



Melbourne – A Great Maritime City

MMHN Opportunity 7

Re-Imagining Station Pier Immigration Museum and Gateway to ‘Maritime Melbourne’

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Introduction

MMHN argues that the heritage significance of Station Pier to Melbourne Victoria and the nation cannot be over-stated. Its role in the social, cultural and economic life of Melbourne is unique. For over the past 160 years, Station Pier (formerly Railway Pier) has served Melbourne as the major point of maritime arrival and departure. It should be acknowledged as crucial, multi-layered, multi-faceted maritime heritage infrastructure which continues to play an important role in the economic, cultural and social development of Melbourne and Australia.

MMHN concern grew over the apparent disregard or ‘amnesia’ for the heritage significance of Station Pier and the apparent disconnect between ‘operational’ management of the pier with the management of the burgeoning new maritime industry – cruising. The conventional management of the pier (safety, compliance, berthing etc.) appeared to be at odds with management of the Pier as an increasingly important tourist facility.

In 2020 MMHN commissioned through its Internship Program an international analysis of piers comparable to Station Pier – heritage sites operating as cruise terminals. The findings were alarming and informed the proposals put forward in this document to ‘re-imagine’, re-purpose and to rescue this rapidly degenerating historically significant maritime infrastructure – a public asset in Melbourne. Station Pier was, and is still, a critical element in Victoria’s prosperity.

MMHN argues that ‘re-imagining’ Station Pier is the key to unlocking the economic potential embedded in its unacknowledged maritime heritage as well as in proactively up-grading its operations to optimizing the value of cruise tourism.

A. Station Pier: Cultural Significance

Opened on 12 September **1854**, originally referred to as Railway Pier, this pier has been central in almost every phase of Melbourne's social and economic history. Its historical significance lies in its capacity to provide a 'continuum' of active service to the cultural, social and economic life reflecting phases of Victoria's development.

In the **early-1850s**, the discovery of gold in the Victorian hinterland led to a surge in migrant arrivals at Station Pier. In **1861**, the first English cricket team to tour Australia arrived at Station Pier and to accommodate the ever-increasing number of ships arriving at Melbourne. The pier was extended to a length of 661 metres. In **1899** the first Victorian and Tasmanian contingents of soldiers left for the Boer War and in **1906** the Great White Fleet arrived from the US. Victorian contingents to the Great War embarked at the Pier. In **1930**, Railway Pier was re-aligned and re-named Station Pier. The Port Melbourne Channel leading up to the pier was dredged allowing the re-configured new pier to accommodate the larger luxury passenger liners arriving in Melbourne. During **World War II** Station Pier served as a major embarkation point for Australian and New Zealand troops heading off to war. Many of lucky ones disembarked on their return at Victoria's 'Homeport' Station Pier. Post-WWII the **Assisted Migration Program** created a great the influx of arrivals and further renovations to the buildings were necessary to accommodate thousands of people from Europe disembarking at Station Pier. Between **1949** and **1962** the pier underwent further refurbishment. Much of timber structure and decking, now concealed by asphalt and concrete slab paving Station Pier was retained. Reinforced concrete slabs replaced the original timber decking. Station Pier is the largest timber-piled wharf infrastructure in Australia. Aside from the pier itself, the most distinguishing structure is the timber gatehouse spanning the main entrance to the pier. The tramlines along the pier remain and the southern end of the structure was extended. Other pier structures of significance include the East and West Kiosks, as well as the Stothert and Pitt portal crane positioned on the west wing pier. Prior to the Melbourne Olympic Games in **1956** the Passenger Terminal buildings were renovated and again in **1960** further works occurred, but little work has occurred since then. In **1998-99**, the remaining tram tracks along Station Pier were included in the new concrete decking on the western side to enable the possible extension of tram route 109 (this has not happened).

B. Station Pier: Optimising Heritage Value

The economic value of heritage assets such as Station Pier is well researched and quantifiable. Yet, despite all the evidence, responsible authorities poorly understand the cultural tourism or social significance of sites such as Station Pier. Consequently, its economic value is not captured and this is, in effect a waste of a 'public asset'.

Post-WWII migration through Station Pier offered a new '*home-coming*'. The number and diversity of migrants disembarking at Station Pier was staggering. Between 1949 and 1966, an average of 61,000 passengers arrived every year at Station Pier, reaching 110,802 at its peak in 1960. It was not uncommon to have four migrant vessels berthed at Station Pier at the same time. The thousands of disembarking migrants at Station Pier remains a symbol today for many migrant families as the start of a new life. It is not surprising then that many migrant families still hold Station Pier in high regard - a special place in the hearts of so many Victorians across subsequent generations. Historians recognise Station Pier as Melbourne's equivalent to New York's famous Ellis Island migrant reception site.

Station Pier, listed on the Victorian Heritage register, is shabby. Today, in the vast empty structures on Station Pier there is minimal reference to the teeming transformational migrant reception spaces nor in earlier times the extraordinary influx of migrants seeking fame and fortune in the colony. Obviously, it is important to acknowledge ‘Multicultural Melbourne’ – but it is equally obvious that immigration is the basis of multiculturalism. Immigration itself is a social phenomenon still shaping our society. The rich and unique maritime immigration heritage of Station Pier over time cannot be ignored.

Inexplicably, the State Government chose to locate the Immigration Museum, an annex of Museums Victoria, in the former Customs House on Flinders Street on the urban reaches of the Yarra River. The Customs House has its own significance in maritime trade heritage terms. This fine building actually has no historic connection to immigration and this historical disconnect may account for the recent pivot by the Immigration Museum towards celebrating ‘multiculturalism’ and not immigration. For example, their much-loved exhibit replicating the shipboard accommodation for migrants that truly acknowledged the migration experience, has been dismantled. The Immigration Museum website explains its re-focused ‘approach’ as follows: *The stories of us - Everyone has a story. While our lives might all look different from the outside, our shared humanity becomes clear when we share these stories. We welcome you to share with us, and each other.* This aim is laudable but gives no acknowledgement whatsoever of the unique role that immigration has played in shaping Victoria over the past 160 years.

Given the importance of migration to our society, it is obvious that a dedicated Immigration Museum is warranted on Station Pier itself. It is the place to legitimately and appropriately celebrate the immigration story. Station Pier remains an enduring heartfelt destination for migrant families in Melbourne and beyond. The ‘story’ of Station Pier should be acknowledged and properly presented as a tourism destination for all Australians as well as cruise passengers. MMHN argues that Station Pier is the perfect location for such an Immigration Museum or Interpretive Centre to adequately acknowledge the contribution of migration to the development of this State. Station Pier is precisely the place to do this.

C. Station Pier: Optimising Economic Value - Cruise Terminal

Cruise tourism has experienced rapid expansion worldwide, with an overall increase in annual passenger compound rate of approximately six per cent since 1990. The cruise industry in Australia has continued to generate significant economic activity, providing benefits to business and communities across the country. The economic benefit of cruise tourism will continue to flow post COVID. Station Pier will continue to be Victoria’s primary cruise terminal.

The numbers are persuasive. With 1.9 million passenger onshore visit days, Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne accounted for 65% of total passenger onshore visit days and 90% of the homeport passenger onshore visit days. Cruise passengers spent a total of A\$1.2 billion at Australian cruise ports, an increase of 20% over 2015/16, and accounted for 43% of total direct expenditure. In 2019, Victoria witnessed 134 ship visit days and 314,000 passenger visit days! Victoria’s local economy experienced a \$317,000,000 economic boost from the cruise industry. The peak cruise season for Melbourne is October to April – a downtime for northern hemisphere cruising.

Comparisons

When considering Station Pier as the primary maritime gateway to Melbourne, it compares very poorly with other terminals around the nation and internationally. It fails to excite or impress. Negative impressions irrefutably translate these days into negative social media commentary. Tourism is about stimulating first visits, capturing interest and encouraging return visits. Station Pier is a key tourist infrastructure and iconic element of Melbourne's maritime heritage, but it is failing to present Melbourne and Victoria adequately. Both its cruise port facilities and its port services onshore compare poorly with other national and international cruise terminals. Two aspects require State Government intervention:

- The physical structure requires investment – urgently.
- The operational management approach requires a re-think- urgently.

MMHN notes that the Victorian Ports Corporation (Melbourne) website refers to *Improvements to the pier's infrastructure and facilities are part of the long-term maintenance and capital improvement program to ensure it can serve as Victoria's passenger gateway both for cruise ships and the Tasmanian ferry service*. Yet there seems to be little evidence that Station Pier management is responding to the new and highly competitive role it needs to play in attracting cruise tourism. It appears that the operating agenda at Station Pier is to merely adhere to narrow, admittedly critical, safety and compliance roles – not marketing. Maintaining the status quo at Station Pier does not serve Melbourne, regional Victoria or Australia well – into the future.

Infrastructure Investment

It is significant that during the COVID lockdowns, cruise ports around Australia are proactively 'lifting their game' by upgrading cruise facilities while terminals are shut (*The Australian*, 'Australia's Ports', 16 September 2021, p.5). Journalist Patrick Lawnham reports that Brisbane has invested \$177 million on a new International Cruise Terminal and up-graded the regional Port of Gladstone; Sydney's Circular Quay has been expanded, and the regional Port of Eden has been up-graded; Cairns and Broome are also cited as busily improving facilities. While QLD, NSW, WA and SA appear to have vigorously pursued the lucrative and growing cruise tourism market, Victoria has not.

Station Pier is the home port for the cruise industry in Victoria but currently falls well below national and international standards. In relation to both management and facilities, Station Pier compares poorly indeed to ports around Australia. Station Pier obviously functions safely and efficiently – the piles are sound and the building doesn't leak, but this is not enough in the world of cruise tourism.

Equally concerning is the inadequacy of the port in relation to access. Station Pier port cannot berth the largest cruise ships – still. Five years ago (2016) the Royal Caribbean line vessel *Ovation of the Seas* visited Australia but her itinerary did not include Victoria. Why? According to its owners, Port Phillip Bay wasn't deep enough and Station Pier wasn't well enough equipped to handle the 168,666-gross tonne, billion-dollar mega-ship. *Although we wanted to bring Ovation of the Seas to Melbourne, unfortunately Station Pier is not yet capable of berthing the largest and newest ship to sail these waters*, said Adam Armstrong, managing director of Royal Caribbean Australia and New Zealand (RCI). *The reasons for this are related to both the depth and width of the channel in Port Phillip Bay and the load and wind-bearing capacity of Station Pier*.

Opportunity

With Star Ferries re-locating to Geelong, there is an opportunity to pursue objectives identified by MMHN to optimize the tourism value of the site:

- Acknowledge and celebrate immigration heritage on Station Pier in a form attractive to locals and engaging to cruise passengers, and
- Transform the operational approach of mere port infrastructure to properly address appropriate services necessary to support the new maritime ‘trade’ of cruise tourism.

Comparable International Cruise Port Terminals

International examples of the successful re-development of heritage port infrastructure which acknowledges the significance of sites, preserved values and have been transformed into efficient, modern cruise terminals. Comparisons may be readily drawn between the ports of London and Auckland. These ports are very similar to Station Pier - significant heritage sites with heritage infrastructure re-purposed as modern cruise terminals with similar logistical and re-provisioning arrangements to Station Pier.

- **Port of Tilbury (UK)**

Opened in 1930, Tilbury was also the gateway for emigrants with P&O and the Orient Line to Australia. The passenger terminal operated until the 1960s and in 1995 it was re-furbished and re-branded as ‘London’s International Cruise Terminal’. In 2017 a further GBP 1.5 million was invested to restore the heritage-listed building (Capital Cruising 2020).

- **Port of Auckland (NZ)**

Another comparable heritage port is Auckland’s Shed 10 Terminal. Constructed in 1910, Shed 10 is the city’s primary cruise terminal and it, too, is heritage-listed. It is the sole remaining original structure on Queens Wharf (Auckland Live 2020). As a key part of Auckland’s maritime history, the structure was formerly used as a cargo warehouse (Matthews & Matthews Architects Ltd 2009). Redeveloped in 2013, the retention and preservation of the original heritage features including the existing form and fabric of the building was deemed a priority. The building now functions as both a cruise terminal and multi-purpose events space. Portable terminal infrastructure (ticket counters, queuing systems and security scanners) is installed when the building is operating as a cruise terminal. There is also a commemorative plaque inside the building which provides a brief history of the port and Auckland’s maritime museum is located a short walking distance away.

Re-imagining Station Pier - Cruise Terminal Experience

MMHN notes that while transformational investment in Station Pier infrastructure is obviously warranted, it will be costly. However attitudinal change in management is equally powerful – and free. And the cost of opportunities lost should also be factored into continued neglect if this public asset. Given that Victorian Ports do not currently accept as their role includes enhancing cruise passenger experience of Melbourne, any improvement to the currently lacklustre and limited offerings is unlikely. Operational efficiency is not in question. However, there appears to be scant recognition that Station Pier will have an increasingly important role, in not only facilitating cruise ships berthing, but also actually welcoming and impressing passengers.

Station Pier facilities and the services extended to passengers both on the pier itself as well as the

surrounding areas are utterly shabby – and certainly not ‘fit for purpose’. Melbourne has a strong national and international reputation as a cultured, vibrant and exciting destination. This is certainly not evident at Station Pier.

Nor is the current Station Pier operational system in which cruise companies manage services for disembarking passengers. So, in effect, Victoria Ports has relinquished control of the passengers’ first exposure to Melbourne. The disparity in services offered by cruise companies differs. This is far satisfactory in an industry which relies upon ‘first impressions’ to generate repeat business.

Extending the ‘Port-of-call’ Experience

Most cruise ships arrive in Melbourne in the early morning and most depart late on the same day, hence the popularity of day tours – though expensive and unadventurous. Ways of extending the time at Station Pier must be devised. Given that the journey from The Heads to Station Pier takes four hours, as a consequence, passengers are unlikely to see the spectacular passage through The Heads to and from Station Pier. Attention and incentives should be explored to encourage multi-day stays. Once the ferry re-locates to Geelong, the capacity to berth four ships at a time will be a factor.

Station Pier management appears content extract profit from the current arrangements with cruise lines. It does not engage with changes to the entire benefits from the cruise industry in the long term. This is reliant on improving what Station Pier (and Melbourne more broadly) has to offer. The focus should already have shifted to enhancing the Melbourne experience and marketing Melbourne’s reputation - safety, culture, accessibility, retail, sport etc. and entice passengers to come back for more.

Currently, Station Pier offers a most uninspiring and unimaginative welcome. anecdotal evidence regarding passenger behaviour on arrival at Station Pier is as follows: :

- A small percentage disembark as a destination, predominantly returning residents with a smaller percentage coming to stay with friends;
- At least 10% stay on board - some of these could be persuaded to disembark if they perceive that the Port Melbourne or CBD has interesting, accessible attractions on offer;
- 25% will travel independently of ship-organised excursions using hire cars or small coaches;
- 25% will travel to the CBD using tram 109, having first interrogated travel staff aboard or ashore – if material is available;
- 25% will take the (expensive and limited) ship-offered day trip excursions. These are on-sold to the ship by local travel firms.

Station Pier Precinct

The local community and tourists describe the Station Pier’s entry area as ‘unwelcoming’. The once impressive heritage port buildings spanning the pier can be restored in detail but are now deeply shabby and tired. The entire precinct lacks appropriate informational and directional signage.

Station Pier could proactively promote Melbourne and St. Kilda. From the passenger perspective, attractive surrounding precincts are considered vital to the tourist experience and may be considered as an extension of the pier itself. When arriving passengers disembark and exit the

Station Pier terminal, there is little to entice them to enjoy the immediate area – no signage, no maps. Apart from a few benches located on the boardwalk that leads to Princes Pier, there are limited areas for visitors to sit and enjoy the surroundings. As a result, visitors are often spotted sitting on nature strips surrounding the car park.

Passenger facilities

The various tourist facilities normally provided at airport points of entry are lacking, such as currency exchange, gift shops, luggage trolleys, cafes, travel cards (only intermittently available), tourism information and maps, of services to drop-off and pick-up at stations which are at a considerable distance from the disembarkation point. The nearest rideshare and taxi rank area is approximately one kilometre away. Given that the majority of cruise travellers (UK and USA) visiting Australia are over 55 years of age this distance is problematic. Clearly accessibility should be factored into the cruise terminal services.

Ferries or water taxis

While there is currently no ferry service linking Station Pier with St Kilda or Docklands, it is being explored – even if only on cruise arrival days. The opportunity exists to contract existing Yarra and Docklands ferry services to provide an exciting option for cruise passengers’ access to the CBD. Alternatively, Station Pier could recruit via EOI a water tour to inform passengers about the points of interest before reaching Victoria Harbour or Federation Square at Princes Bridge. Another water-based tour option could travel south, from Station Pier to St Kilda, as there are many other points of interest along the Bay which are significant to Melbourne’s maritime history, such as Lagoon Pier.

Currently, there is no link from Station Pier with other significant destinations on water or otherwise in Melbourne – except for an expensive and very limited suite of tours on-board cruise ships offering a direct link to popular tourist locations such as Williamstown or Geelong and Portarlington. Station Pier has the capacity to be much more inspirational in relation to promoting other precincts and regions in Victoria beyond the predictable day tours to Phillip Island and the Great Ocean Road.

When the Tasmanian ferry relocates to Geelong, the asphalted car park should be acquired by the City of Port Melbourne to be re-developed as an imaginatively designed community asset integral to the Station Pier precinct. Whatever is built there should celebrate the maritime heritage of this precinct.

Trams

In 1998-99, the tram tracks along Station Pier were included in the new concrete decking on the western side to enable the possible extension of tram route 109. Re-activation of the existing tram route along Station Pier itself is an obvious improvement. It would immediately create a very ‘Melbourne’ experience for passengers. This could be a heritage tram route as the railway line between Flinders Street and the pier was Australia’s first. Signage and maps could also encourage more physically able passengers to try the Sandridge Trail, which runs parallel to the tramline.

An even more ambitious, and very impressive improvement, for the entire currently underwhelming Station Pier Precinct, would be the reinstatement, possibly virtually, of the Centenary Bridge over Beach Road which was demolished in 1991. Using creative technology to virtually re-create the 1934 Victorian Centenary Bridge would have an immense impact.

D. Re-purposing Structures and Spaces

There are many options for improvement to consider:

a. Immigration Museum

There are ample spaces existing within the Pier structures to showcase the fascinating immigration and maritime heritage of Station Pier to local and cruise tourists (see earlier section of this document dealing with heritage). MMHN notes that exhibits can include artifacts, archives and virtual displays. Should the Station Pier Immigration Museum location be within the ‘secure’ sections of the pier, constructing a secure, enclosed mesh pedestrian ‘tunnel’ pathway could enable public access, potentially incorporating an escalator or travelator.

b. Restaurant

The now empty spaces at the very tip of Station Pier are a wasted public asset. These spaces should be re-purposed into a hospitality destination. The potential is obvious. The panoramic views across the Bay and of the steady stream of incoming cargo vessels, are simply splendid. Victorian Ports quite rightly cites security concerns about such public activation. The Navy has berthing rights and wharves are often dangerous places. However, real these issues are, they are easily overcome – again with the right attitude by management, i.e., promoting activation. Vancouver, for example, has successfully overcome similar security concerns on its major tourism wharf. Constructing a secure enclosed ‘travelator’ can enable secure public access to a restaurant on the tip of the pier. Alternatively, an enclosed mesh tunnel for pedestrians could be installed at a point on the pier to the entrance of the restaurant at the tip.

c. Shopping

Tourists like to spend – conveniently. There is currently nowhere on Station Pier or in the precinct where visitors can purchase appropriate gifts. There is ample space within the terminal to establish quality outlets for local art and craft including Indigenous art in collaboration with the Koori Heritage Trust.

Conclusion

Station Pier has immense historical significance – trade, defense forces, immigration – and now cruise tourism. If managed appropriately, Station Pier has immense potential as an economic driver in this city and this State. As Melbourne’s primary cruise terminal it welcomes thousands of international and domestic guests each year – but it is failing to reflect its true merit. Its value as a tourist asset in a growing, highly competitive maritime industry sector is not being optimised under the current management approach. It must be re-imagined.

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