

## MMHN Opportunity No. 1

# MARTIME EXPERIENCE CENTRE (MEC)

**New Floating Pontoon replacing Central Pier on Harbour Esplanade,  
Victoria Harbour**

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## Executive Summary

### What is the Melbourne Maritime Heritage Network?

The Melbourne Maritime Heritage Network (MMHN) is a non-political, not-for-profit, member-based organisation (i.e. a network) that brings together individuals and stakeholder groups with an interest in the maritime industry. These members come from a range of sectors, including marine commerce, maritime heritage, education, tourism, corporate and community groups. What brings them together under the MMHN umbrella is the desire to foster greater recognition of Melbourne's rich maritime heritage and its burgeoning maritime industry sector – past, present, and future.

### **Marvellous Maritime Melbourne – lost but potentially found once again.**

Swamps, billabongs, creeks, and river systems of the Birrarung and Maribyrnong have been critical in sustaining the evolution of 'Melbourne' since before European settlement. An ambitious 19<sup>th</sup> century State Government led initially to the draining of the swamps, the re-configuring of the waterways, excavation of the world-renowned Victoria Harbour, and the more recent construction of innovative maritime infrastructure. Regrettably, bold investment by State Governments since that time have been much less productive.

International port cities comparable to Melbourne promote their maritime heritage and modern international status, celebrating it as a strength. Such ports are viewed as assets of significance, which not only capture and optimise economic capability but also optimise the economic value attached to cultural tourism. Unlike the wider public in Melbourne, the communities in these proud port cities are aware that maritime trade, industry, and expertise are central to their local and national prosperity.

## Re-capturing Marvellous Maritime Melbourne

An opportunity exists to rekindle the reputation, status and respect for Victoria's maritime trade and industry sector by fostering a better understanding of its crucial role in our prosperity. Melbourne's acclaimed virtues – *'liveability'*, innovation, research, culture, the arts, fashion, sport, food, etc – are all closely aligned with the untold success of maritime industry and trade. Consider;

- Melbourne has a rich First Nations history centred around its waterways.
- Melbourne remains the largest general goods port in Australia.
- Victoria Harbour and the extended Yarra/Birrarung waterways represent 150 years of maritime industry and trade, and its construction remains a world-renowned feat of 19<sup>th</sup> century civil engineering.
- Melbourne is recognised as home base for specialised shipping in the Southern Ocean.
- Victoria has global recognition in the maritime industry sector for innovation, aquaculture, freight and logistics, blue water exploration, and extractive industries.
- Victoria is also becoming increasingly recognised as a leading force in national Ocean Energy Industry – wind, tide, and wave.

## Bold New Vision: The Maritime Experience Centre (MEC)

MMHN proposes a bold new vision for cultural tourism in Victoria to recapture the 'Marvellous Maritime Melbourne' of the past. This vision will *resurface* in the form of the Maritime Experience Centre (MEC) – a unique maritime cultural centre in the heart of heritage-listed Victoria Harbour. The MEC will showcase the myriad facets of our maritime heritage and industry.

The MEC cultural centre will facilitate awareness of maritime endeavours, but it will also amuse, inform, and educate through the use of entertaining, creative technologies. This emphasis on instructive amusement, or experiential learning, will set MEC apart from other maritime museums and archives.

The MEC represents a creative response to highlight maritime endeavour in Victoria, a strength that is seldom acknowledged. It will enable the community to recognise and celebrate the maritime legacy of Melbourne and, importantly, the promise of Victoria's maritime future.

The MEC presents an opportunity for government and industry to optimistically support innovation in the form of investment in cultural tourism, which at the same time promotes marine industries and addresses the maritime skills deficit. Such investment will deliver

significant public benefit – cultural, reputational, and economic – for Docklands, for Melbourne and for Victoria.

## Location: Why Docklands?

Docklands is irrefutably the key site in Victoria’s maritime trade legacy. The site physically represents a ‘point of transition’ from the intermittent swamps, a vital indigenous food source with freshwater nearby, and a gathering place around Batman’s Hill. The area was eventually co-opted (read: drained) to serve the commercial agenda of the expanding colony.

As the colonial settlement of Melbourne grew, further changes were wrought on the landscape and waterways. Core interventions were devised, including realigning the river, dredging, and serious investment by government in port infrastructure designed to expand maritime trade and related commercial activities. The Docklands location has always been the epicentre of Victorian maritime activity, facilitating a symbiotic relationship between the productive hinterland of Victoria, the city and the ocean.

Docklands was and continues to be an area in transition. While the initial objective of the 19<sup>th</sup> century transition agenda was to satisfy industry, Docklands has continued to transition from port to urban residential precinct throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This, however, has not been perceived as successful. Regrettably, its port status, the iconic heritage of Docklands as the engine room of Victoria, was ignored. Its immense cultural significance was laid to waste. Gone but not forgotten.

However, Australia’s dependence on maritime industry and trade remains. Downstream, the Port of Melbourne thrives. Victoria’s aquaculture and fisheries thrive. The Ocean Energy industry is booming. From a cultural and an economic point of view, there is a need for Victoria to ‘join the dots’. To accurately reflect the maritime ‘strengths’ we have always had but have rarely acknowledged.

Establishing the MEC in Docklands today presents the opportunity to recapture and amplify the unique status of our maritime past, and to parlay this into the promising future that awaits us. The MEC cultural centre is perfectly located at the heart of Docklands, surrounded by the most important asset; the waterfront on Victoria Harbour.

## Benefit 1 - Activating Docklands

- **Permanent activation for Docklands is imperative:**

That Docklands Precinct lacks permanent activation beyond hospitality and Marvel Stadium is irrefutable. Development Victoria (DV), City of Melbourne (CoM), multiple community stakeholder groups, and the hospitality sector have all identified this pressing need to deliver ‘activation’ in the Docklands Precinct. Activation is not simply events but must include attractions that encourage repeat visitation. The wider public must come to understand that Docklands is a destination which warrants multiple visits. The MEC addresses this urgent need. It will engage children and adults in the experiential programs and exhibits on offer and will also provide much needed community spaces. The Promenade Deck and Maritime Garden will be new areas of public open space.

Given that the proposed MEC would be a facility shared with the community, MMHN believes that mutually beneficial objectives could be met by working together with local residents to realise the latent potential for Docklands Precinct, for Melbourne and for Victoria. Clearly maritime trade, maritime industry, freight logistics, aquaculture, the marine environment, ocean energy, etc matter to us all.

- **Cultural tourism**

Docklands can regain its identity and its status. The MEC is a modest investment in cultural tourism beyond that which is currently offered in Melbourne. It has the opportunity to optimise the economic value of a seldom acknowledged state asset: our maritime engagement. The public will **want** to see and this. The schools will **need** to see this. Victoria has global recognition in the maritime industry sector for innovation, specialised shipping, freight and logistics, aquaculture, blue water exploration, extractive industries. Victoria is also becoming increasingly recognised as a leading force in Australia for ocean energy – wind, tide, and wave.

The MEC will, imaginatively and appropriately, reinstate cultural legitimacy to the Docklands Precinct and will signal its role as the crucial element in Victoria’s prosperous maritime ‘story’ – past, present and, importantly, future. It will present Victoria’s maritime sector strength in such a way as to attract local, regional, international visitation to Docklands.

The MEC will be a high-tech, cultural institutional icon on Victoria’s first large scale Pontoon/Pier in the centre of the magnificent heritage-listed aquatic amphitheatre – Victoria Harbour. Set amidst a Maritime Garden, encircled by a Promenade Deck/Wharf with space for the resident heritage fleet and visiting vessels of note, the MEC will be a centre for engaging the public in citizen science initiatives. A compelling prospect.

MEC design will feature spaces capable of shared community use or spaces for hire. For example; a theatre, workrooms, meeting rooms, commercially active spaces such as a cafe and fish restaurant to show case Victoria’s marine harvest and accessible amenities at all hours.

## **Benefit 2 – Showcasing Victoria’s maritime strength**

Few are aware Victoria has global recognition in the maritime industry sector for innovation, specialised shipping, freight and logistics, aquaculture, blue water exploration, extractive industries. More recently, Victoria is leading the way nationally with ocean energy.

This is consistent with Melbourne’s international recognition as a ‘knowledge city’ with nine universities spearheading an impressive range of research. A focus on showcasing such maritime research will encourage investment and collaborations.

Raising the awareness of maritime industries, specifically in relation to skills, is also an MEC key focus. In 2024, Federal Minister Catherine King released a Task Force Report on Skills deficiencies in the maritime sector. Discussions with MMHN members and other key stakeholders has identified a gap between skills provision and skills demand in the maritime industry and trade sector. The MEC will showcase Victoria’s current skills provision and will, most importantly, stimulate careers education in relation to the maritime sector.

Creative technologies and experiential learning will ensure that young people in Victoria are exposed, as never before, to the range of knowledge, skills and career options available to them in the maritime industry and maritime trade sector.

## What would the MEC look like?

Simply put; an iconic low-rise, three level structure on a floating pier, attached and accessible from Harbour Esplanade where Central Pier once stood.

MMHN proposes a design emerging from an architectural competition showcasing talent in Victoria's creative community of architectural and other relevant design practitioners.

Specific brief to guide the form of the structure will include:

- A permanent iconic low-rise focal point for Victoria Harbour and Docklands Precinct.
- Sitting atop a floating locally made pontoon/pier constructed off-site (to reduce noise nuisance) and towed into the waterway to connect with pre-existing services on Harbour Esplanade.
- Prioritising of innovative approaches to sustainable building, including form, materials, operations on water environment, management of floating pier technology, passive climate control considerations, etc.
- Free flowing flexible internals with a focus on experiential learning, repeat visitation, fast exhibit turn around, and engagement with the water and its unique site.
- Spaces external and internal available for community use.

## Examples

The MEC is a new concept but there are indicative models to consider:

- **On-Water Site: *Brooke Street Floating Pier and Building, Hobart.***

Costing approximately \$14 million, the building itself is a four story, lightweight construction, delivering exemplary environmental sustainability. It features translucent polycarbonate cladding, passive heating and cooling using water and tide fluctuation beneath the pier, and a unique mooring system by Seaflex.

For further information, see: <https://www.brookestreetpier.com>.

- **Context: *ACMI in Federation Square***

This is the 'anchor' cultural institution in Federation Square which showcases a specific cultural industry sector (film) and engages the public (particularly young people) via creative technologies. MEC will be the 'anchor' cultural institution in Docklands to showcase all types of maritime industry and maritime trade – past present and future. Like ACMI, experiential learning, imaginative curation, and engaging programming will attract the public with a specific focus on young people.

- **Construction and Purpose: *Cowes Cultural and Community Centre, Phillip Island***

This is a mixed-use, community arts facility (costing approximately \$35 million) designed by Jason Clement Burrows Architects (JCBA). It has civic spaces as well as spaces for hire. The centre is on Shire owned land, was funded via grants, and the objective of the design brief was to embrace the Cowes location.

## Proposed MEC Dimensions

A key consideration is to prevent visual intrusion into the view enjoyed by many existing high-rise apartments lining Victoria Harbour. Fortunately, this problem is averted in the construction of a floating pontoon on which the height limit is three levels. One level contains operational equipment which lies beneath the water. The pontoon is constructed off-site, resolving the potential nuisance of any construction noise.

The proposed size is 5000 square meters (Gross Floor Area), with two to three levels of accommodation, accessed directly from Harbour Esplanade. A Promenade Deck would surround the main building, accessible from the waterways, with a 250-seat flexible tiered lecture/theatre/exhibition space, and ancillary retail, café and restaurant zones. A Maritime Garden will be located at the far edge of the pontoon.

- Flexible spaces capable of accommodating various types of workshops – experiential and immersive displays and exhibitions to show case local best practise in emerging maritime research and development. Cutting edge technical capabilities, including external and internal projection; library.
- Out-of-hours external access to commercial areas will be directed from the landscaped Maritime Garden, enabling ‘citizen science’ based activities. A Promenade Deck will encircle the building, giving the public an opportunity to interact with the Melbourne Maritime fleet and other visiting vessels.

## MEC Project Delivery

Discussions around MEC content, programming and delivery are pragmatic and on-going.

MMHN has commenced preliminary discussions with many relevant agencies and industry representatives.

- The Office of the Victorian Government Architect (OVGA) has helped to determine that a design competition be considered to assist with detailing the specifics of the opportunity and the iconic nature of its design.
- MMHN is confident of on-going support and endorsement from key stakeholders at Australian Ocean Energy Group (AOEG), Development Victoria, City of Melbourne, Heritage Victoria, Creative Victoria, Parks Victoria, Melbourne Water, Victoria Ports, and the Port of Melbourne.

MMHN considers that a reasonable pathway through the MEC planning process will be negotiated. However, consultations have already commenced via City of Melbourne Docklands Forum: <https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/community/strong-communities/Pages/docklands-community-forum.aspx>.

Also, \$3 million State Government funded community consultations by Development Victoria. See: <https://www.development.vic.gov.au/projects/central-pier?page=overview>.

Obviously, with a comprehensive schedule of further consultations with public, stakeholder and industry groups, a design and planning permit for the MEC could be secured within in a period of 18 months. This programme allows for a design competition (local) and assessment within the established budget funding regimes and anticipated progress on Central Pier demolition. Off-site construction of the floating pier and structure could deliver a new facility late in 2026.

## MEC Curation and Programming

A focus on knowledge transfer and engagement through experiential learning, using creative technology, will differentiate the MEC cultural tourism offering from existing cultural institutions.

- **Experiential learning experience:** These may be ‘slow’ or extended. For example, project-based workshops (individual or group), hands-on building, citizen science monitoring or observing, witnessing experts in real-time or virtually, in research or as they work. Experiential learning can also be rapid. Compared to conventional cultural programming and static displays, creative technologies **enable a rapid turnover of virtual experiences** which will stimulate repeated visitation.
- **ACMI:** The ‘anchor’ cultural institution in Federation Square showcasing a specific industry sector (film) and engaging the public via creative technologies most closely aligns with the MEC concept (i.e. maritime industry and trade and focus on the adoption of creative technologies).

## Projected Visitation

Docklands has no comparable cultural tourism experience on offer and Victoria has no comparable institution targeting, or equipped to showcase, maritime industry and trade with a focus on experiential learning. Consequently, in the absence of strictly comparable visitation data, our data is indicative only.

- **ACMI Federation Square:** The ‘model’ for the MEC concept. Annual Report 2021–22 cites 201,206 visits in its first year (during Covid) with 450 school groups. ACMI, like the proposed MEC, showcases a specific industry sector (film) and engages the public via creative technologies. It is immensely popular.
- **City of Melbourne:** 2021 published data from organisations near Docklands Precinct in support of its investment in the *Greenline* project cited annual visitation to Marvel Stadium as 5.3 million, Aquarium as 1.4 million, and Southbank and Southgate as 1.5 million.
- **Museums Victoria:** Annual Report 2021–22 cites;  
Ticketed attendance: 1,378,323  
Student education program attendance for 2018–19: 255,552  
IMAX projection: 17,019

## What are the estimated MEC establishment costs?

- **Estimated Investment in Education and Cultural Tourism:**

Looking at the comparable activating institutions and not taking into account the initial cost premium for above/near and/or in water, MMHN estimates that structure costs, as detailed, could be delivered through an investment in cultural tourism in the vicinity of \$45–\$50m.

- **Calculating Estimated Benefits:**

The calculation of public benefit is difficult to overestimate. The MEC will offer experiences and exposure that are new to Victoria. ROI on cultural tourism investment for the Federal, State and Local Government and for industry maritime partners is irrefutable, but at this stage unproven. MMHN, a non-profit membership entity, obviously lacks the financial resources to commission a detailed assessment. However, the calibre of expertise available within the MMHN Board indicates significant cause for optimism around the feasibility of the MEC proposal.

- **Ongoing Revenue:**

Income from the commercial-leased businesses on the pontoon, fees on hire space, ticketed entry on events (depending on content engagement by industry and government agencies), ongoing activation support, and grants are likely to assist ongoing operational costs. There is also the potential to host commercial or trade maritime events at the venue for a fee. Hospitality operators will pay commercial rent. MMHN has Charitable Gift Status, and philanthropic funding may be available. It can reasonably be considered that the MEC will be a cost neutral endeavour in the future.

- **Visitation:**

Whilst broad similarities can be drawn, for example, from the Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of **Cowes Community and Cultural Centre** (and public benefit is comparable), the following data is merely indicative: a benefit cost ratio of 2.6 for the local Bass Coast economy, which translates into 1.5 when considered in a Victorian context; 30 full-time equivalent jobs; use value at \$511,000, based on visitation of 62,000 people (30,000 extra) per annum. Other significant additional benefits are cited in Cowes data which will certainly align with this level of investment in the MEC in Docklands: enhanced social cohesion and community pride, addressing social disadvantage and improved business development and confidence.

Due to the larger catchment population drawn from around Melbourne and regional Victoria to the central location of the Docklands Precinct (which is well-served by public transport), plus the potential to attract significant repeat visitation from primary and secondary schools as well as special interest groups, the assumption can reasonably be made that the MEC will outperform the Cowes SDG visitation data.



## Operations, Management & Governance

Decisions on such matters as governance, ownership, and corporate and operational responsibility cannot be definitive at this point. MMHN's initial thoughts on the short term and longer-term governance and facilities ownership possibilities are as follows:

- **Governance Options:**

The MMHN Board could identify key representatives from industry, stakeholder groups, and state and municipal bureaucracies to join a MEC Advisory Group, whose purpose would be to progress the MEC Project with the TEMC in its preliminary stages as a pilot project.

At the point when the MEC Project gains the requisite 'in-principal' approvals, the MEC Advisory Group structure could then evolve into an Independent MEC Trust structure, responsible for operations, programming and curation of the project.

Precise details of the Trust would be developed at that point, taking into consideration the Trust's purpose and constitution, charitable status, tax, financial profile, etc.

- **Facilities Ownership Options:**

There are a number of possible ownership models to be explored, and the MMHN is aware of the relatively unique nature of title ownership across the Docklands Precinct. We understand that DV do not intend to have a longer role on the precinct and have developed our response accordingly:

- the Independent MEC Trust could assume ownership of the facility;
- if ownership is to be retained by government, then the Independent MEC Trust could take a long term or perpetual lease for a nominal rent; and
- if ownership is to reside in the City of Melbourne (CoM), then the MEC Independent Trust could be a tenant of dedicated MEC space within the facility.

MMHN has 'tested' and refined the MEC concept at Docklands over the past four years with a great range of stakeholders – in Docklands and beyond. We are confident that it is supported by key community, industry and heritage stakeholders.

## Government Engagement

- **Federal Government**

The Strategic Fleet Task Force Final Report 2024: Chapter 4 addresses the challenges to growing Australia's maritime workforce. The MEC will stimulate interest in a wide range of maritime industry careers.

<https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/strategic-fleet-taskforce-final-report.pdf>

The Australian Government's *2021 Infrastructure Plan* follows the *2016 Plan* and is intended to support our national recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and other events that have

impacted Australia in recent years such as the bushfires, floods, and drought.

<https://www.infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/publications/2021-australian-infrastructure-plan>

- **City of Melbourne 2019–20 CoM Docklands Community and Place Plan**

*Extract: Adopt a leadership and advocacy role with key stakeholders with the objective of securing collaborative co-funding partnership agreement to deliver maritime legacy outcomes in the municipality including interpretative heritage signage and a maritime museum, advocate to Development Victoria to ensure that Melbourne’s Maritime heritage is considered as part of the development of Harbour Esplanade and Victoria Harbour 2018-19, partner with Development Victoria and the AFL to develop a Stadium Precinct Master Plan to deliver exemplar connected public spaces in Harbour Esplanade, Bourke and La Trobe Streets, integrated with the future direction of Etihad Stadium, Southern Cross Station and Central Pier. See :<https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/community/strong-com>  
<https://www.development.vic.gov.au/projects/central-pier?page=overviewmunities/Pages/docklands-community-and-place-plan.aspx>*

- **State Government**

Development Victoria is the responsible agency under the Minister for Planning. Docklands comprises a number of precincts, each with a diverse variety of residential, commercial, retail and leisure spaces, all developed under the guidance of Development Victoria. The Precinct is approximately two thirds complete. Central Pier is currently being demolished and should be completed in 2025.

See: <https://www.development.vic.gov.au/projects/central-pier?page=overview>

See: <https://www.development.vic.gov.au/projects/docklands?page=overview>

- **UN Sustainability SDGs:**

The MEC Project is consistent with eight UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the Federal and State Governments:

- No. 4: Quality Education
- No. 6: Affordable and Clean Energy
- No. 7: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- No. 8: Industry Innovation and Infrastructure
- No. 12: Responsible Consumption and Production
- No. 14: Life below the water
- No. 15: Life on Land
- No. 16: Partnerships for the Goals

The MEC proposal is compliant with the UN SDGs which may be potentially useful in relation to Federal and State grants.

## **Broad-based Support for the MEC**

- Strong and sustained support expressed by industry, unions and the RAN and relevant state agencies.

- Strong and sustained support from historical institutions and academic networks (ACMM).
- Strong and sustained support from the Victorian maritime heritage community (MMV).
- Strong international interest and offers of support from across the international maritime museums and academic network (ICMM).