

## Heritage Shipping Control Tower, Victoria Harbour

### MMHN On-site Presentation

#### An event within NT Australian Heritage Week Program

North Wharf Docklands, 10.30am 20 April 2024

MMHN is keen to share news of positive progress in relation to the Shipping Control Tower. Till now this significant maritime infrastructure asset owned by the responsible state authority Development Victoria, like Central Pier before it, has been slowly degenerating for decade.

**Why is the Shipping Control Tower so significant?** First, see it where it sits on our heritage 'continuum' or timeline or historical context. What was its inherent value at that time (mid 1960s)? What does it tell us about ourselves and our society? In this case the Shipping Control Tower is a key moment in the tremendous ever-expanding Port of Melbourne. The transformation of the swamp into Victoria Harbour, and re-routing of the river, construction of multiple piers, wharves goods sheds and dry-docks. The constructing the technologically cutting-edge Shipping Control Tower on the tip of north wharf controlling the increasingly complex port operations, in the harbour, and the river, the estuary and Port Philip Bay, the port expanded to enable tremendous maritime trade growth, Melbourne and Victoria prospered.

The sophisticated operations of Shipping Control Tower on North Wharf should be viewed as culmination of the port innovation. The relentless drive to optimise the capability of the ports commenced in the early 1850s - an extraordinarily busy period in Melbourne's development fuelled by the recent discovery of gold in Victoria. The Melbourne Chamber of Commerce was formed in this period, and immediately made the connection between port operations and profit. It commenced campaigning for the establishment of a Harbour Trust to take responsibility for development maritime infrastructure the wharves to enable capacity for maritime trade. They did a very good job. Maritime port infrastructure reflects Melbourne's evolution – social and economic. Port transformation continued: late 19th century Coode Scheme, early 20<sup>th</sup> century rail network and containerisation, mid 20<sup>th</sup> century the Shipping Control Tower cutting-edge operational control, 21<sup>st</sup> century shifting the port downstream to Fishermen's Bend bulk cargo handling and AI automation at Webb Dock.

Complex and ever-expanding port operations triggered technological advancement. The Shipping Control Tower of the mid '60s, replaced an earlier timber octagonal watch tower of 1934. Architect C.J Smith used reinforced concrete with a lift and stairs, topped by two decks – one for Observation duties containing radar and communication equipment, the other being for Amenities for its 24-hour a day operation. This was a period where shipping was front-of mind for many in the community for both social and trade information. An automated telephone service provided shipping information service to the public, which immensely popular with 116,995 calls taken in the first year.

Given irrefutable heritage significance why, did that Places Victoria (now Development Victoria) deliberately exclude the Shipping Control Tower from its Brief commissioning Lovell Chen Brief to write a detailed Conservation Management Plan for Victoria Harbour in 2012? In doing so , it effectively withheld heritage recognition and preservation of the Shipping Control Tower leaving without heritage protection?

Did the State Government see the vast Docklands site merely as prime waterside real-estate? Sadly, seems so. All over Docklands valuable maritime infrastructure assets were simply trashed and removed indicating a complete disregard for its heritage values and for its tourism potential. The future of this entire Docklands heritage precinct was in effect 'outsourced' to commercial developers and the AFL. Was there no coherent Docklands vision at all beyond real estate? We still await a Docklands Precinct plan.

Contrast the ambitious demonstrably successful Harbour Trust vision in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for Victoria Port - past, planning for growth, adopting innovation, investing in the future. Compare this with planning deficiencies identified in Docklands Precinct today:

- Why the Bolte Bridge was designed 5 metres too low and without capacity for rail-line
- Why did primary school reached its capacity so rapidly and now holding classes classrooms in The District a shopping centre?
- Why the Docklands Precinct is woefully deficient in public open space?
- Why there are no plans for a high school at all?
- Why an AFL stadium turned its back on prime water views?

What does this catalogue of planning deficiencies mean in relation to the Shipping Control Tower? Much! Consider the Brief of 2012 Conservation Management Plan in 2012 for Victoria Harbour (which incidentally came AFTER the majority of port infrastructure was demolished) Despite the exclusion of the Shipping Control Tower, such was its heritage significance, Lovell Chen Plan included it as best they could. It was deemed to have '*contributory significance*' to Victoria Harbour. Indeed? Quite the UNDERSTATEMENT! Had Places Victoria rightly acknowledged Docklands heritage infrastructure, it would have certainly included. and thus. Protected the Shipping Control Tower.

Development Victoria, formerly Places Victoria, is the state government agency tasked with generating funds from real estate development. Heritage preservation is not their 'bag' at all. They comply with heritage legislation but are not tasked with factoring in economic uplift delivered via heritage tourism or with optimizing community amenity.

### **Now the good news.**

Despite this focus DV has recently responded to community and MMHN advocacy and has now committed to a repair/remediation program for the Shipping Control Tower. The successful tender for the works will be announced at the end of April and works will be completed September 2024. Quoting DV "*The remediation program includes but is not limited to:*

- *Concrete repair*
- *Re-render of entire tower*
- *New windows and external doors*
- *Handrail repair and painting*
- *New roof membrane*
- *Clean and sanitise internal areas"*

MMHN is pleased with such progress albeit way too late.

### **Next Advocacy issue for the shipping Control Tower**

MMHN advocacy on the Shipping Control Tower continues. Efforts will now turn to Lendlease and the City of Melbourne. Why?

(a) The Lendlease development plan along North Wharf ignores the Shipping Control Tower. Is this because Development Victoria still owns the site and has no input into the Lendlease plans?

(b) City of Melbourne *Greenline* Project along river terminates at the tip of North Wharf at a small public open space at the foot of the Shipping Control Tower. MMHN argues that Shipping Control Tower should obviously feature in the Greenline Project design, and, further, the name of this public space should honour John Coode. MMHN argues that obligatory Public Benefit contributions obligations imposed on the Lendlease North Wharf should be rightly be directed at re-purposing the Shipping Control Tower. Stay-tuned.