

MMHN Objective 3

Docklands Precinct encircling Victoria Harbour

MMHN Vision

The MMHN vision for the Docklands Precinct encircling Victoria Harbour, is that it be properly acknowledged as a site of significant maritime heritage, an economic and civic asset of immense value beyond merely the ‘visual’ water outlook enhancing the real-estate value of the multiple residential and corporate towers around the perimeter.

Docklands Precinct encircles Victoria Harbour, formerly Victoria Port, is world-renowned as a nineteenth-century civil engineering ‘marvel’ largely-hand excavated, yet its remarkable ambitious genesis and evolution is seldom acknowledged in the public realm. It is *managed* poorly by a plethora of State government responsible authorities all of which, over the past 20 years appear to demonstrate a lack any understanding of its maritime heritage value nor cultural tourism nor commercial activation. There is no coherent agreed plan for Docklands Precinct. Its potential remains ‘dormant’. The remaining wharf infrastructure is neglected, degraded or destroyed in the case of Central Pier and New Quay. State government agencies appear to prioritise private development residential towers, The City of Melbourne is the responsible municipality has demonstrated good intent, creating marinas, recreational boating facilities.

But by and large it has been sidelined, denied control of what is actually an urban economic asset. International models of activating such a vast unique water asset are plentiful - yet ignored Over decades funding which was ostensibly dedicated to the maintenance in Victoria Harbour has dwindled. Re-instatement of degenerating wharves encircling Victoria Harbour has been left to private sector property developers.

Inexplicably, Bolte Bridge spanning the river and the Harbour was constructed, too low regrettably preventing larger vessels (e.g. even Antarctic DAN research vessels, and tall yachts). This may have contributed to Victoria Port operations becoming redundant in the now languishing Docklands Precinct. Poor planning absence of bureaucratic imagination and certainly ill-informed disregard for the significance of Victoria Port and its maritime assets and resistance to working towards optimizing the economic value of state waterways assets. Victoria Harbor should be recognized as a versatile aquatic amphitheatre adjacent to the CBD – well served by public transport and to a lesser extent, by ferries. The absence of State government aspiration to optimize the value of Victoria Harbour may account for the absence of minimal ferry services even though Melbourne has more navigable waterways than Sydney.

Degradation and Lost Opportunity

Following Victoria Port being rendered redundant harbour for port operations in the late 1970s, a plethora of state agencies were tasked with ‘developing’ the large brown-field site within the CBD. None of these State agencies displayed any comprehension whatsoever of maritime heritage nor economic value of this unique site. Immensely valuable maritime infrastructure was simply trashed – dismantled and discarded. Elsewhere in the world, industrial heritage sites have been restored in acknowledgement of their immense cultural and tourism value. Not so Melbourne.

Development rights to the Docklands Precinct were allocated to a series of developers with no requirement that consideration be given to the integrity and aesthetic value of this unique heritage site. This is evidence of the peculiar ‘amnesia’ in the public realm and in State agencies relation to Victoria Harbour. This persists today.

Containerization revolutionised maritime trade and port operations in Victoria Port which was regarded as ‘obsolete’. Regrettably, to the ignorant or poorly informed such obsolescence presumably equated with ‘worthless’ or having no ‘value’. Elsewhere in the world such ‘obsolete’ industrial or port infrastructure is valued, e.g. canals, seawalls, windmills, foundries etc. In Melbourne, this unique ‘public asset’ with unique maritime infrastructure was reduced to merely an aquatic backdrop of Victoria Harbour to residential and corporate tower constructions. Victoria Port morphed from operating as a cutting-edge port ‘powerhouse’ driving the prosperity of Melbourne and regional Victoria, to Victoria Harbour becoming merely a gigantic pond without purpose.

Reimagining Victoria Harbour

MMHN is committed to Victoria Harbour being be ‘re-imagined’ as Melbourne’s aquatic ‘playground’ for the wider community. The Docklands Precinct offers the opportunity for continuous and diverse free or ticketed attractions, and permanent attractions such as the proposed MMHN Maritime Experience Centre.

Docklands Precinct attractions based on the unique site of Victoria harbour might include:

- The Heritage Fleet permanently berthed in Victoria Harbour, seaworthy and fully operational
- Free *Son et lumiere* light/laser shows projected across the harbour skies
- Water projections (dancing or illuminated) enlivening the harbour at intervals
- *Son-et-Lumiere* program based at the heritage-listed Shipping Control Tower at the tip of North Wharf
- Presentations of Victoria Port ‘stories’ – past and recent, e.g. excavations, the Blue Lake, Bolte Bridge
- Free concerts using a pontoon stage in the aquatic amphitheatre
- Strategic installations of shipping containers - emblematic of Docklands - which double as pop-up exhibition sites and large public screens to project maritime images
- Visiting vessels berthed in Victoria Harbour, routinely illuminated to create a spectacle to attract domestic visitation
- A large pontoon moored on downstream from the Bolte Bridge to enable visiting ‘tall ships’ currently unable to enter Victoria Harbour to berth in close proximity to the CBD with a dedicated ferry service from the pontoon to the City of Melbourne Marina Lounge

at New Quay.

- Public Transport Ferry Network incorporated into the Myki system serving the Birrarung/Yarra upstream and down extending as far as Burnley and both banks of the Maribyrnong River and around to Port Melbourne and St Kilda
- Maritime Garden with infrastructure to enable waterways-based Citizen Science programs and activities
- Aquatic festivals of all types. The benefits of shared ticketing, cross promotion etc. are captured in relation to ferry links, tourist maps and public transport options.
- Ferry stations at Bolte West Precinct, Southbank, Fisherman's Bend Williamstown, the Yarra Estuary, into Port Phillip Bay - to Station/Princes Pier and St. Kilda Pier and the Mornington Peninsula, across to Portarlington, Queenscliff and Geelong.
- A Waterways Tourism Hub on Harbour Esplanade to support commercial tourism ventures and taxis in the rivers, Victoria Harbour, the Bay, and beyond. a variety of programs serving many purposes, including private and corporate functions, education, and entertainment, such as an interpretive cruise for the Port of Melbourne along similar lines to *Five Short Blasts Melbourne 2013 Prague 2015*: <https://vimeo.com/150977387>. Even a foreign company recognizes the tourism value of cruising Melbourne's waterways!
- Public access to a variety of vessel types (punts, yachts, water taxis) and amphibious permanent public floating open air swimming pool alongside Ron Barassi Senior Oval.
- Public viewing platforms at Bolte West Precinct opposite Victoria Harbour accessed via Lorimer Street, Fisherman's Bend, built with the cooperation of the Port of Melbourne, enabling the public to view the river maritime traffic.
- Local and state government policy re-focus mandates that all major events in Melbourne includes a waterways element – Melbourne Cup, Formula 1 Grand Prix, AFL Grand Final, Australian Tennis Open, Moomba, the Show.
- Support for the boating industry – e.g. Victoria Annual Boat Show.
- Engagement by young audience – Children's Maritime Festival.
- Australian Maritime College collaboration to promote/host submarine or alternate propulsion competition for school children.
- Victoria Harbour as a site to engage in projects involving citizen science.
- Responsible authorities (e.g. Parks Victoria) and stakeholder groups (e.g. Yarra River Keepers) collaborate to proactively engage the public in relation to waterborne litter and pollution.
- A variety of annual events specifically to enliven the waterways including Rowing Regattas, Dragon Boat Races, Inflatables, and innovative propulsion races, Boat Shows, competitive 'artistic Floats'.
- Submerged freight railway tube Bridge the Bay side of the Bolte Bridge on the seabed controlled by AI linking the Port Fisherman's Bend docks with the freight distribution network at Footscray or Truganina, (Such AI controlled services operate successfully in a sealed tubes in Europe),

Brief history

Victoria Harbour is a world-renowned nineteenth-century civil engineering ‘marvel’, a unique and unusual element of City of Melbourne maritime trade history. It was excavated by hand and steam shovel to greatly extend the berth capacity of the port. The Yarra River and Estuary entrance were prone to silting and were shallow. Laden vessels had to be towed upstream to the city. At Station Pier and Williamstown, passengers and cargo disembarked onto ‘lighters’ to ferry them upriver to the river port wharves. As the City of Melbourne evolved, so too did the demand and the technical capacity to, deepen, straighten and widen the riverbed to suit maritime trade purposes.

Finally, the government stepped in and in 1877 established the Victorian Harbour Trust (VHT) to serve commercial interests behind the booming maritime trade in the port. Solutions to the adequate port infrastructure needed to be devised to accommodate the booming economic development of the city. Many plans merged and finally British engineer Sir John Coode and local engineer Joseph Brady came up with a clever plan for maritime infrastructure initially known as Victoria Port – called this because it was Melbourne’s Port. It had excellent associated rail infrastructure for providing coal to drive steam ships and to distribute goods. Over time, this extensive man-made harbor proved to be inadequate to needs. Central Pier was installed to significantly increase the capacity of Victoria Port (later known as Victoria Harbour).

Infrastructure - slipways, docks, piers and other infrastructure assets

Remaining examples of maritime legacy infrastructure include warehouses, good sheds, cranes, wharves, piers, bollards, dry-dock machinery, etc. on the Yarra River estuary, Victoria harbor and Port Phillip Bay. The State Government has committed (Minister for Ports 2018) to adequately maintain the slipway at Dudley Street so that it remains accessible to larger yachts and other ships.

Areas within Victoria Harbour

- **North Wharf (also known as Collins Wharf)**

This wharf, largely built from heaped soil excavated from Victoria Port, forms one ‘arm’ of the harbour. Lendlease Developers have development rights over this wharf. Development Victoria (DV) has commenced (2024) ‘stabilizing’ works on the redundant Shipping Control Tower and Lendlease is obliged to retain the heritage rail lines extending along the wharf. DV retains responsibility for maintaining the wharf piles beneath North Wharf. Regrettably, as was the case with the now demolished Central Pier, it has failed to adequately maintain the piles. Lendlease works to build residential towers will require construction of solid platforms to be built and these may replace crumbling unstable piles. Currently the DV work in remaining piles is shrouded in secrecy and, given the closure and subsequent demolition of Central Pier in 2020, MMHN fears DV will simply continue the pattern of neglect for heritage assets.

- **Harbour Esplanade**

A series of historic goods sheds were formerly located along Harbour Esplanade. Heritage Victoria granted (circa 2015?) Development Victoria conditional permits to demolish these goods sheds requiring that the frames be conserved so that re-erection could eventually occur. These frames are now stored underneath the Bolte Bridge at Bolte West Precinct.

In August 2021 MMHN noted plans to replace the original ‘temporary’ ferry terminal on Harbour Esplanade. Planning control for this structure lies with the City of Melbourne (CoM). MMHN is concerned that CoM and Development Victoria will once again fail to ensure that architectural integrity will be observed around this heritage site.

Given that Central Pier is scheduled for re-development, the replacement ferry terminal should rightly complement this structure. This new structure will be critical to properly enabling the expansion of commercial ferry, water taxi and punt services from Victoria Harbour. Ferry service initiatives around Victoria Harbour, the Yarra and beyond (Bellarine – Sorrento) are increasing and patronage will continue to increase as the urban population density of Melbourne and road congestion increases. Promotion of new ferry or water taxi destinations beyond the CBD around Greater Melbourne with a focus on maritime heritage may appeal to tourists arriving at Station Pier. More ferries and shared ticketing would connect dispersed maritime heritage precincts and assets and would also encourage patronage at various premises. Many cities use this connected or shared ticketing model for their public transport.

- **New Quay**

The City of Melbourne has established a green oval space (Ron Barassi Senior Oval) sporting clubrooms and a playground close to the bridge. Regrettably, public transport does not reach this area – nor is water transport access available because, to date, MAB Developers have not reconstructed the wharves. The City of Melbourne is energetically advocating for the state government to re-open the existing pedestrian/cycle path along the creek which was closed by the government to allow the adjacent film studios to expand. Moonie Valley Council and CoM to are advocating re-establishment of the trail link between New Quay and the Moonee Valley Creek trails.

- **Bolte West Precinct**

Although outside the Harbour and across the river, this precinct is ‘understood’ to be a part of the Docklands Precinct and should rightly be included in any plans to re-activate the Victoria Harbour area. Both City of Melbourne and MMHN have long planned the construction of a Marine Services Depot to address the unmet demand by the recreational boating and commercial boating sectors. They have spent years wrangling the multiple bureaucracies engaged with permit approval, and in May 2025, the City of Melbourne was finally able to progress the project with a partial planning permit to allow ‘back of house’ access to the waterside site from Lorimer Street. The first step towards a Marine Services Depot!

For further historical information, see MMHN Objective 2 – Three Heritage Trails