

Royal Historical Society of Victoria

Submission to the Heritage Council:

Federation Square

PROV VHR H2390

15 December 2018

The Royal Historical Society of Victoria strongly supports the Executive Director's recommendation for inclusion of Federation Square in the Victorian Heritage Register. Federation Square is of state-wide if not national architectural and cultural significance as a remarkably coherent ensemble of late 20th-Century civic architecture and on this basis alone merits registration as a whole, intact package. But Federation Square is also of social and historic significance as the culmination of a shared dream of a civic square that would be a public space at the heart of the city, offering a meeting place open to all, a focus for the urban expression of civic life. Federation Square quickly established itself as the fulfilment of that dream. It cemented its place in the heart of the Victorian community so rapidly because it had already long existed in the community's collective imaginary. Thus its significance, in particular its social significance, goes back to the nineteenth century and on this basis too it fully merits registration.

Age of registration of heritage places

We address as a preliminary the issue of the time elapsed since construction. We endorse the Executive Director's comment that a number of notable sites have been registered more quickly, such as the NGV and the Arts Centre. Our major point, however, is that enough time has elapsed for the people of Victoria to have made a judgment that Federation Square is an essential aspect and indeed a focus for the city.

While time elapsed is not a criterion for inclusion in the Register, it is true that the *Victorian Heritage Register Criteria and Threshold Guidelines* suggest that 'as a general principle, a generation (or approximately 25-30 years) should pass after the creation of a place or object before that place or object is considered for heritage listing'. The definition of a generation here is rather long. A generation is defined technically as the population average length of time between birth and maturity to give birth to the next generation. That average has grown in recent times from 15-20 years historically to 25 years now. Federation Square was completed in 2002, 16 years before the proposed registration. Sixteen years is a generation in the eyes of our culture until recently; it is now two-thirds of a generation, but that 16 years has seen Federation Square become part of the culture of Victoria. We submit that this is ample time. The proof of this is that it has been ample time for the people of Victoria to take on board Federation Square and make it an integral and essential part of the fabric of Melbourne life.

Architectural and aesthetic significance

Federation Square is a remarkably coherent ensemble of late 20th-Century civic architecture. Its architectural and aesthetic significance results from its presentation as a unified whole. The RHSV

concur fully with the Executive Director's Extent of Registration. Federation Square is not just a building, but a unified collection of buildings defining a built space. It therefore transcends the individual buildings whilst depending upon them. The identity enshrined in the Victorian mind is Federation Square as a whole. But that identity depends upon no one part attracting attention under another name. Ron Jones comments:

One of Federation Square's most conspicuous qualities is an absence of defined corporate imagery, despite the mix of businesses and institutions it houses. Not even the National Gallery of Victoria and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image have their own architectural expression. None of the buildings has a distinct identity as a separate object. Each is a conglomerate of elements that repeat from one to another. Federation Square is a composition of masses that frame open spaces, rather than an arrangement of buildings as distinct objects.¹

The unity of Federation Square depends on the coherence of those buildings constituting an ensemble. That it is such a coherent whole makes its registration particularly urgent.

That Federation Square is virtually intact as conceived and completed reinforces that coherence and that urgency. There have been only two notable alterations to the buildings and spaces since it was completed. On the one hand, in 2009 the entry to ACMI was reconfigured to allow entry only from the Square and certain interior spaces were altered. On the other hand, in 2009 a weather protection canopy designed by Melbourne-based architect Peter Maddison was added at the eastern end of the square. Neither of these alterations affected the whole in any significant manner.

Federation Square is one of Victoria's best exemplars of what was called at the time post-modern architecture characterised by playful and exuberant disregard of form, disrespect for traditional modes and materials, and use of geometric forms determined by seemingly random process. The particular style of Federation Square is sometimes called deconstructivist because of its tendency to fragmentation and distortion of classic norms. This aesthetic found its perfect expression in Federation Square and proved to be the right aesthetic for a civic square for the 21st Century while fulfilling a longing dating back 150 years. The playful aesthetic of the exterior offers a lightness masking the bulk of the walls surrounding the civic square itself and this lightness makes the square an uplifting experience for the individual. Buildings offering the same volume in modernist or classical aesthetic would have been too massive and would have overwhelmed the civic space.

Federation Square is one of the most awarded projects in the history of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) Victoria, receiving five major awards in 2003, the Victorian Architectural Medal, the Melbourne Prize, the Joseph Reed Award for Urban Design, a Marion Mahoney Award for Interior Architecture, and an Institutional Architecture Award.

On these grounds, we submit that Federation Square amply fulfils Criteria D ('Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural place.') and E ('Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics').

¹ Ron Jones, 'Design of Apple Fed Square requires a fundamental rethink', *ARCHITECTUREAU*, 16 February 2018.

Social and historic significance

Federation Square is of historic significance as Victoria's response to the centenary of Federation. The architects were aware of this response and their project of creating a whole out of a series of disparate elements (buildings) is clearly a symbol of federation.

Perhaps more significantly, the Square became the focus for major public events almost immediately after the square was opened to the public. Crowds flocked to celebrate New Year's Eve 2002 and shortly thereafter to watch the Australian Open. Later that year the AFL Grand Final drew large crowds. This began what immediately seemed like a long-standing tradition of crowds gathering in Federation Square to watch major sporting events on the big screen at Federation Square. Thus it seemed natural that the square became the urban focus of the hugely successful 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games.

Since its opening, Federation Square has been used as a site of protest, festivals, markets, fashion shows, public lectures, films and concerts. The cultural institutions (the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia and ACMI), the events at the Deakin Edge and at the Atrium draw people as well, adding to the total impact of the whole, but it is the square itself which seems to attract people as great civic squares do everywhere in the world.

Federation Square thus solves the problem which concerned Melburnians since the city was founded. It also solves the problem posed throughout the twentieth century by the failure to complete the implicit entry to the City suggested by Princes Bridge as it leads up to Flinders Street. This intersection, long the heart of the City, involved three key institutions, all dating from before World War I: Flinders Street Station, Young & Jackson's Hotel, and St Paul's Cathedral. What was missing was a public space to accommodate the people using these institutions as they waited, mingled and met. Federation Square is the answer to an implicit question which began with the founding of the city.

The historian Graeme Davison traces the yearning for this kind of space to an 1850 pamphlet arguing that Melbourne needed a 'large central square'. A square was, argued the pamphleteer—who may have been Judge Redmond Barry—'an object of such paramount and permanent importance'.²

Throughout the twentieth century, the dream of a civic square dominated thinking about the shape of the city. In 1929, a Metropolitan Planning Commission called for 'a spacious city square' opposite Parliament House. The Melbourne City Council struggled with the concept in the decades after World War II and finally delivered the misnamed 'square' between the Town Hall and St Paul's Cathedral, which went to an unlamented end with construction of the Metro.

Federation Square has been the culmination of a 150-year dream and as such it is older than its physical age might suggest. That is why Melburnians embraced it so rapidly and so completely and that is why it deserves registration.

On these grounds, we submit that Federation Square amply fulfils Criteria A ('Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria's cultural history') and G ('Strong or special association with a

² Graeme Davison, 'For what shall it profit a city if it loses its civic soul? A plea to preserve Melbourne's Fed Square', *The Conversation*, 19 February 2018.

particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons'; in this instance association with the entire community of Victorians).

Creative and technical significance

Federation Square embodies a number of creative and technical accomplishments integral to the late twentieth century.

The first is the very design and construction of decking over the railyards. This was the first large scale and still the largest expanse of railway decking built in Victoria, and Australia. The high degree of acoustic and vibrational tuning achieved through the decking and building systems to eliminate railway impacts, most notably allows ACMI cinemas to show silent films.

The second is the extensive use of 3D computer modelling and Computer Assisted Design in the construction of the facade wraps, making the non-orthogonal geometries, which are so successful in this context. The same technical prowess is manifest in the three-dimensional structure of the Atrium, an innovative and technically complex achievement for the time.

On these grounds, we submit that Federation Square amply fulfils Criterion F ('Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period').

Conclusion

In Graeme Davison's words,

Federation Square is already an important part of Melbourne's history, not just as a monument to the centenary of the nation, or for the symbols of civic and national identity it incorporates, but as the legacy of a long tradition. Going back to the ancient Greeks, and reinforced by generations of Melburnians who fought for a square, it's a tradition that puts civic values and virtues,³ our responsibility to our fellow citizens, at the heart of our collective life.

Federation Square is a unique, essential part of Melbourne because it fulfils so effectively a long-standing shared vision of a civic space providing a focus for the City. It fulfils this vision with a uniquely coherent civic ensemble of aesthetic, architectural, historic and above all social significance. The Royal Historical Society of Victoria, respectfully but urgently, calls upon the Heritage Council to approve registration of this important aspect of our heritage.

(Professor) Charles Sowerwine,
Chair, Heritage Committee,
Royal Historical Society of Victoria.

³ Davison, 'For what shall it profit a city?'