Consuming the Yarra: The city reaches as a site of consumer heritage in Melbourne

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Abstract

Commencing with the initial development of many riverside cities globally, urban rivers played important roles for the transportation and provision of trade and consumer goods. Although providing vital resources, including food and water, urban rivers also provided an interface between urban consumers and ocean-going trade. The importance of rivers in the development of urban regions has been widely recognised, with many rivers becoming synonymous with the cities they flow through. In recognising this importance, Mumford (1946, p. 316) described urban rivers as the ‘roadbed’ of many civilisations providing vital transport routes and natural resources. As cities evolved and expanded, rivers were increasingly incorporated into urban fabrics, not as natural waterscapes, rather as sites of consumption. The initial role of interface between trade and urban consumption developed further transforming the river environs into a consumer experience. Urban rivers have been heavily influenced by consumerism through use as dumps for waste generated by production and consumption processes, and continual modification to suite changes in economies and consumer needs. For example, the transformation of working rivers, following deindustrialisation, into sites of consumption for entertainment, tourism, recreation and the experience of riverside living. This paper examines the city reach of Melbourne’s (Victoria) Yarra River as an interface between trade and urban consumers and changing consumerism needs. It also illustrates changes to Melbourne’s consumer heritage that evolved in parallel with attitudes towards the Yarra and changes to its environs.

Introduction: The city reaches of the Lower Yarra River

The Yarra River is the city of Melbourne’s main river, flowing 242 kilometres (150 miles) across a mixture of land uses including rural; peri-urban; suburban; and city fabrics. The river rises in the Yarra Ranges to the east of the city and flows into the top of Port Phillip Bay at Hobsons Bay, to the west (Melbourne Water 2017). The city reaches of the Lower Yarra examined in this paper extends 3.74 kilometres (2.32 miles), from the Royal Botanical Gardens in the east, downstream to the Wurundjeri Way (Charles Grimes Bridge) in the west. This reach of the Yarra includes the section flowing along the southern edge of Melbourne’s Central Business District and is thus one of the most publicly exposed sections of the river. The reach has also been the focus of the most extensive and continual use, abuse, and dramatic change since the city’s establishment by Europeans in 1835 (see Figure 1). So dramatic is the change along this section, Presland (2008) describes it as flowing along an almost entirely engineered channel.

Many cities, globally, established along a river frequently use it as a defining or founding feature of the city (Everard and Moggridge 2012). Commonly this results in cities and their rivers being referred to synonymously. Probably the best-known examples are London and the Thames and
Paris and the Seine; there are, of course, many others. Rivers are therefore essential elements within the urban fabric and as part of its city's continuing evolution. Melbourne in this regard is no different. For example, during the 20th century the city, somewhat infamously, was described as ‘the only city in the world where the river flows upside down with the mud on top’ (Smith 1966, pp.67). The Yarra’s colour was a result of suspended silt and clay washed into the river from cleared land and urban development, occurring since the city was established (Leahy et al. 2005). This also illustrates public and media perceptions of the Yarra from the 1850s until the early 1980s when locals and visitors alike viewed it predominately as an industrial sewer and consequently the deserved subject of bad jokes. At this time, the Yarra was ‘too thick to drink, too thin to plough’ (Davie 1980, p.1).

Mumford (1938, p.316) acknowledges the importance of urban rivers in providing fresh-water and transportation routes that enabled the development of many cities. In Melbourne, the Yarra provided the city’s first water supply, the main transportation route with the outside world and level riparian land for construction of Australia’s first steam railway in 1854 (Zierer 1941). In addition to changing the colour of the Yarra’s water, modifying its structure and transforming its riparian zones for construction of wharfs and transport infrastructure, the development and ongoing redevelopment of Melbourne created a role and identity for the river. Its use as a background to the city’s history of consumption and, from the late 1960s, its transformation into a site of consumption describes an enormous change in Melbourne’s attitude to its largest river.

Consumption and Sites of Consumption

To position urban rivers as sites of consumption, the following definitions have been selected to provide context. The most basic definition for consumption is the purchase and use of goods (Miles and Paddison 1998). Sites of consumption are defined by Ritzer and Stepnisky (2017) as the settings in which consumption takes place. They contend these sites are a means of consumption and divides sites into old and new means. Old means included sites of taverns; cafeterias; bazaars; arcades; markets; country shows; fairs; general and department stores. New means of consumption occur at sites primarily developed from the 1940s-50s onwards primarily in North America. The main sites included shopping malls; discount stores; casino-hotels; entertainment (i.e. Hard Rock Café); franchises (McDonalds); superstores (Toys

![The city section of the Lower Yarra. Author image (2018)](image-url)
R Us); and Theme Parks (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2017). Pettigrew (2007) proposes these sites are also consumption objects in their own right. For example, a place can be consumed within the context of an individual’s experience and identification of positive and negative qualities that manifest during their visit. These qualities can be used to make decisions about a places suitability and value for continued experience, revisiting, or a place to live (Pettigrew 2007). Sites as objects of consumption may also lead an individual to develop an attachment to place. This involves formation of an emotional bond to individual physical sites that provide meaning attributed to the site through interactional processors (Kleine and Baker 2004). These processes comprise an individual’s personal history of face-to-face interactions with and within a specific site. The interactions have a degree of intensity (strong to weak), and involve cognitive, emotive and behavioural aspects, are emotionally complex, and change over time (Kleine and Baker 2004). Research by Pettigrew (2007) suggests that places might be consumed for a range of reasons. These included cultural meaning, social benefit, and ability to achieve an individual’s preferred lifestyle. By forming an attachment to place, consumers align themselves with an environment which supports their consumption while also applying influence on their consumption behaviours (Pettigrew 2007). This directs the arrangement of urban fabrics and occurs where consumption is transacted in cities. Consumer expectations and their behaviours are translated into the physical form of the urban fabric including structures and constructed landscapes (Cohen 2003). Knox (1991) proposes Western societies are transforming the landscape into a vast supermarket, regulated towards consumption. He further proposes this contemporary consumer landscape includes aesthetic values of historical preservation and postmodern architecture. These manifest in the development of gentrified areas within inner city spaces dependent on historical preservation, and large-scale redevelopments of mixed use based on spectacle and festival to activate and increase consumption (Knox 1991).

The city reaches of the Yarra, its riparian land and banks, has experienced a transition from a working river with background roles essential for the city’s consumers, to a specific site of consumption. This section of the Yarra’s contemporary form is composed of similar landscape features, described by Knox, geared for consumption of place, products, services, spectacle and a city lifestyle. However, the reach could also be considered a cultural landscape. These demonstrate how people have changed and lived in their surroundings, what they valued and changes over time due to their occupation of a site (McCann 1992). The following section of this paper examines the Yarra’s city reach as a cultural landscape to the background of Melbourne’s consumer heritage and its transformation into a site of consumption.

**Considering Urban Rivers as Sites of Consumption**

Urbanisation has been widely recognised as dramatically affecting and changing the ecology and geomorphology of rivers and riparian land (Paul and Meyer 2001). During the late twentieth century, as many industrial cities globally underwent economic restructuring and the process of deindustrialisation, land along urban rivers previously used for port facilities and industry was identified by governments as being suited for development of new emerging industries (Oakley 2006; Sandercock & Dovey 2002). These new industries signified a change in river and riparian land use from one of production to consumption, with Oakley (2006) proposing the consumption is symbolic of a post-industrial, post-Fordist, residential, work and leisure lifestyle. From the late twentieth century cities were no longer places of production, but rather places of consumption producing a distinctive urban form, as identified above by Ritzer and Stepnisky (2017) and Knox (1991). These have enabled the production of symbolic economies, identified as a mix of cultural, service, and professional workplaces with the emphasis placed upon the capacity of these to attract additional economic development (Oakley 2006). The success of these sites relies on offering the consumer an increasingly diverse range of housing, leisure and working environment choices. The redevelopment of city riverscapes is touted by governments and developers as creating a dynamic, cosmopolitan lifestyle heavily tied to promotion of conspicuous consumption. This form of consumption is not tied to the quality, value of use, or how it is consumed, rather the symbolic meanings and status attached to a product by its consumers (Oakley 2006).
In Melbourne the transformation of the Lower Yarra from an industrial, working river, into a postmodern riverscape essential to the place making and marketing of a modern, globalised city, commenced in 1985 (Sandercock & Dovey 2002). However, this was not the first time within Melbourne’s urban history that the Lower Yarra featured in place making schemes and attempts to use the river as a site of consumption, although not formally recognised as such at the time. Long before the city reach was transformed into a site for the consumption of a cosmopolitan lifestyle, the river’s freshwater was being perceived as an essential resource for human consumption by the Europeans seeking to establish a permanent settlement in the Port Phillip region.

**Transforming the Yarra: The background utility to the city’s consumption**

Although the initial settlement that would become Melbourne was established in 1835, the narrative of the Yarra’s use as a resource for European settlement was first identified in 1803. The Lower Yarra was first discovered and mapped in November 1803 by Europeans who were seeking a suitable location to establish a permanent settlement within the Port Phillip region (Shaw 1996). Their main concern was locating a site supplied with a permanent source of freshwater suitable for human consumption. The party recommended only one site, adjacent to a low rock falls on the Yarra where tidal flows met with freshwater. They considered that the freshwater flowing from above the falls was the only source of reliable potable water in a dry landscape they perceived as lacking any other permanent sources (Shaw 1996). Consequently, the falls site was recommended as the ‘most eligible place’ for establishing a settlement (Shillinglaw & Sayers 1972). Over 30 years elapsed before Melbourne was established on the site adjacent to the falls (Shaw 1996). By mid-1837, Melbourne’s main street grid had been laid out on the higher northern bank and the first land sales conducted, the Yarra providing the town’s freshwater and only communication route with the outside world (Cannon & McFarlane 1984). Consumption of the Yarra’s water by Melbourne’s population continued until 1857 when the first storage reservoir at Yan Yean was completed (Seeger 1947). Due to the polluted state of the Lower Yarra, its water was deemed unsuitable for human consumption. However, contemporary Melbourne sources 70 percent of its drinking water from the Yarra and its tributaries, within the Yarra Ranges on the outskirts of the city (Melbourne Water 2017). The Yarra remains a vital commodity for Melbourne’s consumption, production and survival.

Melbourne’s street grid was positioned to align with river, the southern boundary marked by Flinders Street, parallel to the Yarra. The first wharf established in 1837 was Queens Wharf opposite a large pool that had been eroded into the river bed and northern bank by the water flowing over the falls. Flinders Street provided a connection for land transport (Buckrich 2002; Lewis 1983). The port facilities and warehouses effectively separated that section of the city, and the population, from the Yarra. As Melbourne had no industries of its own, all goods and materials including basic foods stuffs arrived by ship to Hobsons Bay, then sent to Melbourne either by small boats that navigated the Yarra to Queens Wharf or unloaded at Sandridge Beach (now Port Melbourne) and transported by track to the falls that were used as a crossing point (Milner 1992). This was due to the Yarra being particularly shallow and narrow. During Melbourne’s early development, the Lower Yarra was praised of its natural beauty. Journalist Edmund Finn (1888, p. 497) described the Lower Yarra as ‘bright and sparkling; and wooed by the fragrant acacias shaking their golden blossom curls’.

As wharves were expanded along the Yarra, maritime and associated industries developed, further blocking the river from the city (Vines & Ward 1990). The first noxious industries were developed from 1840 onwards that included animal processing industries producing products for local consumption and export (Vines & Ward 1990). The floodplains of the Yarra were favoured for establishing industries as the marshy land, subject to flooding, was inexpensive to purchase, provided direct access to water for use in production, direct access for ships, within close proximity to city markets, and provided free waste disposal (Dingle 2008). By the 1853 the Lower Yarra was transforming into an industrial sewer. Barrister William Kelly travelling by steam tub along the river stated:
within about a mile of the city its northern bank was lined with an unbroken chain of slaughter-houses and fellmongery establishments which filled the circumambient air with the most sickening odours...The north bank of the Yarra, at that time, from the falls down to the slaughter-houses, was a slough of dark mud in a state of liquidity, only a few degrees removed from that of the river. (Kelly 1977, p. 32-33)

The waste from industry, sewage and drainage from the city, and rubbish generated by the Melbourne’s growing consumption was all entering the river, destroying its former beauty, ecology and water quality.

The discovery of gold in North Central Victoria during the early 1850s resulted in Melbourne’s population rising from 77,000 to over 270,000 by 1854 (Lewis 1995). The influx of arrivals resulted in over 3000 vessels arriving in Melbourne by 1852, requiring the Lower Yarra being enlarged by dredging and the expansion of port facilities (Dunstan 1984 and The Argus 9 September 1926, p.32). Shipping also docked on the northern edge of Hobsons Bay, (now Port Melbourne) requiring goods and passengers to be transported overland into Melbourne.

To improve transportation, in September 1854 Australia’s first passenger steam railway was opened connecting Port Melbourne to the city (Moloney & Sagazio 1988). The railway crossed the Yarra just above the falls with the main terminus located on the northern bank that developed into the Flinders Street Railway Station complex, completed in 1910 (Heritage Council of Victoria 2015). The railway was considered a critical component for Melbourne’s growth into a commercial city (Moloney & Sagazio 1988). The terminus and bridge separated another significant section of the Yarra from the city grid, blocking views and public access. Considering William Kelly’s earlier description of the river and its environs and being hidden from view by the wharfs, railway and processing plants, the Lower Yarra was beginning to be perceived as an ugly necessity to be hidden from the city. Melbourne was beginning to develop with ‘its back to the river,’ a phrase to later develop and feature in the media to describe the planning and ongoing actions of urban designers for more than a century (Dowling 2010).

The gold rush resulted in unprecedented urban growth and consequently increased rates of consumption for Melbourne (Twopeny 2005). This was expressed by visiting journalist George Sala, who was so impressed with the booming metropolis he coined the phrase ‘Marvellous Melbourne’ (Sala 1885, p.5). However, despite Sala’s view of Melbourne, in 1893 during a visit to the city, author James Goudie described the Lower Yarra as ‘the filthiest piece of water I ever had the misfortune to be afloat upon’ (Goudie 1893, p. 42). So horrific was the Yarra’s condition Sala’s term praising Melbourne’s growth and consumption was modified into the nickname ‘Marvellous Smellbourne’ in reference the waste from noxious trades and raw sewerage entering the river (Evening News, 5 June 1906, p.8). Despite Melbourne’s smell and the Yarra’s condition, the city prospered with new buildings and shops developed within the grid, facing away from the river, creating an early site of consumption. The renowned Block Arcade in Collins Street is one example. Developed by a financier and opened in 1892, the building was similar to the Milano Galleria Vittorio Arcade in Italy, containing shops, offices and rooms for social occasions, and the largest area of mosaic tiles of any building within Australia at the time (Heritage Council of Victoria 2000). As the population was enthralled by increasing opportunities to consume and captivating sites to experience, the Yarra continued as the main transport route for bringing in new products, aiding in production, and removing the waste.

The year 1897 proved a turning point for the Lower Yarra, when Melbourne’s first metropolitan wide sewerage system was connected to the first property, and sewage began flowing to the new treatment farm, west of the city (Dingle and Rasmussen 1991). For the first time, a section of the river was considered as more than just a utility for the city. In addition to being the main sewer for Melbourne’s first 57 years, (Dingle & Rasmussen 1991, p. 20) the Lower Yarra was also the main stormwater drain. Flooding consistently inundated the lower contours of the city grid along Flinders Street and the flat area to the south, with significant floods recorded from 1889 to 1897 (Lacy 2004). A Yarra Floods Board was established and recommended the city reach be widened to 91 metres (300 feet) from Princess Bridge to the Botanic Gardens, 2.8 kilometres (1.8 miles) upstream (The Australasian, 19 November 1898, p. 36). The work commenced in 1896 and included removal of two bends, in an attempt to stop flooding and
improve flow velocity (*The Australasian*, p 36). *The Age* (10 November, 1897, p. 7) voiced the opinion that construction of the new river bank was an opportunity to move beyond the ‘severely utilitarian engineering’ of a canal to remake this section of river as picturesque riverine scenery for Melbourne. Consequently, roadways were constructed along the banks divided by five rows of trees, defining a series of avenues that included pedestrian and bike paths, an equestrian track and carriage way (*The Australasian* 13 November, 1897, p.51). Named Alexandra Avenue, the first stage was opened in 1901 by the Duke and Duchess of York as a significant event. The avenue was touted as an object of beauty and described as a world-class thoroughfare for Melbourne to rival the great promenades of London, Paris and Chicago (Bourke 2016). Alexandra Avenue became the place for recreational carriage drives and to promenade; the location in Melbourne to go and see and be seen (Bourke). Although upstream from the city grid, this section of the Yarra was quickly recognised as one of Melbourne’s more attractive riverscapes, the *Mercury* (29 August 1908, p.5) stating; ‘the picturesque Alexandra-avenue cannot but appeal forcibly to any stranger with the least appreciation of the beautiful.’ This early instance of place-making illustrates the changing attitudes towards the river. Although not tied directly to consumption of products, the promenade aided in changing perceptions of the Lower Yarra.

**The twentieth century: transformation from production to consumption**

Despite the popularity of Alexandra Avenue, the Yarra’s city reaches only received attention when used for entertainment or celebrity promotions. For example, in 1910 Harry Houdini, the famous escapologist dived handcuffed into the Yarra from Queens Street Bridge for an audience of 20,000 (*Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 19 February 1901, p. 9). Other events that would become synonymous with the section of river above the central business district and important events on Melbourne’s sporting and cultural calendars included the Australian Henley Regatta and Moomba Festival. The first Henley on the Yarra was held on the 19 March 1904, along a course from the Botanical Gardens to Princes Bridge (*The Age*, 18 March, 1904, p. 9). In 1910 the regatta was hosting crowds of over 80,000 (*The Age*, 24 October, 1910, p. 8), and by 1913 had evolved into a large-scale carnival with night time firework displays (*The Argus*, 27 October, 1913, p.7). Despite the regatta’s popularity fluctuating after the 1950s it remains a noted event in Melbourne, though in a much quieter and reduced event to the carnivals and parties of the early 20th century (Australian Henley Regatta 2018). The regatta also illustrates the first section of the Lower Yarra to become a site of consumption, known synonymously with the Henley.

The Moomba festival commencing in 1955, also utilising the Yarra, was established to compensate for the demise of the Labour Day March. The festival used the Yarra as a focus of activities, attempting to link with the highly successful and long-established Henley Regatta (Alomes 1985). As with the regatta, Moomba’s popularity has varied greatly, yet the famous Birdman Rally, where competitors compete to fly across the river with home-made flying machines, remains popular (Ferguson 2005). As with the regatta, Moomba has created a site of consumption within the river, with the Birdman Rally and along its banks with spectacle, and a festive environment.

Despite the popularity amongst Melbourne’s population, and visitors, towards the upstream section of the river, downstream from Princess Bridge, past the central business district, the Yarra remained an industrial drain and shipping channel. Heavily polluted and blocked from view by railway infrastructure, warehouses and port facilities, it remained a utility for Melbourne’s production and consumption. When the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) was created in 1891 to build the sewerage system and maintain the city’s potable water supply, the authority was also given responsibility for all Melbourne’s metropolitan main waterways including the Lower Yarra, excluding the port areas (Dingle and Rasmussen 1991). However, the MMBW largely ignored the Yarra, reluctant to accept responsibility for drainage due to lack of clear legislation defining sewers and drains (Dingle and Rasmussen 1991). In 1923, with amendments in 1926, the Metropolitan Drainage and Rivers Act saw the MMBW define all main waterways as main drains for the city’s stormwater and runoff. The Lower Yarra was
given a number (4400), classified as a main drain and treated as such. Along the picturesque and industrial sections of the Lower Yarra, the MMBW treated the river as a drainage channel by lining the banks with stone and regularly clearing obstacles from the river bed (Dingle & Rasmussen 1991). The population’s desire to consume a suburban life style through individual home ownership on quarter-acre blocks, serviced by comprehensive stormwater drainage systems resulted in the Yarra becoming the city’s main stormwater drain, a role that continues across Melbourne’s contemporary urban fabric.

In 1929 the Metropolitan Town Planning Commission’s *Plan for Melbourne* was released, featuring all the main waterways reserved as corridors of parkland, serviced by parkway drives (Metropolitan Town Planning Commission 1929). This included the Yarra upstream of Princess Bridge with a proposal to extend the boulevard and beautification works along the river to the outer suburbs. However, the city section was not included, instead remaining a working river. The MTPC’s ideas for waterways, reflected the changing attitudes towards the use and revaluing of urban rivers that commenced during the late 19th century in the United Kingdom and North America (Freestone 2007). As seen with Alexandra Avenue, the populations attitudes towards the Lower Yarra were gradually changing and as was their desires to consume the city on different levels.

**Transforming the Yarra’s city reach into a place: An urban river of spectacle**

In 1946, the passing of the South Melbourne Land Act 1946 reserved land for a national gallery and cultural centre just south of Princes Bridge (Fairfax 2002). This would eventually result in the creation of Melbourne’s arts and entertainment precincts, using the river as a focus (Sandercock & Dovey 2002). The National Gallery opened in 1968, followed by the concert hall in 1982 and theatre complex in 1984. However, all were designed to face away from the Yarra (Sandercock & Dovey, 2002), reflecting the public perception of the river as an embarrassment (Melbourne Age 1980). As illustrated by this paper, Melbourne has experiences a symbiotic relationship with the Yarra, as a symbol of the city’s growth, prosperity and lack of town planning regarding waste removal and provision of parkland. As Dingle (1999) considers, Melbourne’s relationship with the Yarra has always been one of unease. The siting of the arts precinct away from the river was evidence that by the 1980s Melbourne continued to have its back to the river.

However, prior to the completion of the Arts Centre, two key events occurred in regard to improving the health, public perceptions and status of the lower Yarra. Firstly, in response to deindustrialisation and relocation of port facilities, the Lower Yarra Study was released outlining opportunities for redevelopment along the lower Yarra, improving the river’s health and enhancing its recreational role (Llewelyn-Davies Kinhill Pty Ltd. et al. 1978). The report recommended the transformation of the former working river into an urban river (Llewelyn-Davies Kinhill Pty Ltd. et al. 1978). Although the plan included riverside parkland and promenades, the theme of turning the riverside areas into sites of consumption to attract locals and tourists using the river as a feature, was a main objective. The economic redevelopment of a post-industrial area based on consumption and consumerism was touted by the government and consultants as the solution to reimagine this section of the Yarra.

The second key event occurred in 1980 when the Melbourne *Age* newspaper commenced its *Give The Yarra A Go* campaign. Melbourne up to this time had not been perceived as a riverside city. The campaign sought to change that perception. By the late 1970s Melbourne as an industrial hub was in decline, the Lower Yarra littered with the abandoned and decaying remains of a former industrial age. Melbourne was a city with a river flowing through it, not a riverside city. On the morning of the 23rd February 1980, the population reawakened to the Lower Yarra when *The Age* published its first article of the campaign under the by-line “Today ‘The Age’ opens a campaign to restore the Yarra to the people” (Davie 1980, p.3). The campaign’s main aims were developed to be simple, effective, and inexpensive (Davie, p.3). They included; redevelopment of Batman Carpark, on the firmer site of Queens Wharf, into a garden; returning smaller boats and vessels to the city reach; developing a maritime park around the sailing vessel the *Polly Woodside*; cleaning up the water quality; developing
a pedestrian and cycle path from the central business district along the river to Dights Falls in the inner suburb of Collingwood; and transformation of the entire Lower Yarra and its banks into a riverside park managed by a single authority (Larkin & Ellingsen 1983). *The Age*’s aims for the river were generally not economically driven, rather the campaign sought to improve public access and recreational space along the Lower Yarra, stop pollution entering the river, and start Melbourne thinking about being a riverside city (Brown & Clarke 2007). Commencing in 1985 many of *The Age*’s requests were undertaken as the lower Yarra was transformed from a polluted drain into a post-modern urban-scape, (Sandercock & Dovey, 2002) with the main Yarra trail constructed linking the outer suburbs with the city (Brown & Clarke 2007).

Following *The Age*’s campaign, in 1982 a newly elected state government sought to halt the effects of deindustrialisation commencing in the late 1960s, by using the current urban economic beliefs that proposed patterns of investment, globally, were vastly influenced by a city’s intangible qualities including its image (Sandercock & Dovey, 2002). Corporations and business were touted as preferring to locate their head offices in cities offering pleasant environments, and enjoyable lifestyles for their staff. In Melbourne’s case the city’s range of nearby natural assets that included the Lower Yarra were identified by the government as having the potential to redefine Melbourne’s image (Sandercock & Dovey 2002). Consequently the new government appointed an architect as the Minister for Planning and the Environment and a pioneering housing developer-urbanist. They promoted the idea of the Yarra’s city reach as an urban river, likened to the Seine in Paris. The southern bank of the river, opposite the central business district, was all crown land under government ownership, and so became the focus for redevelopment (Sandercock & Dovey 2002). Since the 1860s various governments had leased the land cheaply to noxious and other industries as it was unsuitable for development, and outside the city, so the effects of the pollution would not directly impact upon the city’s population (Dingle 2008). The design vision for what was termed Southbank was to complement the Arts Centre and focus on culture and entertainment to attract locals and tourists, with a mixture of retail, commercial and residential developments (Sandercock & Dovey 2002). Over a kilometre of riverbank and 100 hectares (247 acres) of crown land were included to incorporate a range of projects, all designed to promote consumption of a range of goods and services and based on the shopping centre typology of an attraction at each end (Sandercock & Dovey 2002). Now completed, the Southbank Promenade is anchored by the Arts Centre to the east, and the exhibition and convention centre downstream. On the northern bank Flinders Street Railway Station connects the northern promenade with the trade centre downstream. A pedestrian bridge crossing the river connects the station with the southern bank and Southgate shopping centre. Between the civic buildings (arts and exhibition) a range of offices and apartment towers have been constructed, the entire area becoming a site of consumption designed to attract companies and consumers alike.

In 1992 a new state government sought to speed up the Southbank redevelopment by redefining planning laws and regulations as obstructions to such grand projects. Consequently one of the government’s main achievements was approval of Victoria’s first legal casino to be constructed along one kilometre (0.62 miles) of the Yarra’s southern bank (Sandercock & Dovey 2002). As Ritzer and Stepnisky (2017) discussed above, casino hotels are key sites of consumption and the Yarra’s city reach, now an urban river, was a major symbol of the Southbank Promenade that hosted arts, entertainment, shopping, promise of a cosmopolitan lifestyle, and gambling.

The creation of Federation Square, opened in October 2002, was part of the continuing project of reinventing central Melbourne from a city of production into a modern post-industrial globalised city (O’Hanlon 2012; Sandercock & Dovey 2002). Adjacent to the Yarra and opposite the start of the picturesque Alexandra Avenue landscape, Federation Square had been a network of railway tracks and yards, part of the Flinders Street station complex. It had long been perceived as a blight on that section of the city, with plans to cover the yard being proposed throughout the 20th century (O’Hanlon 2012). During the height of redeveloping Melbourne as a post-industrial modern city based upon the new industries of tourism, leisure and consumption, the concept of a square above the railway yards was announced by the
government in 1996 (O’Hanlon 2012). The square was to become a focus point for Melbourne and, although not touted as such, a site of consumption. A riverside park, Birrarung Marr, was also constructed adjacent to the square, envisaged to provide a more passive space next to the active atmosphere of the square (O’Hanlon 2012). The park links with the river, using it largely as an aesthetic feature and venue for the Henley and Moomba events. The square is linked to the park, although not directly to the Yarra, constructed facing into the grid, its back to the river, and thus has been described as a gatekeeper for the river. As with Southbank and the other spectacles positioned along the Yarra, the river is used in the place making for these sites of consumption (see Figure 2).

In late 2016 evidence of Federation Square as a site of consumption became clearly apparent when the state government approved demolition of one of the square’s southern buildings, its back to the river, for construction of an Apple Global ‘Flagship’ Store. A design review conducted by the government architect in May 2016 cited support for the project as Apple’s landscape design plans for around the structure had been modified for improved linking of the square to the Yarra (Lucas 2018). Although reported as having the government’s full support, many in the community protested against what they described as modifying the square for the needs of a private corporation (Lucas 2018). Although developed as an attraction to bring locals and tourists into the city, the square is reported to have produced no profit since 2002 (Lucas 2018). This highlights the dependency of post-industrial sites of consumption upon place making, spectacle and the need to consistently attract consumers.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the urban history of the city reaches of Melbourne’s Yarra River as two separate components of the city’s consumption. Firstly it identified the river as a background utility for the city’s production, consumption, and removal of the resulting waste. Secondly it examined the Yarra as an actual site of consumption that commenced at the end of the 19th century with the creation of Melbourne’s first promenade. Despite being described as having its back to the river, from the late 1960s onwards the Lower Yarra played significant roles in Melbourne’s economic restructuring following the process of deindustrialisation. The city reaches of the Yarra were and continue to be used exclusively in the placing making of a variety of sites along its banks. Even the proposed Apple Store for Federation Square, the latest attempt at place making along the river, has been cited as redesigning the surrounding landscape to significantly link with the river.

Although the premise of urban rivers as sites of consumption has intermittently been addressed within the literature, the above, brief, examination suggests the Lower Yarra was indeed an important component for the city’s consumption, and a site of consumption within its own right. This despite the city’s history of constructing infrastructure and buildings, along the northern bank that block the river from view and public access. However, in following what

Figure 2: The city reach of Yarra at Southbank; a contemporary site of consumption. Author image (2017)
could be described as now a tradition in Melbourne, Federation Square is the latest to face away from the Yarra. Since the 1980s the city reach of the Yarra has been remade into a site of consumption, hosting a range of other sites skewed specifically for consumption. Despite this, the physical form of the river channel and its water quality remains primarily as a large stormwater drain, with the consumers having minimal if any intimate contact with the river.

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