Melbourne and the Yarra: an uneasy relationship

Some cities are intimately associated with their rivers — London and the Thames, Paris and the Seine come to mind — but not Melbourne and the Yarra. The Yarra River was long regarded as something of a joke, especially by the harbour dwellers from further north, or an embarrassment for a city looking for a distinctive and preferably beautiful natural feature.

The situation is changing. A short time ago The Age headlines read ‘Righting the upside down river. How Melbourne used, abused then learnt to love the river’. The article continued, ‘After being defiled by sewage, penned in by embankments and shunned by city dwellers, the water course once dubbed the ‘upside down river’ is now gaining recognition as an asset for Melbourne’.

The Arts Centre and the National Gallery were the first institutions to move south over Princes Bridge more than 25 years ago. In the last six years or so there has been a rush to the riverside immediately south of the CBD. Southgate showed the way demonstrating that people were willing to come to the riverside to eat while staring across the river at the backside of Flinders Street railway station. Since then, the Exhibition Centre (Jeff’s Shed) has been built and, of course, the Crown Casino. Now that the much-hated Gas and Fuel towers, which obscured the view of the city from the river, have been knocked down, Federation Square will soon take their place, to be followed by the biggest development of them all, Docklands. People are already coming to the riverside between Princes Bridge and Spencer Street Bridge in unprecedented numbers, notably to the casino and Southgate restaurants. Once Federation Square and Docklands are under way, the riverbanks will be crowded as never before. There is a sense that the recreational life of Melbourne has re-focussed onto the city stretch of the river and the institutions lining its banks.

There is a neat historical sequence in this re-focussing, representing a return to the stretch of river which originally gave birth to Melbourne. This stretch was where John Batman declared ‘This will be the place for a village’. The rocky barrier across the river where Queens Bridge is was high enough to stop salt water flowing further upstream on all but the highest tides, so salt water for ships and commerce joined fresh water for drinking — an ideal conjunction for a trading settlement. (Incidentally, this places the much-debated Crown Casino at the historic heart of Melbourne.) Fawkner’s little ship the Enterprise was tied to the bank along this stretch of river and later the bustling city wharves extended from this part, downstream. Ironically, this stretch became increasingly deserted in the 20th century as the docks migrated downstream. By the 1970s and 1980s it was a rundown area of warehouses, cobbled lanes, some trees along the banks, car parks and a scruffy park unsafe after dark. For a long time derelict and sinking boats were tied to one bank. The stretch between Princes Bridge and Spencer Street Bridge fell between the upstream jurisdiction of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) and the downstream responsibilities of the Harbour Trust — and no one wanted to know about it.

With these recent changes in mind, I want to explore Melbourne’s public view of its relationship with the Yarra and trace how this view has evolved in the 20th century. There have been repeated attempts to ‘improve’ the river to make it more useful or less dangerous to the city, as well as attempts to ‘beautify’ it in the hope that more Melburnians might come to its banks for relaxation and recreation. There have also been episodes of breast beating at the realisation that the city has defiled and neglected the Yarra. It has been an uneasy relationship.
Discussion of Yarra improvements initially came out of broader concern with civic improvement and public health concerns in last decade of 19th century. There was a convenient marriage of beauty and utility in that practical improvements — changes that would make the river more useful or less damaging — were seen also to enhance the beauty of the river and its recreational potential. The Yarra was seriously prone to flooding. When the river flooded spectacularly in 1863 and 1891, the amount of damage increased because so much building had taken place in the flood plain. As a result, flood control measures were a high priority. The Coode Canal, cut in the 1880s on the lower river, was a flood control as well as a shipping measure. The re-routing of the river past the Botanic Gardens was more clearly a flood control measure. However, it was discussed in the context of recreation both on and beside the river—there could be carriage drives along the banks and better boating and racing on the river when a sharp bend was eliminated. The Henley on Yarra rowing event was the major outcome. The first event was held in 1904, lasting half a century as the premier rowing event on the river before being submerged into the Moomba festival.

In 1904, MMBW engineer W. Thwaites suggested the first grandiose Yarra proposal. He proposed throwing a low dam across the river just downstream of the present Chandler Highway to permanently flood the extensive floodplain upstream, creating a narrow S-shaped lake six-and-a-quarter miles long. The river below this point would be snagged (the Yarra is a naturally snaggy river making boat travel difficult), and a lock built at Dight’s Falls would extend navigation by allowing recreational and commercial traffic to move upstream. The dam would generate electricity, control downstream flows and the lake would be a major recreational facility for Melbourne. It would also, Thwaites claimed, attract foreign tourists. This was an engineer’s scheme. In his words it ‘... would most materially conduce to the Health, Utility, Recreation and Beauty.’ Local councils were in favour of the proposal, but artists and other residents of Eaglemont and Alphington objected on aesthetic grounds. The scheme lapsed for two decades, but a flood in 1923 — suggesting how the lake might look before the waters subsided — provoked further debate and increased opposition.

Responsibility for the Yarra was finally clarified in 1923 when the MMBW was given the authority to control the river, its banks and floods above Princes Bridge. The Melbourne newspaper, The Herald, sent Bernard Cronin to investigate the proposal. His report argued there were recreational opportunities, ‘a people’s playground of incomparable opportunities’. He also extolled the beauty of many reaches of the river above the CBD, ‘A fairyland at Melbourne’s door’. These opportunities were forsaken because the river was neglected and access to the river restricted to the extent that it had become ‘a no man’s land’.

The Board of Works immediately began an enthusiastic de-snagging campaign, as well as felling and grubbing willows which had grown in great profusion along many reaches. Both measures helped flood control and improved boating on the river, but also generated considerable hostility from residents who enjoyed the meandering sluggish willow-lined river for its scenic qualities. They argued that the MMBW’s activities were causing rapid bank erosion. A clear division had opened between those valuing the picturesque and those wanting a safe navigable river.

Melbourne’s Metropolitan Town Planning Commission began its deliberations in the early 1920s and produced a report in 1929. The commission offered the second grand vision of how Melbourne might use the Yarra and its tributaries. The river’s valley and
that of its tributaries radiating out through the metropolitan area, would be the spines for a system of radial parks (around 1926 the Yarra Bend Park was already set up). These would compensate Melburnians for a lack of reserved parklands as the suburbs pushed outwards. This was cheap, flood-prone land unsuitable for building yet ideal for recreational purposes — Melbourne has always turned its cheap land into parks. The commission considered Thwaites' lake scheme, but thought the floodplain would be far more use turned into football and cricket ovals than being flooded. Integral to the commission’s scheme was a radial fan of ‘parkways’ or tree-lined ‘picturesque drives’ alongside the water separating the linear parks from residential areas. They were to be largely recreational, based on the US model which Stapley, chairman and force behind the commission, was familiar with. There was also a local precedent in the form of the Yarra Boulevard proposed and partly built by Carlo Catani, the engineer of the Public Works Department before World War I.

The onset of the Depression shelved such grand schemes, but there was still the prospect of some unemployment relief funds to beautify the Yarra. One favourite plan was to complete the Yarra Boulevard to become a ‘golden highway’ and a fitting way to commemorate Victoria’s centenary. This did not happen in its entirety, but some of the boulevard was built and a variety of other improvements, such as stabilising and beaching the banks and replanting, were completed. Much of the riverside plantings seen today originated at this time. This was ‘Beautification’. Herring Island was created when a bend in the river at the Richmond quarries was cut off as a flood control measure.

Meanwhile people were using the river — canoeists, swimmers, and 100,000 plus crowds at the Henley regatta. However, the press remained convinced that ‘comparatively few of Melbourne’s million realise the wonderful beauty of the river which lies at their doors, or the facilities it offers for sport ...’ The Herald introduced a more censorious note in an article titled ‘River which the city neglects’ — it was the people who were at fault. The article pointed out that the growing use of the car for recreation was taking people further afield. The article lamented, ‘... the river is “too slow” for a motor minded generation’. However, no one neglected the river in 1934 when it flooded spectacularly, creating an impromptu lake.

By the later 1930s as prosperity began to return, a rare spirit of municipal co-operation saw a series of Yarra River Improvement conferences. These recommended bank protection, tree planting, screening factories, the lock at Dight’s Falls, completing the Yarra Boulevard and creating the parks. All the dreams for the river, except the lake, were revived. Francois de Castella, while dreaming of what the Yarra could become, and of a park along its whole length to Warrandyte, also deplored the lack of river sense among Melburnians. Little was done before World War II intervened, the problem of finding funds for the aquisition of land for public parks remained unresolved.

The view that the Yarra was neglected was revived in the 1950s. W. H. Newnham writing his Biography of Melbourne in 1956 suggested the car and city beaches were a stronger attraction for holiday makers. Melbourne’s first official town plan, published in 1954, largely ignored the river and the 1929 proposal for radial parks — it was far more interested in increasing the number of playing fields than creating more informal parklands.

In 1958 the River again attracted attention when a proposal to subdivide the old
Banyule Estate by the Yarra into residential blocks generated considerable opposition. Lovers of the Yarra valley were urged to act to save 'one of the last natural beauty spots left in the Yarra Valley'.' A Save the Yarra Valley League was formed and Verne Christie, Liberal MLA for Ivanhoe, orchestrated a shrewd campaign. The press supported the league and called for Melbourne's master plan to adopt 'the principle of preserving natural beauty spots and recreational areas for all time'. Government did at least think that land below the 1934 flood level should be reserved for public use.

It was soon evident that pollution and freeways were far bigger threats to the river. The new generation of persistent chemicals began to find their way along broken sewers and drains into the river and joined some of the old pollutants — the septic tank was now allowing human sewage back into the river after an absence of over half a century. The Board of Works seemed incapable of stopping this. By 1967, The Sun newspaper commented on the 'beauty' and 'beastliness' of the Yarra, juxtaposing graceful willows with the yellow effluent from the tannery, old petrol drums and tyres and run-down factory sites.

The radial creek system looked as inviting to traffic planners as it had to park planners in the 1920s for the same reasons— the land was cheap, especially when compared to the cost of acquiring land in residential areas for freeways. The first stage of the South Eastern Freeway skirted an unattractive industrial area on the river's northern bank and there was little concern. However, as the freeway moved west it took up playing fields of prestigious independent schools and overshadowed more attractive stretches of the river. The proposed Eastern Freeway would be even worse, carving through the Yarra Bend National Park. Battles over road routes would continue for more than 15 years. In the United States, the parkways had been the precursors of the freeways. This was also the case in Melbourne, but the freeways built in the 1970s and 1980s cut people off from the river rather than let them enjoy its beauty — people passed through or above the river at 100 kilometres an hour.

The press drew more and more attention to what was happening. 'The Yarra is no joke' insisted The Herald, 'It is our River. It reflects us as much as the sky and the green of the over-hanging trees. In misusing it we betray a heritage'. The new language of environmental concern was increasingly used in connection with the river. No longer were journalists content to wax lyrical about the scenic bits of the river or 'tut tut' over pollution. A new style of investigative journalism had reached Melbourne and was used to good effect. Eventually the Government acted, promising a clean river by 1980. The Government put the Environmental Protection Agency in charge of checking pollution. While the condition of the river improved, the rate of improvement did not keep up with the rising expectations of the press. Nine years after The Herald campaign, The Age newspaper began a 'Give the Yarra a Go' campaign. The message was familiar, and the paper realised its efforts were part of what had almost become a tradition for Melbourne newspapers. The newspaper was still concerned that, 'a vast lethargy has somehow come between the people of Melbourne and its greatest, indeed its only asset'. The same set of reasons for this lethargy were reiterated — the car, railway embankments and other barriers to easy access. It was seen as vital to reverse this trend because,
The river is the key to Melbourne’s existence: and it could and should become the key to the way people think of their city and are nurtured by it. If the citizens of a city are not exhilarated by it, the city slowly dies. Already the whole centre of Melbourne is slowly sliding out to the suburbs, threatening to leave a dead centre.

In line with this reasoning, The Age focussed on the city reach of the river. This was a new emphasis — all previous campaigns had looked further upstream. While this was ‘a twisted jungle of rubbish and tangled undergrowth’, a ‘metropolitan mini-tip’, it could be turned into ‘an area of parks, boat moorings, natural bush, barbeques and a fun and fitness track’. This would provide a much-needed ‘recreational buffer’ between office development on the CBDs southern and western flanks. It would link the Arts Centre, the World Trade Centre and the proposed casino. It would also ‘lend scale and softness to a fast growing and bustling urban centre that, until now, has had no obvious heart or focus’.

There was considerable activity during the 1980s. The MMBW, with its parks along the river, began to realise the vision of the 1929 Metropolitan Plan. Bicycle tracks were built along cleaned-up banks. But it was in the city stretch that something began to happen. Enabling legislation, a planning scheme and some public money saw the beginning of a clean-up, but it was private finance which would re-create the riverside landscape.

Southgate was the catalyst. It demonstrated the commercial viability of the river. This was an A. V. Jennings project and was to have been a retail complex. Late in the development, with Daimaru and Melbourne Central looming as serious competition, the emphasis swung to restaurants. This was a big gamble, as those involved realised. Southgate opened more than five years ago and diners crowded to get in — they have been doing so ever since. The river landscape has since grown confident in the knowledge that people will happily come down to the water.

The developments of the last five years or so, which have persuaded so many people that Melburnians are at last embracing the Yarra, are very different in several respects from earlier times.

First, and most obviously, the persistent theme of all reformers was that the sylvan, rural scenery of the river would refresh and reinvigorate jaded city folk if only they would walk by it or float upon it. It was Rus in urbe. But what people have flocked to recently is essentially an urban landscape, a built environment. Stone brick and concrete dominate and the only significant mass of greenery is captured in an atrium in a building next to Southgate. This is a postmodern look at nature. Something similar will be included in the new Federation Square. Greenery will be kept safely encapsulated in large glass wedges that people will be able to see but not touch or go amongst. The river too is denatured. It has become an angular, regulated canal flowing between geometrically straight stone banks.

People going to the riverside precinct are lunchtime city workers, theatre goers, concert goers and diners with disposable income in their pockets, gamblers with money to spend (at least on the journey there), visitors to car shows, home shows, and other exhibitions in ‘Jeff’s Shed’. They seek essentially urban forms of stimulation. Many, perhaps most, do not visit the riverside to take in a sylvan scene and recharge their batteries. They are a new crowd. The river is no more than a backdrop to other activities, rather than the reason for the visit.
The river has been commercialised and commodified by agents of post-industrial capitalism, by entertainment providers in the form of restaurants, shows, exhibitions or the casino. These entrepreneurs invested heavily in the river as a site, encouraged by planners in government. They risked dollars but were emboldened by the successful renovation of other waterside sites in other cities. The Yarra has become popular, it seems, not because it has greened the city, but because the city has urbanised the river and incorporated it into the urban landscape.