Melbourne’s Royal Exhibition Building – A Case for World Heritage Significance

Introduction

Australia has 13 places on the World Heritage List, none of them buildings or monuments. Perhaps, given only 200 years of European history, this might not be surprising. However, ambiguity is not the sole arbiter of “outstanding universal values”. Australia has at least two buildings of world heritage significance which have been constructed in the past 120 years. One is the Sydney Opera House; the other is the Royal Exhibition Building.

Today it is hard to believe that only a few decades ago Melbourne’s Royal Exhibition Building was regarded as a white elephant, and only survived a motion for its demolition by one vote. Over the past ten years the building and its surrounds have undergone a major transformation, some of it controversial, and today it stands out as a proverbial jewel in Australia’s cultural heritage crown.

But let us first turn back the clock.

Of all the great nineteenth-century exhibition structures, the two which have achieved iconic status are the Crystal Palace in London, destroyed by fire in 1932, and the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

The Royal Exhibition Building was constructed for the 1880 International Exhibition held in Melbourne. It was by all accounts a resounding success, which put Australia and Melbourne on the world stage.

The architect was Joseph Reed. Reed’s design is most widely known for its resemblance to Brunelleschi’s dome of Florence Cathedral. More importantly however, it drew upon parameters originally set by Paxton, Fox and Henderson at the Crystal Palace and, in varying degrees, subsequently used in all of the major exhibition halls up until that time. These were:

- The cruciform plan with central dome
- Triple-storey basilican section
- The double-height galleries running around the perimeter
- The form and detailing of the fanlights.

The builder was David Mitchell, the father of Dame Nellie Melba.

The original decorative scheme was designed by John Mather, more known today as a plein-air painter of the Heidelberg School, and executed under the watchful eye of James Paterson, co-principal of what was to become one of Australia’s leading firms of artistic house-painters and decorators. A key feature of the building was the pipe organ, installed by notable organ builders, George Fincham & Son. This was the

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The largest pipe organ ever constructed in Australia, reportedly larger than that in St Paul’s Cathedral, London. Sadly it was progressively vandalized, and finally removed in 1965. Only a few pipes remain in various locations.

When completed, the main building, the aquarium and the temporary display annexes covered almost the whole 20-acre site of the Carlton Gardens, which had been reserved by the Exhibition Commissioners as a permanent exhibition facility in 1878.

Consistent with the concept of the ‘Garden Palace’, extensive landscaping works were undertaken in the southern portion of the Carlton Gardens by notable landscape gardener William Sangster. The area was planted with valuable trees; lawns and flower beds. The paths were asphalted, and the whole grounds were surrounded with a substantial iron fence, a small section of which still remains on the site.

The building was again host to the Centennial International Exhibition held in 1888. While not as grand as the previous exhibition, it was still a major international event. Before the 2000 Olympic Games ‘Victoria welcome[d] all Nations’.

Today, the building survives as the world’s only remaining nineteenth-century exhibition pavilion. Originally built to exhibit the arts and manufactures, many of which have become today’s prized antiquities and industrial wonders, it still serves its original function, being until recently Melbourne’s principal exhibition venue.

Twenty-one years after it opened, an age which was perhaps propitious, the Exhibition Building was the site of the opening of Australia’s first Federal Parliament. On 9 May 1901, amid much pomp and ceremony and surrounded by splendiferous decoration, Australia was born as a nation. It was certainly a major episode in Australia’s history and was probably the single most important event ever to have occurred at the Exhibition Building.

Externally and internally, the building, if not the site, but particularly the interior, has been accurately restored to its appearance on that occasion, including the actual decorative techniques used for the original Federation scheme.

Allegorical tableaux and mottoes in the decoration are indicative of the political aspirations for the new nation:

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\begin{align*}
  \text{Dei gratia} & \quad \text{(By the Grace of God)}, \\
  \text{Aude sapere} & \quad \text{(Dare to be wise)}, \\
  \text{Benigno numine} & \quad \text{(With benign power)}, \text{ and perhaps most prophetically } \text{Carpe diem} \\
  & \quad \text{(Seize the day)}. \text{ Collectively they boded well for the infant nation.}
\end{align*}
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**Why is the Royal Exhibition Building significant?**

At a world level, it remains as the world’s oldest surviving exhibition hall and a legacy of the great nineteenth-century exhibitions of arts and manufactures, the underlying purpose of which was to establish an international reputation and trade in various national manufactured goods and raw materials – the forerunner of globalisation.
Nationally, it was the scene of the consummation of the Federation process which bore witness to the first Federal Parliament, symbolizing the unification of the states, and a rite of passage of the young nation. Australia today has one of the longest traditions of continuous democracy in the world.

Towards World Heritage Listing

In 1993 the Kennett Government proposed to relocate the new museum, then under construction, to the Carlton Gardens site. Since the 1880 Exhibition this area had been built over. First by the Exhibition Annexes and more recently by unsightly masonry additions indelibly imprinted on many young minds as the place of the annual examinations (great social significance perhaps) an asphalted car park and a children’s traffic school.

By 1995, there was much concern about the new museum proposal for the site, and its effect on the significance of the Royal Exhibition Building. Alarm was first raised by Emeritus Professor Bernard Smith, and subsequently academics on all sides became involved. Even the republican debate was invoked: Professor Colin Duckworth said, “the intrusive design of the Museum blade is, and always has been, in part a deliberate attack on the heritage value of the Exhibition Building by those who see the Building as an imperial icon”.

On the other side Professor Peter McIntyre, head of the panel which chose the Denton Corker Marshall scheme, supported the government’s position which was to “bring together the greatest public works project in Australia this decade, a building that will be a symbol for Victoria and also a grand institution for a museum that reflects both the past and the future”.

In the cut and thrust of debate Professor Miles Lewis said a lot in between. Opposition gradually narrowed from the whole proposal to just the “Blade”, or roof over the Gallery of Life.

The Melbourne City Council and the National Trust joined forces and proposed nomination to the world heritage list as, in the words of the Council it ‘would be a first for Victoria and for Australia’.

Premier Kennett on the other hand stated:

The listing might prevent or impede the construction of the museum in the Carlton Gardens. The bid to the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organisation requires the support of the both state and federal governments.

In the wings, The Age fanned the flames with reports, editorials and cartoons against the blade and supported the Trust and the Council’s campaign. It even went so far as to say, ‘the government should listen to the National Trust on this issue’.
The Australian Rationalist accurately summed up the debate:

Well, the Museum is finished and open for business, the blade is there amongst the trees, but blocking the view of the dome from the north.

**Conclusion**

Is the building any less significant now that it was? I think not! In many ways the interface between the old and the new creates a synergy, benefiting both. Melbourne’s Royal Exhibition Building is of world heritage significance.

Hopefully the Bracks government will make what Sir Humphrey Appleby might refer to as a ‘courageous decision’, and move the nomination of the Royal Exhibition Building from the wish list to the tentative list, and finally to inclusion on the World Heritage List.

Somewhere here there is a role for ICOMOS.