Early in 1994 the Melbourne City Commissioners, with the support of the Victorian government, delivered the coup de grace to Melbourne’s much-abused and neglected City Square. Under a scheme proposed by the developer, Mr David Marriner, the eastern third of the Square will be sold to a company, Staged Developments, and absorbed into a proposed tourist hotel. The remaining two-thirds will stay under the control of the City Council. The proposed hotel development is but one component in a complex series of swaps and deals under which interests associated with Marriner will restore the long-disused Regent Cinema as a Centre for the Moving Image, and acquire outright ownership of another major development site: the half-block formerly occupied by the Queen Victoria Hospital in Lonsdale Street. In May 1994 the Minister for Planning, the Honourable Robert Maclellan, overrode a recommendation of the Historic Buildings Council by granting a permit to demolish two of the remaining three towers of the old hospital. Marriner’s plans to build a massive residential and retail development on the site have been shelved; and, for the present, it will become a temporary car park and outdoor market.

What public benefits have these proposals brought? Two major pieces of public land will have been sold back into private hands at bargain basement prices. One, the Queen Victoria site, has been public land since the beginning of the colony; it was once seen by Melbourne’s first planner, Robert Hoddle, as the possible site for a ‘very handsome square’. The other was won for the public by a long campaign on the part of planners, architects, businessmen, and city councillors motivated by the desire to give Melbourne a dignified public square. One site has now been lost, while the other has been reduced to the forecourt of a yet-to-be-constructed hotel. A notable historic building, the Queen Victoria Hospital, has been reduced to a single token tower. Another, the long-neglected Regent picture palace, will be lavishly restored, though its future use and commercial viability remain unclear.

These decisions represent the heaviest defeat suffered by the Victorian heritage movement in twenty years. They are a depressing illustration of the truth of Leonie Sandercock’s summary of Melbourne’s planning history: ‘capitalism, crude and uncivilized’. In part, the decisions are to be explained by the severity of the times and the desperation of successive state and city administrations to balance their books and rid themselves of embarrassing obligations. They are also a measure of the confusion sown in the minds of heritage advocates and planners by the complexity of the successive Marriner proposals. But most of all, they reflect a collective loss of faith in the link between the provision of public space and a healthy public life, between civic space and civic virtue. To understand the gravity of what has recently been done, we need to retrace the history of Melbourne’s long search for a city square.

**The classical ideal of public space**

Melbourne was unique among the Australian capital cities in being a pure creation of free enterprise. Free settlers founded it, and government only arrived in their wake. The governing classes often surveyed the upstart city with a sense of alarm. They were apprehensive that a society ruled by nothing more than ambition and avarice might simply fall apart. Governor La Trobe’s creation of the city’s greenbelt of public parks, and the strenuous program of public building in the late 1850s and 1860s - it included the Parliament House, the Museum and Public Library - were part of a concerted campaign of physical and moral improvement. Public institutions and public spaces were seen as providing symbols for a sense of community and civic morality that overrode the individual commercial interests of the inhabitants of the city. The popular demand for public spaces, and contests for the control of them, were a common feature of political life in liberal democratic states in Europe, America and Australia in the nineteenth century. When citizens asserted the right to free assembly, they were also implicitly demanding access to public places in which such meetings might take place. It was a cause that drew support from radical democrats and conservatives alike. As Graeme Tucker has recently shown, Melbourne’s Town Hall was built at the height of the democratic excitement of the early 1860s to accommodate the demand of the citizenry for a place ‘capable of containing any reasonable number of persons, proportionate to the population, who may wish to assemble together for political or other purposes’.

Since the time of the Greek polis and the Roman forum, the practice of public life has been associated with public squares or places. In 1850, on the eve of the gold-rush, an
anonymous pamphleteer (possibly Redmond Barry or one of this circle) made the first of many calls for the establishment of a city square. *Melbourne as it is and as it Ought to be with Remarks on Street Architecture Generally* portrayed an ideal Melbourne in a classical Mediterranean mold with a forum or piazza, colonnades and boulevards, obelisks and fountains. Its House of Assembly, its churches and its Supreme court would look onto public squares and the squares would be joined by wide boulevards. On Flagstaff Hill a public promenade would be lined with statues of Great Men and nearby would be a museum of geology and industrial art. The grandest and most essential feature of the plan was a ‘great central square, the focus of commerce and civic activity’ which, the writer believed, should ideally occupy the whole of the block bounded by Bourke, Elizabeth, Collins and Swanston Streets. On one side of this ‘Grand Square’ should be erected a Town Hall ‘with deep porcicos and a lofty tower’. Squares and piazzas performed several purposes: ‘During the heat of summer and the rain of winter they offer an agreeable promenade, a pleasant rendezvous for the purposes of business and pleasure, a kind of exchange for commerce, politics and news.’ A large city square would serve a dual purpose. It would enhance the dignity of the municipality: ‘The great central square [would be] the focus of commerce, and civic activity, the residence of Municipal Authority’. And, secondly, it would contribute to the health of the citizens. As Melbourne grew, the amount of open space decreased. The author stressed the need for squares and broad open spaces to ventilate and purify the most crowded quarters [of the city].

Grand schemes of municipal improvement stood little chance of realization amidst the more insistent demands of Melbourne’s businessmen for better roads, street lighting, dock facilities and policing. The Council, as their political voice, was generally less favorable to schemes of civic ornamentation than the Governor and his officials who could afford to take a longer view of the public good. In July 1851 the Government Surveyor and original planner of Melbourne’s streets, Robert Hoddle, responded to a request from the City Surveyor to continue Little Lonsdale Street through the block surrounded by Lonsdale, Russell, LaTrobe and Swanston Streets. From the time of the city’s first land sales this block had been set aside for public purposes, and it already accommodated the Melbourne Hospital. Hoddle advised the Council against the proposed street extension ‘as it would cut, what would otherwise form a very handsome square into two parts; and also because the formation of such a street would seriously detract from the quiet and retired situation of the General Hospital’. But the vision of a ‘handsome square’ was evidently not shared by burgesses more anxious to afford access to their shops and warehouses and they promptly authorized the construction of the new street.

**The search for a square**

The dream of a grand civic square would remain the most consistent focus of civic idealism in Melbourne from the 1850s to the present day. Squares had been a leading feature of the Haussmannesque schemes of grand civic design that had dominated European city planning in the later nineteenth century, and were a feature both of the British tradition of Garden Cities, in which they played a subordinate role as a physical expression of community; and in the American City Beautiful movement in which they were usually a leading element. Most of the great American cities that were re-designed by Olmsted and Burnham in the early twentieth century included a grand city square, as did the schemes for a beautified Sydney put forward by the Sydney Improvement Commission in 1909.'
Melbourne's Metropolitan Planning Commission of 1929, also strongly influenced by American ideals, recommended that 'the City hall and its administrative block should be centrally situated in a spacious city square. The edifices dedicated to a city's ceremonies, its art, and its administrative activities, are definite expressions of community pride'. The most suitable site for a city square, the Commission believed, was in front of the Victorian Parliament at the top of Bourke Street. By opening out the street, the square would create a vista linking Melbourne's prime civic buildings and thus reinforce a sense of civic identity. Other potential sites, such as the site over the Flinders Street railway yards, were rejected as 'unsuitable as a place of assembly on important occasions'.

In the 1930s Melbourne's dream of a civic square was kept alive by the artist and art critic, Lionel Lindsay, who had already contributed his own sketchy designs for the beautification of Sydney twenty years earlier. Melbourne needed a civic square, Lindsay argued, in order to brighten up its social life:

Public squares, with their surrounding cafes and orchestras, the pleasure of the promenade free to the poorest, refreshment, cheap and good at any hour—when these are denied there is little for the people to do but make a dash for the pub, frequent the cinema or go back to their huches like good little rabbits! Australia possesses for the most part a Mediterranean climate, which should dictate her way of living. Now that she has passed her colonial days, it is time she found a life motive more in tune with her soil and sunlight. To compass that, the means must be architecturally provided and certain prohibitions modified.

Like his brothers Norman and Daryl, Lindsay was a passionate opponent of Puritanism and saw a square as an antidote to the suburban conformity and sabbatarianism for which Melbourne was becoming notorious. They were supported by Melbourne University’s Professor of Classics, T.G. Tucker, who suggested the construction of such a square by widening Swanston Street, the city's main thoroughfare, outside the National Gallery. The plan had some obvious shortcomings and shortly afterwards another artist and would-be town planner, John Rowell, put forward a more ambitious alternative scheme that utilized the Old Melbourne Hospital site (which was soon expected to be vacated) for a new Art Gallery and Museum which would face a new Town Hall across a grand civic square on Lonsdale street, thus anticipating the current proposal for a great square on the former Queen Victoria Hospital site.

The Depression and the War delayed any prospect of realizing these ideas and it was not until the late 1940s, when the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works drew up the first metropolitan planning scheme, that the idea of a civic square received official endorsement. E.F. Borrie, the Board's chief planner, reaffirmed the 1929 proposal for the creation of a square around Parliament House, and urged 'the erection of buildings of a monumental character around the square to provide for a Town Hall and Municipal Offices'. Such a square, the planners believed, might be an economic as well as a social asset to the city since it would enhance the value of surrounding properties. The idea that a square might actually pay for itself out of increased rate revenue added greatly to its appeal, especially in the eyes of the Melbourne City Council and its principal constituents, the traders of the central business district.

The more economic considerations came to the fore the less appealing were the claims of upper Bourke street or the Exhibition Gardens - another suggested site for a square - which both lay far outside the main retail district. In 1961 a city councillor, William Lempriere, floated a proposal to erect a brand new square and civic centre at the city's southern gateway above the old railway yards on Flinders Street. While Flinders Street Station remained the city's traditional gateway, the growing dominance of the motor car had begun to undermine the retail trade at the southern end of town: Lempriere's scheme may perhaps be seen as an attempt to prop it up. The scheme gained strong support from the Town and Country Planning Association and the City Development Association and several imaginative drawings of the completed proposal appeared over the next few years in the Herald newspaper, whose proprietor, Keith Murdoch, had been another of its supporters.
E.F. Borrie, who was invited to report on the city square issue, urged the adoption of a site closer to the civic centre of the city and in 1961 the Council’s Town Planning Committee underlined its civic function as 'a meeting place for the population as a whole, for public celebration, and remembrance and thanks to God'. In the long tug-of-war that ensued the costs of roofing the railway yards and rebuilding the Town Hall, combined with the stronger commercial pull of the Collins Street retail district, eventually prompted the Council to shift its gaze to a site further north, opposite the Town Hall. Conceived in the spirit of civic idealism, the city square would finally be realized as a recreational annex to the city's struggling retail zone.

By 1968 the council had assembled a parcel of land on the south-east corner of Collins and Swanston Streets between the Town Hall and St Paul's Cathedral. In order to finance the project, the Council intended to demolish the Regent - a 1920s picture palace which stood on the easternmost section of the site - to allow a commercial development. But public opposition to the demolition of the Regent, led by the Builder’s Labourer’s Federation, forced the Council to abandon the commercial scheme and keep the old cinema. The Council persevered with its planned square, but the site was now much reduced in size and flanked on its eastern side by the blank wall of the Regent. A lot of rate-payers' money had been invested in the scheme and the Council was desperate to make the square pay for itself somehow. In 1976 the young Melbourne firm of Denton, Corker, Marshall won the competition to design the new square. An austere blue-tone piazza facing Swanston Street was to be divided by a waterwall from a semi-subterranean row of leasehold shops in the lee of the Regent.

The privatization of heritage and the erosion of public space

Almost from the beginning, the square was a failure. It was too small to be truly grand. The interposition of the waterwall limited its use as a place of public assembly. (It has been suggested that this limitation was deliberate: in the aftermath of the Vietnam Moratoriums the City Fathers may have become less enthusiastic about the provision of space for popular assembly.) The roar of traffic down Swanston Street, the westerlies gusting down Collins Street and the lack of morning sunshine made it an inhospitable place to sit or stroll. The shops, cut off from the flow of pedestrian traffic, failed to prosper and soon the shopkeepers were complaining of the nefarious doings of the drug traffickiers, vagrants and homeless youth who frequented the place after dark. Meanwhile, the Council was obliged to shoulder the financial burden of the untenanted Regent. The square that was going to help revive the commercial prospects of the city centre had become a great millstone around the ratepayers' necks.

In the wake of its failure, it became commonplace to question the utility and value of a city square. Perhaps Melbourne was not really a sunny Mediterranean city at all, but a wintry European one. Rather than squares and forecourts, what we should have been building - so it was suggested - were arcades and atria. The ideas of public life to which the public square was an answer were appropriate enough for the walking city of the mid-nineteenth century, but in the post-modern city of the late twentieth century, such notions of street-based democracy were said to have been made obsolete by the automobile, new forms of electronic communication and suburban residence. Feminists add their criticisms: public squares like Melbourne's are monuments to male preoccupations with power and money; they have little to offer women and children who increasingly live their lives in the suburbs. These fashionable notions, like other shibboleths of post-modernism, do more to undermine a traditional understanding of citizenship than to create a new one. They rest upon a series of unexamined assumptions. Is it really true that the connection between public space and public life has become obsolete? Television, it could be argued, by dramatizing conflict in visual terms, actually gives greater scope for a politics of public action than the newspaper or the radio. The rise of the automobile city may strengthen the demand for pedestrian space rather than weakening it. The omnipresence of consumerism and privatization may create countervailing demands for the preservation of a public realm.

On the 26th January 1988 I found myself sitting, as a member of the Lord Mayor's Bicentenary Advisory Committee, on the official dais in the City Square. We had assembled, after eating damper and sausages, to witness the raising of the Australian flag and the playing of the National Anthem. The ceremony had just begun when there was a disturbance among the crowd. A small contingent of Victorian Aborigines passed under the portico of the Town Hall and advanced across the Square toward the perimeter of the official enclosure, where they stood in silent protest while the "White Man's" flag was raised and his anthem sung. No-one who witnessed the moment, whether they were on the platform or in the crowd, could evade its significance or reflect on where they stood. We need such moments of celebration and protest, of pride, anger and mourning, in our public life. And we need places where they can take place. A city square is a public space where Aborigines and non-Aborigines, Monarchists and Republicans, Environmentalists and Mountain Stockmen, Bosnians and Serbians, may each claim the right to peaceably assemble, and to speak if not to be heard.

Recent commentators in both Britain and the United States have emphasized the continuing political link between public life and public space. "It is impossible to understand
public life and the spaces in which it takes place without recognizing the political nature of public activities', write the authors of an impressive recent American study, citing a host of examples from Boston Common to Tiananmen Square. Two recent British writers focus on the threat to public life implied by privatization of public space, especially in the central city:

What is at issue here is the gradual erosion of public space or the 'civic realm' ... that geographical and historical space in our towns and cities that properly belongs to the residents as a community in the form of town squares, public gardens, street markets and meeting places ... Increasingly people come into town as isolated and individual consumers; rarely as active citizens or members of a civic community. Another American writer, observing the absorption of public squares into privately-owned malls and atria in Los Angeles, warns of a marked increase in the sense of 'enclosure', 'exclusivity' and 'commercialism' in the city's central symbolic spaces.

So far in Melbourne these concerns have found only faint echoes. Yet the erosion of Melbourne's public realm, far from being gradual, seems to proceed apace. Not only the City Square, but other public places, such as Albert Park, are increasingly made over for semi-private uses.

We are poorly equipped intellectually and politically to deal with problems like the death of the City Square. Our concepts of heritage are too narrow. When the Historic Buildings Council was belatedly asked to register the City Square, it confined its attention to such matters as the merits of the 1976 Denton Corker, Marshall design and the impact of the proposed hotel on other registered buildings such as St Paul's Cathedral and the Town Hall. The defense of the Square before the only public tribunal empowered to consider the matter depended, not on the heritage significance of the square itself, but on the impact of the proposed development on other buildings which were already listed as part of the heritage. Mr Marriner was able to convince the city's rulers that, since the Square was recent, its design was poor and its environs had become run-down and sleazy, its death would be no loss to the city. Yet a concept of heritage that finds no place for the defense of public space is arguably untrue, not only to Melbourne's long search for a square, but to the best traditions of the heritage movement.

That buildings have now become almost synonymous with heritage is a measure of the distance that separates the modern heritage movement from the ideals of its founders. Once historic buildings were seen as exemplars of a heritage which found its primary expression in national history and ideals. The buildings were important because, like monuments and documents, they put the viewer in touch with the source of those ideals. Public places were often venerated too, not just for their historical or architectural associations, but because they enjoyed a tradition of common or public ownership. The English heritage movement, for example, traces its beginnings to the Commons Preservation Society, founded in 1865, well before the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments (1877).

We need, I believe, to recover and revitalize the connection between heritage and the cultivation of public life. For the time being, Melbourne's City Square may seem a lost cause; yet already new public spaces are being proposed. Perhaps, when the Gas Company towers come down, and Premier Kennett at last fulfills Henry Bolte's promise to roof the railway yards, we will get a new City Square at the city's southern gateway. Or perhaps the City Commissioners, the enlightened despots of the 1990s, will do what generations of City Councillors have failed to do and claim back the Queen Victoria Hospital site for a new northern square.

That we can still dream such dreams is a cause for hope, although, if history is any guide, these dreams may not be quickly or perfectly realized. Two lessons, in particular, emerge from the story of Melbourne's long search for a square. One is the error of supposing that a place devoted to the public can be truly successful unless it is just that - a place for public enjoyment rather than private profit. For almost 20 years, since the Strategy Plan of 1974, Melbourne's planners have asserted the goal of maintaining a diversity of economic and social functions within the central city, while the activities of individual developers have tended in an almost opposite direction. Everyone wants to take advantage of the parks, squares, and low-cost eating places; no one wants to limit their own development options or pay more rates to ensure that they remain. As recently as July 1992, in its review of the City of Melbourne Strategy Plan, the Council affirmed:

An attractive, diverse and distinctive city centre is necessary to provide a heart for metropolitan Melbourne, to engender a sense of belonging and creativity, and the exchange of ideas and innovation. Cities are about people, and their most important function is to provide a place where people come together face to face. A city that fails to attract people fails to survive.

These are admirable sentiments, but they can only be realized if public authorities see the city in terms of citizenship as well as consumerism.

The other error is to allow a city square to become a place for architectural self-indulgence. Already there are signs that the public purposes of a new city square may be subordinated to the ambition of some up-and-coming architect to make a statement. The Age's campaign to
retrieve the Queen Victoria Hospital site from Mr Marriner made much of Robert Hoddle’s shadowy design to reserve the site as the place for ‘a very handsome square’. Yet what the Age proposed was not another square, but a park. No sooner was its campaign launched, than Dimity Reed, RMIT’s new Professor of Design, had encouraged youthful members of the profession to show what might be done with the site. The results were sometimes ingenious and occasionally striking, but seldom did they demonstrate even a dim appreciation of the ceremonial or political functions of public space. Rather than the austere grandeur of a great square or piazza, the site would be turned into a kind of theme park, consisting of a series of mini-parks, each with its own national, ethnic or futuristic theme. Instead of Hoddle’s ‘handsome square’ Melbourne would get a kind of outdoor mall.

Twenty years ago Justice Hope gave us a serviceable definition of heritage. Heritage, he suggested, was ‘the things we want to keep.’ We have given much attention, over the years, to the ‘things’ and even more to the ‘keeping’, but less to the claims of the ‘we’ - the political nation - in whose name it all is done. Measured against the great architectural treasures of the city - St Patrick’s Cathedral, the E.S. and A. Bank, the Exhibition Building - the loss of the City Square may seem no loss at all. But that is because we have mistaken the fabric for the heritage. Only when we consider the ideal of public life it represents, take account of the continuous history of Melbournians to give it expression, and recognize how faint is its remaining imprint on the post-modern city, will we see cause to mourn its passing.

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Endnotes

2 In the following account I draw, with permission, upon the fuller history of Melbourne’s city square in Jenny Williams, ‘The Search for a Square’ in Graeme Davison and Andrew May (eds.) ‘Melbourne Centre Stage: The Corporation of Melbourne 1843–1992’, Victorian Historical Journal, No. 240, October 1992, pp. 50-63.
9 Herold. 11 May 1935.
11 For the Exhibition Gardens alternative see “Veritas” [L.H. Luscombe], Rebuilding the Melbourne of Tomorrow, Melbourne 1943.