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Abstract

From its 1994 conception to its 2002 realisation, Federation Square generated an intense public dispute between groups associated with architecture and conservation. Created by London-based LAB Architecture Studio following a design competition and located at the southern gateway to central Melbourne, Federation Square was a notable example of late-twentieth-century public architecture. It functioned as a civic and national monument and incorporated a sophisticated design response to its immediate physical and broader symbolic contexts. However, conservation activists the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) opposed Federation Square and specifically ‘the shard’, a structure which partially obstructed historical southern view lines into the city and St Paul’s Cathedral (1891). Rather than aiming to prevent demolition and conserve historic fabric, the National Trust sought to shape the future impacts of this experimental architectural response to the urban historic environment. Progressive sections of Melbourne’s design community rallied around LAB Architecture Studio because the integrity of architecture appeared to be at stake. Civic populism and political opportunism generated a final negotiated outcome. This article argues that this major public space architectural project was shaped by an expansive urban politics of heritage revealing broader concerns about the role of architecture and conservation in Melbourne at the time.

“We haven’t seen such passion in architecture since the tussles over well I guess the design of the Sydney Opera House.”
- Michael Cathcart, ABC Radio National, 9 May 2000.¹

Introduction

More than two decades of discourse in print, broadcast, and social media suggests that Federation Square (Fig. 1) possesses the iconic qualities which make an urban landmark in the public, architectural and conservation imaginations.² It has been awarded many accolades from the design and urban professions, has been embraced by Melburnians as their city’s civic heart, has forms which have entered the local design vocabulary, and is a destination on the itineraries of visitors to the city. Evidenced by its 2019 heritage listing, which came sixteen years after completion, Federation Square is a highly successful example of public architecture, despite many people finding its distinctive aesthetic bewildering.³ From its 1994 announcement to its delayed 2002 opening, Federation Square took eight years to come to fruition. Federation Square was intended as a deliberate monument to Australian nationhood, taking the physical form of a major public square at a prominent location in Melbourne, the nation’s second largest city of 3.53 million people (in 2002) and the capital city of the state of Victoria.⁴ Its development provoked a heated heritage dispute, the importance of which was recognised by contemporary commentators through the frequent comparisons to the Sydney Opera House. In 2000, the Age newspaper editorialised: “The architects of Federation Square must know exactly how the Danish architect Mr Joern Utzon [sic] felt when he left Australia, dismayed and demoralised at the bastardisation of his design for the Sydney Opera House interior…Is history repeating itself?”⁵

To examine the architectural and urban history of Federation Square, this article focuses on the heritage dispute over ‘the shard’. The distinctive design language and built forms of Federation Square were a significant factor in generating public consternation towards the site. However, the primary dispute concerned the placement of a structure – labelled ‘the shard’ in public discourse – at the Flinders and Swanston Streets intersection. The dispute began in 1997 following the designation of LAB Architecture Studio’s Peter Davidson and Donald Bates as competition winners for Melbourne’s new public square and was resolved in 2001 with a redesign of the shard to a reduced scale and prominence. The shard, as originally conceived, partially obstructed the southern view line into the central city along Princes Bridge and across the intersection towards St Paul’s Cathedral, thereby blocking sight of the lower sections of the cathedral’s Gothic Revival façade. With a range of functions and buildings, this historic environment on the southern edge of central Melbourne has,
since the nineteenth century, served as a major focal point for a city, which had no designated
congregation spaces in its colonial grid layout of 1837 until the completion of the nearby City Square
in 1980. Federation Square also replaced two unloved monolithic modernist high-rise structures:
Princes Gate, otherwise known as the Gas and Fuel Buildings.

The singular shard structure would have been one of two similar-scaled buildings at the north-
west corner of the site, which were two of seven shard-like structures conceived for placement across
Federation Square. Conceptually and aesthetically, each building form was itself a shard, which
created and structured both exterior and interior spaces, and transition spaces and pathways
throughout the precinct. The two controversial shards rested across from St Paul’s Cathedral, the most
problematic being the left-hand or western shard which was sited directly along a southern view line
into the central city (Fig. 2). The two shards were four-storey free-standing zinc-and-glass structures.
One shard was to contain a restaurant and public viewing tower, the other a museum to Federation;
neither the viewing tower nor museum were realised. The angular forms of the two shards created an
open space in the shape of an isosceles triangle. Called St Paul’s Court and paved in bluestone, its
tip was formed by stepped sandstone paving, its legs by the two shards, and its base by St Paul’s
Cathedral across Flinders Street.

Those who favoured the construction of the shard as part of St Paul’s Court saw it as integral
to the architectural composition of Federation Square and in keeping with the historic environment
since it was intended to enhance the relationship between the new public precinct and St Paul’s
Cathedral. Critics believed it unnecessary and damaging to the visual experience of the view line
which they argued was historically and aesthetically integral to the city. The most vocal opponents to
the shard were the National Trust of Australia (Victoria), Melbourne’s most influential conservation
advocacy organisation. However, competing ideas for this historic section of the city circulated.
Crucially, Bates and Davidson articulated a sophisticated design vision for Federation Square, which
responded to both the physical and historical milieu and the cultural significance of the project as a
civic and national monument. The shard itself was a contextual design response intended to enhance
the immediate historic environment. Many people in the Melbourne design community agreed. While
the National Trust ultimately succeeded in having Bates and Davidson remove the original shard from
their designs, neither the conservationists nor the architects generated the negotiated outcome. Rather,
the final outcome resulted from political interference, which followed the 1999 state election and a
change from the Kennett Liberal to the Bracks Labor state government. The state government was
responsible for the development through its Office of Major Projects.

Federation Square is a remarkable example of Australian public architecture shaped by
conflicting visions for heritage proposed by the architects and the conservationists and inflected by
the broader public and political response to the site. The shard became a lynchpin for competing
cultural claims about the city and its public architecture. Not just concerned with identifying and preserving the value of existing historic environments and their built forms – the traditional remit of architectural conservation – heritage at Federation Square was a contested political process which influenced its ensuing design, symbolism and reception. This approach to the history of Federation Square thus builds on research in critical cultural heritage studies which conceives of heritage and its conservation as a social, political and cultural process for historic places. Editors of a Fabrications special issue on “Architecture/Heritage/Politics” in 2018, Anoma Pieris, Stuart King, and Mirjana Lozanovska wrote: “architectural history needs new methodologies for researching cultural heritage, so we can participate more fully in a fast growing, dynamic and interdisciplinary global field”. Some built environment scholars have been wary of the impacts of heritage studies, or “critical conservation”, because it unsettles assumptions of twentieth-century traditional conservation practice, such as the certainties of expert knowledge and the distinctions which have been drawn between old and new, heritage and development, and change and stability. However, for architectural history, as with urban and planning history, this emergent theoretical paradigm for heritage as a dynamic and contested social phenomenon has the interpretative potential to re-conceive urban change: specifically the intricate ways in which new architecture has evolved in relation to inherited environments. This notion, and, by extension, the methodology that architectural heritage is a social phenomenon and subject to contestation has been previously adopted in, for instance, the context of disputes involving Australian Indigenous groups over historic built environments in Newcastle and Perth. Building on the assumptions of critical conservation, the following focus is thus not on the veracity or validity of specific heritage claims against past or current conservation benchmarks, but rather on the broader cultural and social interests generating heritage claims affecting new architecture.

The article examines both the politics and assumptions on which heritage claims for Federation Square were founded, along with their impacts for its development. It first explores the significant historical and spatial context for Federation Square. It then examines the competing claims for the future of the precinct with an emphasis on the positions of the architects (LAB) and the conservationists (National Trust). Ideas of heritage are necessarily expanded beyond those which were officially sanctioned by conservation organisations and governance regimes at the time to reveal the broader issues at stake for architecture, conservation, and public participation in the creation of Federation Square. The methodology adopted in this article thus interprets the diverse cultural claims to Federation Square and its historic environment through a heritage lens, even though only the National Trust framed their engagement with the site specifically in terms of heritage at the time. The article uses the rich institutional archive of the National Trust and its extensive place files on Federation Square. It also considers collections held by the State Library of Victoria and draws on
architecture scholarship and the metropolitan press. Bates and Davidson have provided commentary, which has been consulted. These various sources enable an investigation of the entangled public and expert debates. Full government records on Federation Square, as well as its institutional archive held on site, have not yet been transferred to the Public Record Office of Victoria. These will provide openings for future research.

Public Squares for Melbourne

Producing Federation Square

Federation Square is a public space comprised of cultural institutions, hospitality venues, retail stores, performance spaces, community, cultural, media and commercial offices, and laneways and congregation spaces including stepped walkways and open spaces (Fig. 3). The major cultural institutions are the National Gallery of Victoria (Australia), Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) and the Koori Heritage Trust, an Indigenous cultural organisation. A public atrium is lined with boutiques and hospitality venues. A civic square and its large digital screen reflect a turn-of-the-millennium interest in embedding technology in urban space.

A government-owned independent company, operating under a civic and cultural charter, is responsible for tenancies, events, and maintenance. As a public space, Federation Square embodies the higher ideals of the Greek *polis* referring to the virtuous and just city, whereby public spaces become essential for urban democratic life.\(^{12}\) Intended to be completed to mark the centenary of Australian Federation on 1 January 2001, following design changes, construction delays, budget overruns (from an estimate of $100 million to $473 million) and a change in state government, Federation Square officially opened on 26 October 2002.\(^{13}\) After completion, Federation Square was received warmly within architectural circles, and was conferred with a record five awards from the Victorian Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA).

A significant example of late-twentieth-century Australian public architecture, Federation Square reflected the changing approaches to design and urbanism of the period. It was the kind of distinctive, mixed-use and immersive environment, which become favoured by the urban professions and the broader public within the “postmodern urban condition” following the decline of architectural and urban modernism from the 1960s and 1970s.\(^{14}\) Unlike and in response to modernism, late-twentieth-century architecture and urbanism had a sensitivity to history, context and conservation.\(^{15}\) Reflecting on Federation Square and the rejuvenation of central Melbourne since the 1980s, academic Kim Dovey, architect and urban designer Rob Adams and landscape architect Ronald Jones note the “criticism of the highly contemporary design, political tensions, community scepticism and robust media critiques”.\(^{16}\) Various factors made this public architecture. First, Federation Square has a
symbolic role as a monument and a functional purpose as a gathering place. In creating this public space, Bates and Davidson sought “to initiate a dynamic resonance between the citizens of the city”.17

Second, and as John Macarthur suggested in 2003, Federation Square is of a lesser scale, bulk and speculative value than the private property market would have drawn from the site and its high costs of production are not immediately visible to the public.18 Third, and the original contribution of this article, competing public cultural heritage claims had a generative force in shaping Federation Square.

The architectural vision for Federation Square addressed both the broader Australian and Melbourne contexts and the physical milieu of where it was located. Both stylistically and temporally, Federation Square appears typical of late Deconstructivist Architecture,19 inspired by French literary theorist Jacques Derrida and characterised in built form by a manipulation of the exterior and interior forms of structures along with irregular shapes, distortions and dislocations.20 Many thinkers and designers directly inspired Bates and Davidson including artists Alberto Giacometti (line drawings) and M.C. Escher (patterns), mathematician Joseph Conway (pinwheel grid), architectural critic Jeff Kipnis (graphic space), urban theorist Stan Allen, and architects Bernard Tschumi, Coop Himmelb(l)au, Daniel Libeskind and Rem Koolhaas.21 In The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture (2012), Macarthur writes that Federation Square has “forms that appear to be shattered from a larger object and clothed in a complex geometric skin which has some shape homology with the building forms”.22 The façades of the concrete structures adopt polychromatic shapes.

In an understated way, Federation Square interpreted the centenary of Australian nationhood. Its approach reflected post-1960s monument, memorial and memory practices for public space, which have been less overtly patriotic or nationalistic in symbolism and forms than traditional statuary, columns and fountains set in squares, gardens and on streets.23 To build this national monument, the Federal Government provided $50 million in 1996. The commitment was made by the incoming Howard Liberal Government, which, during its four terms (1996-2007), engaged in culture wars to advance conservative narratives of nationalism.24 An effort to subvert such renderings of nationalism came at Federation Square in the form of Paul Carter’s Nearamnew, a major artistic installation created in collaboration with LAB Architecture Studio for the surface of the entire outdoor plaza. It was made of Kimberley sandstone from north-western Australia which, combined with local bluestone pavers in other sections of the site, evoked and intermingled the material, colours and feeling of the landscapes of the city of Melbourne and of the Great Sandy Desert in the Kimberley. Carter’s intention for Nearamnew was to represent the decentralisation and distribution of political and social power across the Australian Federation.25 To create a sense of shared ownership of this public space, Carter inscribed the voices of people including a colonist, federalist, worker, migrant and tourist by sandblasting patterns, figures and texts into the sandstone cobblestones forming the plaza. The title itself is a spirited portmanteau of the words “near” (together), “am” (being) and “new”
(in a society of Indigenous and settler cultures). The clearest acknowledgement of Indigenous heritage and Australia’s deeper history at Federation Square took the form of the use of the two kinds of paving stone, along with Carter’s artwork and its suggestion of cultural togetherness.

Bates and Davidson integrated responses to the historic environment into their designs. They saw themselves as completing the final corner of an historic intersection. From a contextual design perspective, the project’s laneways were inspired by those across the central city, the lighting canopy resembled the city’s overhead tramlines, and the two kinds of stone evoked diverse landscapes. Although its layout deliberately rejected the geometric ordering of the city’s grid pattern for angled pathways across the site, Federation Square nevertheless meshed with the city and the surrounding streetscapes, aligned to the adjacent laneways and echoing their spatial morphology. The decking of railyards for the site improved access between Flinders Street and the Yarra River. The stepped pathways down to the river were a compromise due to the complexity and cost of full integration to the riverfront, in part caused by the historic bluestone vaults on the river edge of the complex. Like Melbourne itself, Federation Square was a place to be explored and discovered, with its scale not immediately clear to the passing visitor. Although the architects made concerted efforts to engage and enhance the historic environment, the prominence of the location and importance of this project meant their experimental vision proved controversial.

**The heritage milieu**

The spatial and historical importance of the Flinders and Swanston Streets intersection (Fig. 4) has been interpreted by historian Andrew May as the “pre-eminent sacred and secular ground… in the mental cartography of Melburnians”. The intersection is the southern entry point to the city grid, reached by train from Flinders Street Station or foot, bicycle, car or tram across Princes Bridge, which spans the Yarra River and connects Swanston Street and St Kilda Road. From the southern approach along St Kilda Road, an 1880s “Marvellous Melbourne” boulevard, Federation Square can be seen in the distance. The precinct spans an area of 7.9 acres, slightly less than one square (10 acres) of the original colonial-era grid. Built over the Jolimont Rail Yards, Federation Square connects the city grid to the walking path which lines the north bank of the Yarra River. The site is accessed riverside and from Swanston and Flinders Streets, with the pathways leading to the civic square: the primary node and symbolic heart of the site.

This location is significant in the longer history of Melbourne as a settler-colonial city. The banks of the Yarra River had already been a meeting place for the Indigenous Kulin nations prior to the arrival of colonists in the 1830s. By the early 1860s, the penultimate years of the Victorian gold rush, the intersection had taken on the functions for which it is familiar today: religion, recreation and transport. The Anglican Church had been granted land on the north-east corner of the intersection and
replaced its original 1852 bluestone St Paul’s church in 1889–91 with St Paul’s Cathedral, designed by English Gothic Revival architect William Butterfield. The family home of colonist John Batman, a founder of the settler city, was on the north-corner and was amalgamated with five warehouse and residential structures to form the Princes Bridge Hotel in 1861. It was renamed the Young and Jackson Hotel in 1875. On the south-east corner, the 1854 Melbourne Terminus would become Flinders Street Station. The early Princes Bridge Station, now located underneath Federation Square, had been integrated into Flinders Street Station (with a pathway under the Princes Bridge) by the time the current Edwardian Baroque station opened in 1903. Other works included the 1890s demolition of the City Morgue, once entered from Swanston Street near to Princes Bridge Station. By the first decade of the twentieth century, this historic environment largely resembled that which is there today.

The vacant spot in this significant Melbourne urban ensemble was the south-east corner. This was a large site with excellent transport links, subject to the technical constraints of decking the railways. Recognising this, the Victorian State Government and the government-owned Gas and Fuel Corporation of Victoria, established in 1950, took advantage of the opportunity. The corporation’s headquarters would become Princes Gate towers (Fig. 5), after the Bolte state government sold the air-rights above Princes Bridge Station in 1963. The two modernist towers of 230 feet (18 storeys) were of the International Style, designed by local architecture firm Leslie M. Perrott and Partners, built by Lend Lease, and completed in 1967 at a cost of $12 million. The towers were finished in brown brick. A public square was also constructed as part of Princes Gate.

In the late 1960s, Melbourne was undergoing a kind-of public square renaissance. The city never had a public square in its colonial designs. Nineteenth and early-twentieth century civic idealism would be insufficient to overcome the proponents of free enterprise who prioritised increased private land holdings and enhanced street circulation over a public square which would have terminated a city street or taken over a city block. In the early decades of the twentieth century, there had been various unrealised proposals to construct a public square such as in front of Parliament at the eastern-edge of the city grid, as well as on the future site of Federation Square. Importantly for Federation Square, sketches of the public square for this latter site from the 1920s-50s projected a clear southern sightline towards St Paul’s Cathedral. These projections could have been deliberate, instinctive or accidental, given that the forms these squares took were flat paved expanses.

With Princes Gate, the civic dream for a Melbourne public square was indeed realised. At the opening of Princes Plaza in 1966, the *Canberra Times* reported this was an “event which Melbourne citizens waited 65 years to see”. Princes Plaza was an open-air, half-acre rectangular open space, accessed by a stairway from Flinders Street. It sat on top of a retail arcade accessible from the intersection and managed by the City of Melbourne on a 99-year lease. It was paved in terrazzo tiles, lit by spherical lamps and had blackwood seats, shrubs, flowers and trees. Eastward of the plaza
complex, both the north and south towers of Princes Gate were directly parallel to Flinders Street. According to a 1963 article in the *Age*, this siting for the blocks was chosen to “[allow] a clear view of St. Paul’s Cathedral” from Princes Bridge.\(^{35}\)

Meanwhile, as a municipal authority, the City of Melbourne was also purchasing and amalgamating land holdings a block north of Princes Gate along Swanston Street between Collins Street and Flinders Lane, opposite the Melbourne Town Hall.\(^{36}\) A small pop-up City Square first opened in the late 1960s. The Denton Corker Marshall scheme for City Square opened in 1980. Its confusing layout and multi-level pathways, large, austere and impractical expanses, video matrix screens, and hard and bland surfaces were criticised in the press. Despite receiving the Urban and Community Design Medal in 1980 from the RAIA, it was never fully embraced by Melburnians, leading to its demolition in the early 1990s.\(^{37}\) Its replacement involved half the site becoming privatised for a mid-rise Westin-branded hotel building, and the remainder forming a street-level rectangular plaza (which was demolished in 2018 for a new underground railway station entrance). From the Melbourne Town Hall, the three versions of City Square preserved, to various degrees, open view lines towards the rear of St Paul’s Cathedral.

The disappointment of not only the 1980s City Square but also 1960s Princes Gate and its public plaza paved the way for Federation Square. Princes Gate was part of a grander Victorian Railways modernist scheme to replace Flinders Street Station and deck the railyards to its east and west. The southern edge of central Melbourne would have been lined with modernist towers on the riverfront; the next of which would have been Flinders Gate.\(^{38}\) The almost immediate unpopularity of Princes Gate meant that proponents of Flinders Gate already in 1975 sought to emphasise that “the high-rise scheme would not resemble the ‘slab buildings’ of [Princes Gate nor] affect the vistas” of St Paul’s Cathedral, the Town Hall, the Arts Centre, or St Kilda Road.\(^{39}\) Flinders Gate was subsequently abandoned in the 1970s following widespread opposition (including from the National Trust) and funding shortfalls caused by the economic shocks of the period. Urban modernism, which encouraged these kinds of mega renewal schemes, was indeed fading in the 1970s.\(^{40}\) Princes Gate was perceived by its critics as a pair of unappealing brown-brick monoliths. The towers blocked sightlines across the Yarra River and walled off the southern edge of the city grid, a visual frame which included St Paul’s Cathedral. St Paul’s Cathedral, however, was visible across Princes Plaza from the Princes Bridge southern approach. Princes Plaza itself was an austere, wind-swept and elevated island which provided little aesthetic interest or attractions for visitors.\(^{41}\)

The future site of Federation Square was a politically charged arena already recognised for its architectural and urban heritage. The intersection was already a mishmash of buildings and styles constructed between the 1850s and 1900s, while the southern edge of the CBD had been subject to continuous redevelopment. Any architectural project in this context would also be regulated by not
only planning requirements but also heritage governance regimes. The initial passage of state historic buildings legislation occurred in 1974 during a peak in public support for the heritage movement. By the end of the 1980s, St Paul’s Cathedral, Flinders Street Station, and the Young and Jackson Hotel had been recognised in the state heritage list, as well as in the non-statutory National Trust register. In contrast, Princes Gate, despite its ambitions to enhance the public realm, had failed the city and so could be demolished to make way for new projects. Additionally, between the late 1960s and early 1990s, the setting had been enhanced by a new arts precinct over Princes Bridge on St Kilda Road with the Roy Grounds’ National Gallery of Victoria and Arts Centre complex (1960-84), as well as the regeneration of the south bank of the Yarra River on the western side of Princes Bridge. Although sections of Southbank had previously hosted popular entertainments, the effect of these new developments in the last four decades of the twentieth century was to extend and institutionalise the civic, cultural, and entertainment proposition of Melbourne from beyond the city grid into this once industrial riverfront area. After the opening of the Southgate retail and hotel complex in the early 1990s, Melbourne would no longer “turn its back” on the Yarra River; a phrase which writer John Larkin adopted in the Age in 1984, and which became a common refrain in the city. Federation Square would enhance the north bank, east of Princes Bridge. Nevertheless, and as evidenced by the short life of Princes Gate, this was a challenging historic environment for contemporary architecture.

The Shard

Round 1: 1997-99

Melbourne was transformed in the 1990s by several architecture and renewal projects. The instigator of these projects was Liberal Premier Jeff Kennett who was elected at the 1992 Victorian state election with a laissez-faire economic and planning agenda. A focus included renewing riverside Melbourne, reflected in Agenda 21 of 1992 which incorporated a new casino and exhibition centre westward or downstream from Southgate. Then came the “Capital City Initiative” in 1994 which included Federation Square to be completed by 2001. With the privatisation of the Gas and Fuel Corporation, the depressed office market, the sizeable investment needed to modernise the towers, and the perception the towers were a blight, the Kennett Government took the opportunity to acquire Princes Gate in order to demolish it for this major civic project. Reflecting the sophisticated and dynamic place-marketing of the period, a six-storey banner was plastered on Princes Gate facing Flinders Street Station in 1996: “these buildings are ON THE MOVE”, riffing on the Kennett Government’s spirited slogan: “on the move” (Fig. 6). News of the demolition was greeted with “public acclamation in 1997”.

Round 2: 1999-2004

With the Commonwealth Games in 2000 and the Olympic Village in 2004, an era of post-Cold War globalisation was recounted. The 1997–99 Round 1 and the 1999–2004 Round 2 were marked by the spectacular completion of the Yarra River project in 2000 and the V&A (Victoria and Albert) Museum of Art and History (2004) on the east side of Princes Bridge. As a new wave of competition for the city emerged in the late 1990s, the Kennett Government could claim significant achievements for Melbourne’s public realm: the development of the Yarra River, the completion of the Southbank Arts Precinct, and the transformation of the suburb of St Kilda into the cultural hub of the city. The impact of these projects on the city’s cultural and entertainment propositions was profound, furthering Melbourne’s reputation as the “cultural capital of Australia”.

Round 3: 2004 onwards

With the election of the new Labor Government in 2006, a new era of civic investment was underway. The Round 3 projects included the redevelopment of the Southbank Arts Precinct, the extension of the Yarra River project, and the construction of the new Shrine of Remembrance, all of which would enhance Melbourne’s public realm and civic life. The completion of these projects would mark a new phase in the city’s history, reflecting the ongoing evolution of Melbourne as a global city.
Architectural competitions became more frequent in the 1980s and 1990s to increase the quality of public and commercial architecture in city centres. Although there was a tradition of competitions in Australian cities – notably, for the national capital Canberra (1911-12) and the Sydney Opera House (1956-57) – the number of competitions held annually accelerated from the 1980s. Architects embraced the competition for Federation Square as a democratic stage from which the best outcome for the site and for the city would emerge. Commentators acknowledged that a competition never guaranteed a good outcome, however it came in the context of strong suspicions around the role of urban planning in Melbourne. According to architecture critic Norman Day, this competition reflected a vital democratic moment for design in the city. Texan-born Bates and Sydneysider Davidson of LAB Architecture Studio were awarded the Federation Square commission. The pair had met in London while teaching at the Architectural Association in the early 1980s, formed a partnership in 1994, and over the next couple of years entered around 15-20 competitions. Before moving to Melbourne after winning the competition, their London offices had been located off Tottenham Court Road near the Architectural Association. The intensity of designers and engineers shaped their practice, including their interest in computer-generated design. Before Federation Square, neither had had a major commission. The pair were also outsiders in a city with a strong sense of civic identity.

The 1996 competition brief addressed the significance of the immediate context, while allowing the architects to articulate their own responses. The historical and civic importance of the project and context was acknowledged. The brief also suggested the western edge of the precinct along Swanston Street should be activated. The entries had to respect the surrounding streetscapes and the “reinforcement of St Paul’s Cathedral’s visual presence within the precinct”; but this could involve new structures so long as the cathedral parapets, roofs, spires and sky were generally visible. View analysis based on the height of potential structures was provided: 20 metres preserved sightlines towards the southern edge of the city grid and 5 metres preserved sightlines towards St Paul’s Cathedral. These height figures were neither mandated nor designated to precise locations. Of course, the whole shard issue would have been avoided had the design briefs mandated height limits and sight lines, and thereby created stricter boundaries for the design potential of the project.

After some delay, reflecting his initial apprehensiveness about the designs, Kennett announced LAB Architecture Studio partnered with local firm Bates Smart as winners of the competition on 27 July 1997. Examining the competition in 2004, Dovey wrote that LAB Architecture Studio’s scheme was the most appropriate selection by the committee of professional, community and government representatives of whom three were architects. Shortlisted had been Ashton Raggatt McDougall (Melbourne), Chris Elliot (Sydney), Denton Corker Marshall (Melbourne), Jennifer Lowe and Adrian Hawker (London), and LAB Architecture Studio (London).
Neville Quarry (Architecture, University of Technology Sydney) chaired the jury. The most well-known member of the jury was Daniel Libeskind. Bates had worked in Libeskind’s London office on the early stages of the Berlin Jewish Museum (2001). Adams, representing the City of Melbourne, was also a member of the jury, along with Catherine Bull (Landscape Architecture, Queensland University of Technology), Peter Clemenger (Advertiser and National Gallery of Victoria), Brett Randall (Victorian Arts Centre), and Dick Roennfeldt (Office of Major Projects). In its deliberations, the jury considered the western shard and recognised its design merits.\textsuperscript{57} Given the parameters for the competition were under-specified in terms of design, function and budget, an added attraction of the winning scheme was that it provided the theoretical and practical flexibility to adapt to a changing project brief.

The critical response to the civic boosterism of the official announcement and the publishing of the winning designs was mixed. The designs appeared on the front pages of metropolitan newspapers the morning after the announcement, followed by almost daily commentary about the site until the mid-2000s. Architecture critic Joe Rollo wrote in the \textit{Age}, that the designs were “received with indifference from many in the profession who believe it lacks the iconic quality that its site at the city’s most important axis demands”, a sentiment shared by Day.\textsuperscript{58} Critics dampened the apparent optimism that Federation Square would become as iconic to Melbourne as the Sydney Opera House was to Sydney. The contributors to a special issue of the progressive architecture journal \textit{Transition} on Federation Square in 1997 were more enthusiastic about this avant-garde project.\textsuperscript{59} Admiration in \textit{Transition} suggested that the experimental and adventurous members of Melbourne’s design community, centred around by RMIT University, had immediately embraced Federation Square and LAB Architecture Studio.

The public response to Federation Square was somewhat suspicious and perplexed. This was due to the unique forms and the functional mix of open spaces, cultural institutions and hospitality outlets. As a significant public space created in the wake of the disappointments of earlier civic squares, Federation Square would ultimately depend on the public for its success. But community engagement had not been sufficiently incorporated into the political and design processes for this major public architecture commission, according to an expert planning panel assembled by the state government in 1997.\textsuperscript{60} That said, Melburnians had opportunities to engage at a forum held in November 1996 and again when the designs were refined in 1997–98 involving a “Your City Your Say” exhibition, public surveys and town hall meetings.\textsuperscript{61} At one such event on 5 August 1997, “Melburnians turned out in force…to fire questions at the designers [who] tried to explain the complex theoretical underpinnings of their design”.\textsuperscript{62} But public reception had already been swayed by establishment commentators such as satirist Barry Humphries who compared LAB Architecture Studio to the Martians in the new science-fiction film \textit{Men in Black}.\textsuperscript{63} Conservationist and
architectural historian Miles Lewis also maintained that Federation Square “looks totally out of keeping with Melbourne” and sought a design based on a traditional “international” square surrounded by buildings. Other Melburnians were disengaged. A small survey of 101 people conducted by Roy Morgan Research for the National Trust in September 1998 found that 36% of respondents had never heard of Federation Square. Of those who were aware of the project, 61% favoured the proposed designs, and 46% of the total respondents would have preferred parkland rather than a hard square.

The National Trust watched developments at Federation Square from 1996, and formally expressed its interest in the future of the site to the state government in February 1997. It then consulted with its committees (including conservation, twentieth-century and urban issues) comprised of architects, conservation practitioners, and academics. The advice received was generally positive – subject to some design refinements – and so the National Trust approached the government in December 1997 seeking a reduction in “the general bulk of the [entirety of the] proposal” and specifically questioning why the shards “need to be so tall and dominating”?

By July 1998, most of the National Trust’s concerns had been resolved during the initial refinement stage, when changes were made such as the removal of the winter garden for the atrium and the inclusion of a site for the National Gallery of Victoria. The National Trust listed its accomplishments for its members: realignment of buildings on Russell Street, increased setback to frontages along Flinders Street, reduction in height and change in position of shards, proper conservation treatment of the riverside vaults (required by heritage legislation), and the reduction in heights of various other buildings. These were conventional conservation concerns, of the kind which the National Trust often brought to development projects, and were implemented into the designs before construction commenced.

There was still one major sticking point: the western shard. The National Trust argued that it impeded views of the cathedral from the square itself and from the vantage of Princes Bridge (Fig. 7). Representatives of the National Trust used historical evidence, though did not explicitly frame their case in terms of conservation protocols or heritage legislation. Conservation Manager Ian Pausacker wrote that the shard “blocked views of St Paul’s Cathedral” and that the National Trust preferred “A much lower, thinner structure, or even flagpoles [to] achieve the design goals”; moreover, in its view, the “proposal is generally quite bulky and takes up a larger site than the competition brief envisaged.” The campaign escalated after the 28 June 1998 public launch of the refined designs. At this stage, the two shards were reduced in height by approximately 2-3 metres to a height of 20-21 metres; at the cusp of the higher height figure identified in the competition brief. The state government media release stressed the changes to the height, orientation, cladding and materials of the shards to “better frame and explore views of the historic Cathedral” in response to
community concerns. At the City of Melbourne, Adams assessed that “most of the face of St Paul’s Cathedral is fully visible when viewed from the Princes Bridge [and] the revised design frames the Cathedral and produces the new St Paul’s Court which will be a major new asset to this part of the City.” Bates and Davidson wrote in the Herald Sun of their “new and imaginative vision of city life.”

Although opposed by the National Trust, the shards proposed an experimental design vision for the historic environment. From a critical conservation perspective, this new architectural response can be considered as a heritage claim alongside the conventional conservation position adopted by the National Trust; both were valid heritage responses to this context. At the time, it was made clear that the shards had three primary design roles. First, the shards provided a sense of structural resolution to the intersection and the south-east corner of the project, enclosing the precinct and offering a staged transition from the street. Second, the shards created the triangular public space which would be activated by the anticipated social life engendered by it. Third, the shards framed the view of St Paul’s Cathedral from the southern approach along Princes Bridge. The dissenting National Trust Urban Issues Advisory Committee, with Dovey and architects Bruce Echberg and Nigel Lewis – himself a conservation specialist – in attendance, supported the shards because:

the committee felt that these were essential to this particular design in order to anchor the corner of Swanston & Flinders Streets and to provide some shape and enclosure to the new open space. The committee therefore accepted the blocking of the view of the main southern facade as one approaches along St Kilda Road and agreed that the placement of the two new small towers in front of the Cathedral created an appropriate space in which the Cathedral would sit.

In similar terms, Bates and Davidson wrote in the Weekend Australian: “what we are trying to do is to enhance and give expression to [a] new space [which is] also to bet on the future.” The state government found the National Trust’s campaign frustrating and believed its messaging about the shard was misleading (Fig. 8).

Although emphasising across its campaign that it supported contemporary architecture, that it was “not locked in a time warp”, the National Trust was unable to accept the proposed response to the intersection; it believed any substantive structures crowded the existing “three icons on the corner”. Chairman Simon Molesworth wrote editorials for the national and metropolitan press evoking “the city’s grand gateway from the south” and then asked: “why throw away a fine perspective of Melbourne when there is no necessity to do so”? The National Trust had the support of the Anglican Church, the North and West Melbourne resident associations and influential figures in the artistic and creative communities as well as the Labor state opposition party. Unsatisfied with
the compromises achieved, and despite media coverage of the issue dwindling, in December 1998 the National Trust re-committed to its campaign.\textsuperscript{79} Nevertheless, the plans for the shard were seemingly settled following the mid-1998 redesign, and media coverage thereafter faded.

\textit{Round 2: 1999-2001}

The National Trust revived the conflict following the state election held on 18 September 1999 when Premier Steve Bracks unexpectedly led the Labor Party to victory. This resulted in a dramatic escalation and growing intensity to the heritage dispute. On 14 November 1999, the National Trust wrote to the incoming state government: “there is still time to stop their construction…I hope you will institute a review of the shards immediately.”\textsuperscript{80} Following this suggestion, a review was initiated by the government to be led by academic, architect, and former planning minister Evan Walker who had been a long-term advocate for stronger conservation protections in the city. The review generated a vocal public response including from former Premier Rupert Hamer who wrote of the “intrusive”, “unwelcome”, “ugly ‘finger’” of the western shard and wanted it replaced by a fountain or a “beautiful sculpture”.\textsuperscript{81} Two months after the state election on 31 January 2000, Walker recommended that “the heritage vista…should be preserved in perpetuity [and the] western shard…should be deleted from the scheme” and a replacement structure be determined.\textsuperscript{82} The recommendation was accepted.

Announced a couple of weeks later, the state government decision generated a vigorous response from those in favour and those opposed to the shard. On the ground, construction had commenced and so making changes would be disruptive. Reflecting their frustration, Bates and Davidson engaged lawyers in March 2000 and accused the National Trust of defaming their reputation in the media and, by extension, of misdirecting the Walker inquiry through intimating that their designs had broken the competition rules and through raising inferences around their professional competence.\textsuperscript{83} Publicly, Bates and Davidson said: “We cannot be accused of not fulfilling [a design] requirement if it wasn’t there” and the National Trust was staging “an attack on the integrity of the project”.\textsuperscript{84} Legal action was publicly and privately threatened but never proceeded.

From this point onwards, the National Trust sought dialogue over confrontation. It paused to review its position and specifically its submission to the Walker inquiry. Following the renewed public debate, reservations about its submission circulated within the National Trust and so it toned down its stance against the shard.\textsuperscript{85} To resolve the shard impasse a working group involving the state government, the National Trust and Bates and Davidson was established in May 2000. Over the coming months, the state government messaged in the media that the project required an overhaul due to mismanagement, cost overruns and ongoing delays, which it claimed was caused by the complexity of the project and the incompetence of the previous government.\textsuperscript{86} The combined impacts
of the controversial Walker Report, a critical Auditor-General assessment, and tactical government messaging built expectations that further changes to the complex were basically inevitable.

Although the primary conservation concern of the shard and the view line still dominated the second round of the shard debate, weightier factors were seemingly riding on the eventual outcome. Many architects felt that the integrity of the competition, of the project, of design and of the profession itself was being brought into question (as it had been at the Sydney Opera House in the 1960s and Canberra in the 1910s). Bates felt that it was as if architects were being somehow positioned to “exist outside ‘The Public’” amid the dispute. In his editorial for a July/August 2000 shard special issue of professional journal *Architect Victoria*, Dean Boothroyd wrote of the “conundrum of the western shard”, the “unprecedented” public debate, and the “ineffectual” role played by the RAIA in advocating for the integrity of Federation Square. The design community organised, launching the campaign [www.Shards-Yes.com](http://www.Shards-Yes.com), representing an early foray into online architecture activism for the city. A public forum headlined by Davidson and Bates was held at RMIT in May 2000. Bates and Davidson conjured the “attack on the integrity of the project” which has been “developed holistically”, and reiterated that their project “creates an activated civic space, which focuses upon the cathedral and creates a space to view it at the appropriate scale [which is] understandably hard to appreciate”. Libeskind opined that the abolition of the shard was “a mockery of the art of architecture”.

Progressive members of the Melbourne design community opposed the politicisation of architecture and the undermining of the design vision for the site. Some conservation architects and scholars also disagreed with the decision to abolish the shard. Architectural historian Philip Goad – who had practiced and advocated in design and conservation before entering academia – argued for the shards because St Paul’s Cathedral was an “urban church” and so, over time, “views are framed, vistas open up and disappear…Like Florence, Melbourne’s Federation Square implies an understanding of urban space as the dialogue between a collection of buildings.” Goad summed up a potential heritage case for the shard as follows:

The shards relate directly to designing of buildings and open spaces in a gridded city that is not in Europe and that is now a thoroughly modern metropolis with a hierarchy of skylines and views totally different from the nostalgic postage stamp views of the 1950s.

Goad suggested opponents of the shard were downplaying the broader developmental history of this context which had evolved over many decades with frequent changes to the physicality and experience of forms, sightlines and streets. A series of new skyscrapers built along Collins Street between the 1960s and 1990s transformed the southern view line into the city from appearing as a medium-rise Victorian city to that of a late-twentieth-century high-rise city. Moreover, and in a
remarkable oversight among planners, architects and conservationists, the new Westin Hotel at City Square crowded the skyline above St Paul’s Cathedral from southern viewpoints. Since the late 1960s, the National Trust had opposed many of those Collins Street skyscrapers, though it did not mount a campaign around the Westin Hotel, which was architecturally unremarkable and involved the partial privatisation of a public space.\textsuperscript{94}

The proposition that St Paul’s Court and the shard had the potential to enhance the historic environment was a view shared by some expert members of the National Trust. As with the Urban Issues Committee two years earlier, members of its Twentieth Century Buildings Committee next dissented. The chair and deputy chair resigned their named positions and some members wrote private letters to the National Trust expressing their frustrations about how the organisation arrived at its advocacy positions.\textsuperscript{95} Other members of this committee such as architect Peter Brew and Goad publicly criticised the National Trust’s campaign and the government’s decision.\textsuperscript{96} There existed a disjuncture between this instance of late-twentieth-century public architecture, which was sensitive to history and context, and traditional conservation, which interpreted the major aesthetic contrasts generated by this new architecture as the erasure of heritage.

A key tension involved the appropriate arbiters of the future of the city’s heritage as well as its appropriate conservation. The legitimacy of the National Trust’s campaign was based on two factors. The extent to which, firstly, it was acting on behalf of the public and, secondly, its advocacy position was consistent with expert conservation knowledge and historical evidence. This legitimacy was being brought into question by various critics including its own expert committee members. Goad described its campaign as “decidedly fickle” and suggested the National Trust “and their taste represent only a small number of the citizenry”.\textsuperscript{97} Nevertheless, the National Trust had the support of many members, the Anglican Church and resident associations. Its campaign was also backed by the Heritage Council of Victoria, an independent statutory panel of conservation experts, which endorsed the Walker report and government decision in February 2000.\textsuperscript{98} Opponents of the shard drew on conservation expertise to make the case that the historical, if not historic, sightline was highly significant and that further changes were necessary, either to further reduce the scale of the shard or to remove it completely. This pursuit of a framed, staged and picturesque aesthetic outcome was a traditional conservation response to the site. The question was whether such an approach remained an appropriate way to do conservation in Melbourne by this time.

Broader urban politics rather than conservation or architectural interests generated the eventual design outcome. An important source of support for abandoning the shard came from an unlikely coalition of conservative media and progressive politicians. They both drew selectively from the National Trust’s position that the view line was a worthwhile and enduring one. However, the main emphasis was the ways that Federation Square had been neither planned nor designed in a
democratic or participatory way. From this perspective, the shard symbolised the eroding of the public sphere and public planning under the Kennett Government. Favouring the removal of the shards, radical planning academic Paul Mees wrote of “elitist” Federation Square, which had lacked “any genuine public involvement”, though he hoped that “at least it may prove possible for the public to have a say on such issues next time round”. Federation Square was perceived as too highbrow because the public, as a whole, was unable to understand the innovative design vision. Progressive Melbourne Lord Mayor Peter Costigan said: “we pulled down the Gas and Fuel towers and now we’re putting up a collection of space-age, blockbuster buildings in their place”. Adopting a populist stance towards architecture, the new Labor State Government took issue that the community found the designs “confused”, “different” and “aren’t really sure what is happening. It’s different to a lot of our architecture. That’s a bit threatening to many people”. The new government sought to put its stamp on its predecessor’s project by forcing major changes. The conservative tabloid Herald Sun (2000), a Murdoch publication, editorialised that the shard should be removed. In contrast, the progressive broadsheet Age condemned the compromising of architecture by politics. Yet, a non-scientific Herald Sun poll of 1,080 people had only 19% in favour of the decision to scrap the shard; probably due to the growing costs of the project and any redesign. The heritage claim that was seemingly made in this perspective related to the democratic shaping of the future of the city and its public square by the community, which never meaningfully occurred before Federation Square and the shard issue became both politicised and polarised.

The outcome for the north-west corner of Federation Square was shaped by this fusion of urban, architectural and conservation politics. In October 2000, revised designs were announced by the working group. In March 2001, renders of the new “mini-shard” were released. Dispassionately, Davidson and Bates explained, “The plans that have been drawn up follow the government’s instructions”; while Molesworth said, “It’s sufficiently low-key enough to appreciate the architecture of the cathedral”. The western shard was a building of 8 metres, so 3 metres higher than the competition brief height analysis, and 13 metres shorter than the earlier redesign. It was in a consistent form and cladding to the other structures on site and preserved view lines to much of the upper parts of the cathedral. It would become the Melbourne Visitor Centre. Meanwhile, the corner and view line were also crowded with flag poles, wires and lighting poles. Walker’s recommendation to abolish the shard was not followed. The shard’s third and final rendering was also a departure from the first two designs. Both the precinct itself and the sightline towards St Paul’s Cathedral lacked the framing which had been intended. The government called it “a win-win outcome”. At its final stages of construction in early 2002, the Australian reported Federation Square “was going to be to Melbourne what the Opera House is to Sydney or the Eiffel Tower to Paris”. The public debate by this stage
had fizzled out. After four years, the community response to the announcement of the final shard designs was subdued.

Conclusion

Federation Square welcomed visitors from 26 October 2002 and was immediately celebrated in the metropolitan newspapers as “a great achievement” and a “New heart for the City”. The passage of time and the coming of age of a generation for whom Federation Square was a familiar and appealing feature of the city would lead to its embrace by the city. At its most basic, the shard campaign involved suspicion of new public architecture in the name of historic conservation. Perspectives on the shard were entangled with the broader public, political, architectural and conservation responses to Federation Square, which were tied not only to the significant local milieu but also to the political and design processes through which the site evolved. Most notable about Federation Square was not that the project itself was contested (which was almost inevitable) but rather the extraordinary nature of the intensity and duration of debates over this site from at least the 1960s and Princes Gate onwards.

The conflicting heritage claims over the shard revealed different visions for public architecture, for conservation, and for the city. The National Trust and its allies were inspired by the attractive and enduring proposition of an unhindered, familiar and historical view line. The forceful position adopted towards the shard by the National Trust perhaps suggested uncertainties about the changing role and relevance of conservation and related activism since the fading of 1960s-80s heritage movement. By the late 1990s, with historical sensitivities embedded in contemporary architecture, the view that urban development and new design endangered heritage had become a conservative stance for conservation groups to take. It happened that the National Trust anti-shard position aligned with not only community organisations and populist civic sensibilities but also broader political interests, which ultimately led to the final compromise of the Melbourne Visitor Centre (demolished in 2019 for a new underground railway station entrance, of similar proportions to the visitor centre). The extent of political interference in the development of this major project was remarkable and signalled a wariness towards innovative public architecture in a city, which was otherwise benefiting from a progressive design culture.

Arriving at the end of the postmodern architectural moment, Federation Square should be considered as having a sophisticated heritage response embedded within it. However, the conceptual and practical divide in Melbourne between i) contemporary architecture and design and ii) conservation activism and practice meant this project could not be meaningfully interpreted by opponents to the shard for its heritage potential towards enhancing the historic environment. Traditional conceptions for conservation had a remarkable capacity to extinguish competing heritage
claims. By destabilising traditional conservation positions and examining opposing cultural claims to the historic environment, the contribution of heritage studies and critical conservation to this article has been to provide an interpretative lens for exploring the role of heritage in the shaping of public architecture. The realisation of St Paul’s Court with its shards would have represented, from a heritage perspective, a prioritisation of the enhancing of urban social life and experimental contextual design over the preservation of static views of historic forms. Despite the conflict and compromises, the important contribution of Federation Square to Melbourne’s architectural and urban heritage has only become clearer over time. Its 2019 heritage designation represented the arrival of public architecture completed in the twenty-first century into heritage governance regimes; the impact of which will become discernible in coming years. The dispute reflected broader concerns about the interrelationships between design, conservation, history and democracy in turn-of-the-millennium Melbourne. Heritage becomes an instrument by which claims for conservation, for architecture, and for the future of the city are made.

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Plan of Federation Square, LAB Architecture Studio, ca. 2000.

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1 ABC Radio National, May 9, 2000, Media Monitors, in National Trust of Australia (Victoria) (NTAV) Archive, File B6873 Federation Square, Folder 3.
3 National, metropolitan and local periodicals for the period 1994 to 2002 on Melbourne’s urban development and specifically Federation Square have been extensively examined to evidence public, political and professional sentiment. For recent conservation assessments of the site see Federation Square in the Victorian Heritage Database at https://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/. All websites accessed June 2020 unless otherwise indicated. See also Lovell Chen, Design Principles and Conservation Management Plan for Federation Square, Melbourne, 2020, prepared for Federation Square Pty Ltd.


34 *Age*, March 26, 1966

35 *Age*, April 13, 1966.


41 *Age*, March 26, 1975.


43 *Age*, July 30, 1984.


45 Kim Dovey, *Fluid city: transforming Melbourne’s urban waterfront* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004), 34, 38.

46 *Age*, June 18, 1994.


49 *Age*, April 12, 1996; *Age*, April 17, 1996.

50 *Age*, March 5, 1995; *Age*, August 19, 1996.

51 Bates, ‘Different Differences’.

52 Ibid.


54 Ibid., 39.


56 Dovey, 2004, op.cit., 98ff.


60 *Age*, April 27, 1997.


63 *Age*, December 31, 1997.


66 Letter: Simon Molesworth to Damien Bonnice, December 17, 1997, in NTAV Archive, File B6873, Folder 2; various meetings between July and November 1997, in Ibid.


72 Minutes of a Meeting of the Urban Issues Advisory Committee, 28 July 1997, Folder 1, B6873 Federation Square, NTAV Archive.


Heritage conflict again stirred at Federation Square between 2017 and 2019 when plans emerged for an Apple store to be built on the civic square to replace the Yarra Building (Fig. 3). Apple abandoned its plans after state heritage agency Heritage Victoria rejected the proposed demolition and then state heritage listed the complex.
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