

history

Circus Site

The 4.5 hectare site upon which the Arts Centre is situated is steeped in entertainment history.

In **1877** Cooper and Bailey's Great American International Circus was one of the first travelling circuses to pitch its Big Top tent on the site. In **1901** a permanent circus home, Olympia, was built by the Fitzgerald Brothers' Circus, Australia's biggest circus of the 19th century.

In **1904** the area of the site not occupied by Fitzgerald's was developed as a fashionable meeting place called Prince's Court. This area featured a Japanese Tea House, open-air theatre, miniature train, water chute and a 15 member military band.

In **1907** Wirth Brother's Circus took over the entire site from Fitzgerald's and remained there for the next 50 years. By **1911** they had built a new circus Hippodrome and a roller skating rink, and had leased the original Olympia as a cinema. During World War 1 some of the buildings were used as nursing homes for soldiers and nurses.

Wirth's continued to entertain children during the **1920s** while adults enjoyed the new Green Mill Dance Hall, which replaced the Jazz Pavilion and Olympia Dancing Palace.

The entertainment bug soon spread to adjacent streets. There was ice-skating at the Glacarium in City Road, and around the corner, opposite the Snowden Gardens, Gregan McMahon's Repertory Company ran seasons of drama. In 1922 a 16 year old aspiring architect, Roy Grounds, played the part of a boy scout in a production at the Playhouse Theatre, opposite the present Stage Door of Hamer Hall he later designed.

Depression

The depression of the **1930s** and the worries of World War II meant most of the entertainment venues, with the exception of the cinema, fell on hard times.

The Green Mill, renamed the Trocadero, managed to survive this era as a rendezvous for servicemen and their partners, but eventually closed in the mid **1950s**. Wirths continued to occupy the site until their buildings were destroyed by fire in **1953**.

During the late **1950s** and early **1960s**, before construction of the National Gallery of Victoria commenced, much of the site was used as an outdoor car-park.

Birth of a Cultural Centre

In **1942** the Victorian government began looking at the effect World War II was having on the provision of public buildings.

A post-war reconstruction committee was set up in that year to look into future facilities for the Public Library, National Gallery and Museum - then all linked under one governing body and housed at the top end of Swanston and La Trobe Streets in Melbourne's central business district.

The trustees of the National Gallery regarded this as an opportunity to gain a new building and independence, a view shared by the architects appointed by Then Premier, Sir Albert Dunstan.

In **1943** they recommended a separate gallery and an auditorium to hold 1000 people be built on the Wirth's Park site in St Kilda Road. The estimated cost of this venture was 2 million pounds.

Melbourne's music lovers applauded the auditorium suggestion, and composer Dr Margaret Sutherland initiated a public meeting of music, drama and ballet societies which led to the

formation of the Combined Arts Centre Movement.

The resolution of this group's first meeting was: "That this meeting of citizens representing the cultural arts of music, drama and ballet present to Parliament a petition asking that the erection of a suitable building for the aforementioned arts form part of the immediate post-war development scheme."

Signed by 40,000 people, this petition was presented to the Victorian government. In February **1944** State Cabinet decided the Wirth's site would be reserved for public purposes. By October of that year the site committee recommended "a new Gallery, with a small chamber for music, and the subsequent construction of a State auditorium with 1000 seats for non-commercial presentation of high-class drama and other cultural purposes."

Securing the site was another matter. Although the land belonged to the Crown, it was subject to various leases. The coalition Liberal and Country Party government was defeated on 19 September **1945**, the day it introduced the Melbourne South Land Act to reserve the site for cultural purposes. The Act was passed the following year by the Labor government under John Cain Senior.

Despite the passing of the Act, the years between 1945 and 1955 were politically turbulent, with 12 governments in 10 years, and the Act was not proclaimed. During this time the land came under threat from commercial interests, but was saved by the intervention of Parliament and the press.

In March **1955** the Town and Country Planning Association petitioned the government, with the Association's director and president continuing an active involvement with the Centre. The Association's Director, Mr R A Gardener, played an ongoing role in organising public support for the project as did its President Mr Kenneth Myer, who later became Chair of the Committee responsible for building the Centre. Mr Myer retired from the position of Trust Chairman after an involvement with the performing arts spanning over 40 years.

National Art Gallery and Cultural Centre

In June **1955** the new premier, Henry Bolte, kept his election promise of proclaiming the Act and established a committee to plan and build a National Art Gallery and Cultural Centre.

In December **1959** the noted architect Roy Grounds was appointed to the project. In **1960**, together with Mr Eric Wesbrook, he made a three month, 52-city tour of North America and Europe, looking at more than 100 galleries, museums, theatres, Concert Halls and libraries.

His master plan was presented and approved in December **1960**, and the project was planned in two stages - first the gallery and then the performing arts centre and spire.

The National Gallery was planned and built in seven years, without a major hitch, at the cost of \$14 million. \$1.5 million of this came from a public appeal organised by a committee chaired by Mr R D Malcolmson. The National Gallery of Victoria opened on 20 August **1968**.

The second stage proved slightly more difficult. The original plan was to put Theatres and Hamer Hall underground in one building, topped by a copper-sheathed spire, however it soon became evident the cost would be prohibitive.

While the second stage was linked to the first, it didn't have the same firm basalt rock foundation. Once part of Port Phillip Bay, the site had been filled with gravel aquifer Coode Island silt, and layers of salamander filling over the past century. The Building Committee decided to build Hamer Hall on a separate site and to raise the planned Theatres halfway out of the ground.

This decision, together with the ongoing geographic difficulties of the site, added three years to the project. Eventually construction began in **1973** and 1200 steel piles were driven into the bed-rock 25m below, upon which was poured a giant concrete trough. A protective electric current, similar to that used on oil rigs, was built into the steel piles, thus preventing corrosion.

The concrete was also protected by a 2mm thick rubber compound, ensuring a long life for the structure. The foundations for Theatres building had finally been laid. The building opened in October **1984**.

Construction of Hamer Hall, built on a small site known as Snowden gardens, and donated to the State government in **1974**, was much easier. Hamer Hall opened in **1982** as the Melbourne Concert Hall.

The Spire

"The Arts Centre Spire is the most powerful cultural symbol in Melbourne - it is an artistic landmark, and one which represents the city as the arts capital of Australia." Haddon Storey, Minister for the Arts, 1995.

As with a church steeple or spire, the purpose of the Arts Centre's Spire is symbolic, providing a visual feature and signpost for the entire complex.

The building originally planned for the site was to encompass both Theatres and Hamer Hall and to be topped with a 126 metre Spire, the same height as St Patrick's Cathedral. However the growth of the building to include the facilities now provided meant the building and the Spire had to be redesigned.

Sir Roy Ground's investigations into the possibilities of an open lattice, space frame design coincided with technological developments utilised in the stadium construction for the 1972 Munich Olympic Games.

Sir Roy's new 137 metre high space frame design included spectacular gold coloured webbing around its lower section, simulating the flowing folds of a ballerina's tutu. This design was subsequently adopted, although the height was reduced by 22 metres to **115** metres.

As a result of increasing structural deterioration of the original upper Spire structure, with cracks discovered in 4 of the Spire's 12 largest stainless steel nodes, the Trust's engineering advisers recommended the upper Spire be replaced. It was deemed more cost effective to replace the tower of the Spire than to continue regular repair and maintenance work.

Following the consideration of a number of design options submitted by different architects, the Trust approved the design proposed by Professor Peter McIntyre of **McIntyre Partnership** and Bob Sturrock of **Maunsell Pty Ltd**. This proposal was based upon the open lattice design selected by Sir Roy Grounds for the original Spire however it was to be much taller, providing a more elegant and better proportioned spire. Completed **January 12 1996**, the new spire reaches 162 metres above St Kilda Road with a 10 metre mast at its peak, while adhering to Sir Roy's original design.

Lighting the Spire

The design incorporated major lighting elements which were installed as part of the lighting installation and winched into place through the spire structure after the scaffolding had been removed.

An essential element of the Spire design was that the Spire would have strong and dramatic night time imagery.

The challenge of the proposed design was that it sought to light the structure by adding lighting elements directly onto the Spire, not by the more traditional means of flooding the structure with light from a distance. The proposed design was therefore also the most energy efficient and provided for the creation of a number of 'moods' projected by the Spire on the Melbourne skyline.

The placement of thousands of components onto the structure required the development of sophisticated engineering solutions. These solutions resulted in the development of world first lighting equipment and computer control technology. The design of the fixing and securing components resulted in the need for wind tunnel testing and significant prototyping, to ensure

they complied with the structural design parameters of the Spire and the mast.

The Spire, with the capacity to create images that will glow, sparkle and twinkle, has **6,600 metres of fibre optic tubing** in and around the spire, **17,700 metres of power and control cables**, **14,000 incandescent lamps** on the skirt of the spire, **150 metres of neon tubing** on the mast alone, **496 computer control devices** which manipulates the colours and movement of the lights, and **900 power and control plugs**.

The Arts Centre celebrated the New Year and Australia Day 1997 in style, launching the exciting lighting system of the Spire on **January 28**. Over 35,000 people witnessed the spectacular lighting of the Spire, which transformed the cultural icon into a unique nocturnal presence on the Melbourne skyline.