

# Vaulting ambition

by Jonathan Green



Ron Robertson-Swann, *Vault*  
Commissioned by the City of Melbourne, 1980

As an object, it's solid, with presence, but hardly confronting. Quietly earnest, despite the brazen canary yellow of its tilted metal planes. The scale is politely assertive, just comfortably better than head-and-a-half height as you stand in its central space. As many have. Some have sheltered here, spent the night between these open angled walls when Vault, the sculpture Melbourne rejected in a gush of angry disdain, was relegated to the then unkempt, unloved, unseen riverside, cast down by the Yarra among the homeless and neglected. Shaded by a rail overpass, circled by pigeons, daubed occasionally, poked at, run through by rats, slapped and knocked, and yes, sometimes slept in.

In May 2018 it will be 40 years since Ron Robertson-Swann won his first major public commission: to erect his then untitled sculpture in Melbourne's new city square. He called it *The Thing* for its first two years, opting eventually for *Vault*, but only after the sculpture had become a figure of fun, anger and general opprobrium, known almost universally by the redolently disdainful media shorthand of *The Yellow Peril*.

And in its way *Yellow Peril* was the perfect name for emblematic figure this hapless sculpture became, bracketing the public distaste for difference in art, embodied here in this meek aesthetic confrontation of a tumbled set of sunnily yellow steel sheets, with the visceral xenophobia inherited from the Victorian goldfields of a century before. *Vault* thus plugged in to the key driving strands of Australian cultural conflict: subconsciously to race and more directly to the populist antipathy for the tastes of the cultured elite. It might have taken place in the late seventies, but in its way, this was a very modern flaring of what we now call culture war.

By the late 1970s the *Sun News Pictorial*, Melbourne's dominant morning tabloid newspaper, had begun to lose just a little of its omnipotence. Daily sales of half a million still made it the country's most popular source of news, though a changing media world would soon be nibbling at the margins. The internet was a decade and a bit away, but newspaper sales were showing the first sings of softness as demography wreaked havoc with habit: the young folk were less likely to buy a paper, raised on TV news and happy with that nightly shorthand for events. Soon they wouldn't watch even that.

But as the eighties dawned broadcast held firm, and mass circulation remained the rule. Public influence was thus a simpler affair in 1980; the channels of persuasion were few and hugely popular. Newspapers led public comment and debate, informing the agendas of electronic media, setting the tone.

That was the top-down temper of the times. The sort of vigorous public conversation that would be enabled by social media and the all-inclusive democratisation of online opinion was still more than two decades away.

This was mainstream media with considerable heft. If they campaigned, people listened, and things changed. On the other side of the coin, populist newspapers like *The Sun* did their darnedest to reflect tides of public sentiment as they saw them, nurturing a commercially effective culture of call and response between newspaper and public.

When the papers took a set against *Vault*, and they quickly did, the die was cast.

Mind you, the council, its architects and the cultural mandarins of The City were asking for it.

In that moment, the late seventies, the creation of a new central public space for the city of Melbourne was a project that followed routine and rather undemocratic orthodoxies: commissioned by a council, devised by architects, then revealed, *fait accompli*, to a presumably grateful public whose space it putatively was.

Vault embodied the offhanded disregard of public sentiment implied in that process: a bright, awkward and highly visible spur to public annoyance at what various elites had set before it.

And here's one of several paradoxes in the popular storm that would quickly engulf Vault and sweep it, an outcast, to a 20-year exile on the banks of the Yarra: this quick antipathy was the sort of social convulsion that we see—with great concern at its apparent modern novelty—as a symptom of contemporary social upheaval and decay. But this was no easily stirred digital anger; this was old-school, a product of the universality of broadcast, and probably the more heartfelt, enduring and consuming for it.

This is the great contrast between these two moments in media: now public anger is easily stirred, but it's driven from the quickly amplified concerns of individuals up. In the late seventies, public anger was an orchestrated wave. The outcry against Vault didn't stem from online petitions or Facebook-driven public campaigning. It was an outpouring of public sentiment led by the loud declamations of that definitive anti-public: the commercial tabloid and electronic media.

A routine recourse of tabloid journalism is to roll itself in the veneer of popular empathy: we feel your pain, we are your champions. This over time has become a darker force, exploiting the fears and anxieties that are the cornerstones of modern politics cynically, with a knowing inward leer, and purely for commercial gain; a cycle of outrage exacerbated by the now-familiar failure of the media business models that in the late seventies were still delivering both audience and profit.

Back then, before media become overtly politicised and socially exploitative through simple commercial necessity, a public campaign still carried a semblance of responding to public feeling: media more closely represented existing public sentiment. And so, Melbourne's two main thought-leaders chose their sides across the city's new city square: The Sun and Herald were appalled, clutching their pearls at the sight of the little yellow shambles that had been delivered to a blithe Melbourne through the same backroom process that delivered its equally unloved city square. The Age sided somewhat hesitantly with the elite aestheticism and sense of bold newness that lay behind both the Denton, Corker Marshall design and the Ron Robertson-Swann sculpture. Though even down on Spencer Street they couldn't resist the suddenly popular sport of giving Vault, its builder and the people who commissioned it, a pretty good kicking.

Which takes us back to the sculpture itself.

You come upon it quietly now, a glimpse here and there through the alleys that thread between the crowded buildings of the Victorian College of the Arts. Then, as you turn out of Sturt into Grant St, the yellow planes

unfold in the furthest corner of the gravel apron that moats the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and also provides a defacto carpark. Vault squats in the north-east corner, looking bright, jauntily confident, but to a 21st century eye unremarkable, like the sort of bold but anodyne structural feature you might find in some regional botanic garden. It's a part of the contemporary art establishment now by implication ... and yet still held a little at arm's length, pushed out to the corner. Over there. Up the back, unidentified to the passing pedestrian other than by repute, resting in the lee of a towering steel-veined and vividly black and red exhaust stack for the freeway tunnel that runs deep beneath. Google maps marks the spot: 'Vault (Yellow Peril)'.

How did a city convulse in outrage at this happily tumbled assembly? How were hundreds of thousands of people triggered? The sculpture had to be more than the sum of its parts; it had to be representative of deeper resentments. And of course it was.

When the then nameless seven steel plates arrived under police escort down Swanston St to be assembled on May 1, 1980, public Melbourne was oblivious. The process that delivered the sculpture had been narrow and opaque, and the decision to place Vault in the square had not been a popular one, which is to say there been no public input: all decisions concerning the sculpture had been left to the architects of the new city's new public heart.

The young and soon to be famous firm of Denton, Corker, Marshall had secured its first grand public commission, and a piece of large, contemporary sculpture was a key element of their square's design.

It was critical, says John Denton looking back: 'We wanted people to see the square as not just a space between the clock tower of the Town Hall and the Cathedral spire. We wanted the sculpture to be the symbol of the square.'

Which, when you think on it, was pretty much the way things panned out.

The process to select a sculptor and sculpture was not without its controversies, but all of them were contained within the narrow world of enclosed cultural and commercial elite. For a moment the sculptor selection looked like being a well-healed stitch up that saw businessman David Bardas boosting the work of his Eltham artist protégé Matcham Skipper. The ultimate process settled on by DCM, was a contest that pitted the visions of three nominated artists, a short list first vetted by various cultural czars: gallery chiefs and establishment taste makers.

And so it was that sculptors Ron Robertson-Swann, Clive Murray-White and David Wilson vied for the \$60,000 commission.

The architects' eventual brief was broad enough:

'The man piece of sculpture in the square needs to be: Large in scale to act as a focus point in the square. Open to allow people to move in and around: an 'urban' sculpture that doesn't block out views around the square. To be in scale it would need to be 10-15metres high.'

There were also criteria that had to be met by the winning sculptor. He would have to be Australian and 'representative of the seventies'. There was one last stipulation: the winning sculptor also needed to be: 'an artist acceptable to art critics, gallery directors and art academics, and considered an important artist'. This would ultimately be the key to the Vault defence. It was art, really important art. Art people said so.

John Denton remains a fan; likes the structure, likes the form, and 'the yellow really appealed to us. It had presence', a modern burst of colour and deconstructed form set among the straight-laced stone and ornate Victoriana of Town Hall and Cathedral.

The total concept of the Square would be insistently 'of the moment'. This was key to the intentions of the architects and in keeping with the almost aggressive progressive stance of the Lord Mayor driving this project, Irvin Rockman, a man determined to make a quick mark on the city, a man whose energy and flamboyance made as many enemies as friends, a man whose two-term tenure in the Town Hall would be limited by the emblematic kerfuffle that was about to unfold. At play were intergenerational and profound cultural tensions that Vault, unwittingly, would come to represent.

Rockman was the brash new-money, young Toorak millionaire. This was the new world of culturally adventurous, cosmopolitan Melbourne. Taking an expanse of Swanston St left vacant by demolition and seizing the opportunity to give the city 'a heart', what's more a heart that would be topped by a three-storey high, elevated video screen ideal, as Rockman explained it to The Sun's town hall reporter Wendy Harmer, for playing opera clips from La Scala. Pizazz: Irvin Rockman was a hint of the nineties in 1978.

As Harmer recalls: 'I remember him as a go-getter. Handsome, millionaire rich, athletic, charming and progressive. His door was always open. You'd knock to find him feet up on the desk, huge speakers belting out operatic classics and always ready with a colourful quote.'

The Melbourne establishment was unseated for the moment, but it was biding its time.

The City Square was no fly by night idea. The first suggestion that splash of open space might be a useful addition to the purposeful rigour of the Hoddle grid came in 1850, but it wasn't until a century later that a square was talked about in earnest. The Queen Victoria Building was levelled in 1966 and slowly, over successive years other buildings were chipped away, revealing the eventual rectangle bordered by the Town Hall, Swanston St, St Paul's Cathedral and the sheer western wall of the once-threatened, now treasured, Regent Theatre. In 1968 a temporary square of grass and paving was installed and in 1976 the council launched a competition for the design of the 'permanent' square that four years later would be opened by Queen Elizabeth, the monarch casting an apocryphally disdainful glare towards its gleaming yellow feature sculpture. It would attract an immediate and vigorous chorus of complaint.

The sculpture was nothing if not a vivid contrast to the surrounding sea of blue-grey paving. It caught and held your eye from a passing Swanston St tram, a low-slung luminescence set in from the southeast corner of Swanston and Collins.

What would Melbourne make of it? Of this deliberate and yet determinedly undemocratic aesthetic imposition, the project of cultural curators who had no idea of what the general public might want in its square, and hadn't take the trouble to ask. Here was the true contest: of elite aesthetic entitlement and the common rights to public space. Vault was awkward, angular and just a little loud, but the fact that it had been imposed by arrogant cultural fiat was surely the key to the eventual and almost unanimous popular resentment: that's what made the case fertile, what drove the depth of feeling and a tide of popular protest.

There had been dissenting voices along the way of course. In his definitive account, *Peril In The Square*, Geoffrey Wallis reports the words of Ernest Fries, secretary of the Association of Sculptors of Victoria, a man clearly nonplussed that the square's architects had restricted their competition to find a suitable sculptor to just three artists, to be nominated by ... the architects. Fries wrote to the council suggesting the extraordinary possibility of a public competition 'open to Victorians or all Australians, or on an international basis'. The square's sculpture, he argued was 'likely to be the most significant sculpture in Melbourne's history.

It's near to impossible to imagine any modern project that so impinged on public space not having involved even a nominal process of public consultation'.

The public may not have been consulted, but they were instantly responsive once the square was opened and the still-nameless signature artwork revealed. The reported verdict was quick and emphatic. On one side were the likes of architect Harry Seidler who told *The Age* that the sculpture was, 'a strong, aggressive symbol of the modern city which belonged to the world of industry and work'. Sociologist John Carroll offered a counter view, the sculpture, he said, was a work that was 'totally abstract and geometric, symbolising the inhumanity of the modern'. So ran the lofty conversation of *The Age*. In *The Sun* the work still referred to by its creator artist as 'The Thing', was quickly dubbed 'the yellow peril' ... a nickname that carried with it a potent combination of cheeky disdain set against a subtext of profound cultural aversion. Words carry a complete and historic package of meaning, and the phrase 'yellow peril' brought a subtext of race-based threat to an piece of art that also assaulted the established popular sense of calm aesthetic certainty.

The public conversation became a bit of a one-way street. As *The Sun's* Town Hall reporter, Wendy Harmer was doing as much as anyone to drive the public conversation. 'It was God's gift to a lowly town hall reporter,' she recalls. 'The blow by blow account of the fight over Yellow Peril gave me front page bylines. Heady stuff, but how to ensure that it was the gift that kept giving?'

Escalated public controversy could be the key. Harmer realised that the story, to be sustained, needed two sides: someone needed to speak on behalf of the sculpture. As things turned out, that would be her.

'My boyfriend at the time, Steve Mephram, was an aspiring film-maker, and between the two of us we knew a lot of people in the Melbourne arts scene who were incensed that the troglodytes wanted Vault removed. But there was no organised group to speak up for the sculpture. So I doxed Steve to be the spokesman for an outfit that I named "Save Our Sculpture". I couldn't just go on quoting myself endlessly.

'SOS had a good ring to it. And OK, I'm not exactly proud of myself, but it was extremely useful to have the opposition living under the same roof, ready with a handy quote when the visigoths were dominating the debate. Steve remembers that at least I did him the courtesy of running his quotes by him for approval.'

SOS would go on to a firmer footing in the end, with Mephram stepping out of the shadows to organise a public rally that for a moment looked like featuring visiting ham horror actor Vincent Price as its star, and suitably gothic, turn.

'A few days before the protest,' recalls Mephram, 'I was called by his assistant with apologies, but Vincent had fallen and broken something and couldn't walk. In the end Rod Quantock did the MC-ing. Rod was a gift: a funny architect.'

The protest filled the square and was relayed to the surrounding crowd by the new video screens above. 'It didn't change anything,' says Mephram, 'and I think the council was too embarrassed to bill us for the use of the video screen. Would have been churlish really.'

The controversy rolled on, spilling in to the council chamber, playing its part in rolling the Rockman administration in favour of culturally conservative councillor Don Osborne, whose famously reported position on city square adornment was 'Why can't we have a pleasant fountain?'

Trouble within the town hall ran deeper than the Vault farrago, and in the end both council and sculpture went at the same time, the council sacked by the state government, Vault packed up under cover of darkness and shipped off to Batman Park, an anonymous piece of half reclaimed riverside across the Yarra from what one day would be Crown Casino, but then, in 1981, was a sea of tumble-down industrial remnant.

Ron Robertson-Swann knew nothing of this final disgrace. The first he heard was a TV news report accompanied by the sit of his sculpture in pieces on the back of a truck. This was a final crushing win for anti-art, and it paid the creator no respect.

'It was,' he recalls, 'rather hurtful and shattering. When it was first taken to Batman Park, it wasn't really a park. It was dumped in the mud, in its parts.'

He would eventually visit it just once in its 21 years by the Yarra, a stay marked by graffiti, neglect and the occasional grateful occupation of the city's homeless. A homeless Melburnian had lately been in residence when Robertson-Swann called by.

'It was the late afternoon on an overcast, cold and unpromising day. Someone had blocked off one of the sheltered triangles with card board cartons, even with a shelf with a wine cast. As the left saw me as a mere "formalist" who didn't address the social issues of the day, for my sculpture to be giving shelter to the homeless, was a pleasing moment.

'I felt I had made a contribution.'

Vault had been exiled, a pre-formed steel pariah, famously daubed at one point with a telling spray-can scrawl: 'I am not an animal'.

Even now in its new home now, rehabilitated and restored to the community of the arts, it still carries the mottled bruises of freshly removed graffiti beneath its shining yellow skin, the odd smudge of a ramping BMX tyre.

'One thing about Vault,' says Robertson-Swann, 'it doesn't embarrass me. There are a few things I've done that I wouldn't do again, but Vault is not one of them'.

If a test of public art is to create a lasting intrusion in the collective aesthetic consciousness, then Vault, spark and focus of the most earnest cultural fracas Melbourne has even seen, can rest happily, job done.

Jonathan Green is a writer, editor of Meanjin and a Radio National broadcaster.