

# Royal Exhibition Building (Australia)

No 1131

## 1. BASIC DATA

*State Party:* Australia  
*Name of property:* Royal Exhibition Building and Carlton Gardens  
*Location:* Melbourne, Victoria  
*Date received:* 31 December 2002

### *Category of property:*

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

### *Brief description:*

The Royal Exhibition Building and its surrounding gardens were used for the great international exhibitions of 1880 and 1888. They now represent ideas promulgated by the international exhibition movement.

## 2. THE PROPERTY

### *Description*

Situated in the heart of Melbourne, the site covers a rectangular block of 26 hectares bounded by four city streets. No formal buffer zone is proposed.

In the centre of the site, on high open ground, is the Royal Exhibition building erected for the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition. To the south and north are formally laid out 'palace' gardens, the latter created after the closing of the second Great Exhibition of 1888, held in the same building.

The site thus consists of two elements:

- *Royal Exhibition Building*
- *Carlton Gardens*

The site is also valued for its:

- *Association with the International Exhibition movement*

These are described in turn:

- *Royal Exhibition Building*

The Royal Exhibition Building is what is left of a complex of buildings erected for the 1880 Melbourne Great International Exhibition. Unlike many exhibitions, this complex consisted of both permanent and temporary structures. The central Great Hall was considered to be a permanent structure which would continue to function after the exhibition had closed. Cruciform in plan, the Great Hall (now the Royal Exhibition Building) was flanked by two smaller wings, known as the western and

eastern annexes and these were demolished in 1961 and 1979 respectively.

The Royal Exhibition Building is constructed of a mixture of brick and timber, steel and slate. The walls are of cement rendered brick, originally unpainted but subsequently painted. The roof is timber-framed covered with slate and corrugated steel.

The building and grounds were designed by Joseph Reed, of Reed and Barnes architects, as a result of a competition. His scheme combines Gothic and Classical elements and also amalgamates the German *Rundbogenstil* (round-arched) style with other more familiar motifs from earlier European buildings. It is thus an amalgam of elements from Byzantine, Romanesque, Lombardic and Italian Renaissance buildings.

Like earlier great exhibition buildings, it combined religious and secular elements. In form it was a cross between a banqueting hall and a church, with aisles, naves, transepts, and clerestory and viewing galleries at high level.

Its main door, surrounded by a massive portico in the form of a triumphal arch, faces south towards the city. Rising above the building, a huge dome mounted on an octagonal drum is a highly visible feature of the city skyline. The platform base of the dome originally formed a public viewing area.

Each elevation consists of a central porch flanked by regular bays and terminated by corner pavilions with mansard roofs. The bays either side of the portals rise over three levels. The southern elevation is the most elaborate with the bays decorated with pilasters, aedicules and heavy cornices surmounted by scrolled discs.

The east and west elevation are smaller in scale and have less decoration.

Inside, the tall central space has a raked ceiling flanked by lower aisles with mezzanine galleries over. A clerestory runs the length of the 'nave'. The roof system of timber trusses connected by a metal tie rod, embellished with timber fretwork in imitation of four-centred arches and pendants, is similar to that used for the 1862 London Exhibition building. The massive central dome, rising 68 m above the floor and 18 m in diameter, is supported on four round-headed arches and arched pendentives.

Much of the interior was decorated to provide a background for the exhibits. The original decoration was carried out by John Mather. He used a combination of aesthetic sunflowers, lilies, allegorical images promoting arts, science, industry and agriculture, and the coats of arms of exhibiting nations.

Mather's scheme was overprinted for the second great exhibition by John Clay Beeler. This second scheme was 'florid and embellished' using strong colours of red, blue and gold. It had similar messages of Empire, glory and improvement.

In 1901 the building was again repainted this time for the opening of the first Commonwealth Parliament. The artist was John Ross Anderson. He chose sombre colours of browns, reds and greens contained improving mottoes and, tableau representing Peace, War, Federation and government – the whole concept deriving much from

J. G. Crace's scheme for the 1862 London great exhibition. This scheme, overpainted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is now being restored.

The west transept was fitted with an organ - larger than St Paul's London. This no longer exists, having been dismantled in 1965.

- *Carlton Gardens*

The Carlton Gardens provide the setting for the Exhibition Building on all four sides. The main gardens are to the north and south. The south gardens during both great exhibitions were laid out as pleasure grounds, designed by Joseph Reed, while the north garden space was used to house extensive temporary pavilions and was only landscaped after the close of the events.

The south gardens are in 'gardenesque style' (planting reflecting scientific botanical interest) with a formal symmetrical layout around an axial path leading to the south front entrance. The planting consisted of avenues of plane and Turkey oak trees, exotic and native specimen trees, and parterre flowerbeds used for elaborate summer bedding displays. There were two lakes with islands and shrubberies and a number of fountains. The whole was linked by geometrical and linear paths and surrounded by a cast-iron perimeter fence above a blue-stone plinth. A notable feature is the Hochgurtel Fountain installed at the focus of the southern pathway system, and the largest and most elaborate fountain in Australia.

The garden reflects a major input from the 19<sup>th</sup> century horticulturalist William Sangster, particularly in the selection of plants and trees.

The garden was added to for the 1888 great exhibition but retains most of the main elements of the 1880s scheme and a high number of trees survive from that date, although some of the detail has been lost such as parterres, railings, fountains and seats.

The north garden was originally the site of the temporary exhibition halls. After their demolition at the close of the first great exhibition, the area was landscaped as a public park. The design is attributed to Clement Hodgkinson and his layout was subsequently re-established after the 1888 fair. As in the south garden, there were cast-iron perimeter railings, although only a small part survives.

The north garden now houses the new Melbourne Museum constructed on the site in 2000. This building now dominates the north garden. The conservation plan notes that the construction of this building has not been without impact on the gardens. Some pathways have been removed and had their alignment changed and the diagonal avenues of Chestnut-leaved oak and Dutch Elm close to the face of the building may potentially be affected by the construction works. What remains of the park to the north end is crossed by avenues of mature trees.

Overall most survives in the south garden, less in the north garden and least in the east and west. The more ephemeral garden ornamentation features are substantially lost, although documentation survives.

The gardens are of considerable botanical significance for their collections of trees, many of which are rare or of outstanding form.

### *Association with the International Exhibition movement*

The relationship of the building to the overall great international exhibition movement, or phenomena, is brought out in the next History section. In summary the building, its decoration and its surrounding gardens, together are seen to reflect what became the standard 'form' of layout and presentation of these major exhibitions and are now seen as the sole major remaining survivor of this genre.

### *History*

The history of the buildings and gardens is closely linked to the history and development of the international exhibition movement – a phenomena that spread across all continents. Although the first great exhibition took place in 1851, in the Crystal Palace in London, the idea of celebrating manufactured goods had been in being for almost a century, with national exhibitions in England then France and elsewhere in Europe.

The difference between these small celebrations and promotions and the great exhibitions that followed was of scale and classification. The great exhibition movement, as it came to be known, espoused the 19<sup>th</sup> century passion for discovery and creation, but above all for classification. Classification – as exemplified in museums and botanical collections – demonstrated man's control over his surroundings. Great exhibitions were a way of both celebrating the industry that emerged from the Industrial Revolution, and showing man's domination over it in an international context.

Over 50 exhibitions were held between 1851 and 1915, each different yet sharing common theme and aims – to chart material and moral progress within a world context, through displaying the industry of all nations. Venues included Paris, New York, Vienna, Calcutta, Kingston, Jamaica and Santiago, Chile. Most had display 'palaces' specially constructed, often from manufactured iron components stretching technology to the limit.

By the 1870s a form for the overall layout had come to be established which consisted of clusters of history-domes, national pavilions and viewing platforms surrounding a 'Palace of Industry' all set within landscape grounds. And a network of contacts has been set up with 'commissioners' observing and suggesting improvements for the next event.

By around 1900 the slowing of national economies, combined with peoples' realisation that manufacturing did not always improve the quality of life, led, outside the United States, to exhibitions begun to lose their appeal.

The Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne is thus an example from the mid-point of the movement. It did not appear out of nowhere: a first small exhibition building had been built in 1854, and others followed larger in scale, usually precursors to international exhibitions elsewhere. The two international exhibitions of 1880 and 1888 took place at a time when Melbourne was booming.

Unlike many other exhibition buildings, Melbourne's has survived still on its original plot and surrounded by gardens. However there have been significant changes to the extended complex of buildings and gardens. The east

and west annexes of the exhibition building were removed in the 1960s and 1970s (one of the halls being re-constructed off-site as a tram museum). The major recent change has been the building of the new Melbourne Museum in the north garden.

The uses of the building have been diverse since it was built. Until 1901 it was used for exhibitions. It then became part of the parliament until 1919 when it was used a fever hospital during the First World War. Between then and 1975 it served as stores and offices, and as troop accommodation and as a ballroom. The new direction for the building started in 1975 when was officially listed on the Register of the National Estate.

The adjective Royal was added to the building in 1980.

### ***Management regime***

#### *Legal provision:*

Australia has a three-tier system of legislation: Commonwealth (national), State (provincial) and local levels. In the State of Victoria, heritage is primarily managed at State level through Heritage Victoria which is governed by the Heritage Council of Victoria, appointed by the State Government.

The Royal Exhibition and Carlton Gardens are listed on the Commonwealth Government's Register of the National Estate. This does not provide direct legal controls, but authorities must alert the Australian Heritage Commission to actions that might significantly affect the values of places on the Register. The buildings and gardens are also listed in the Victorian Heritage Register, which means that designated sites need permission from Heritage Victoria for any works undertaken to them.

The City of Melbourne has responsibility for Heritage Overlay Zones, which form a key part of the development control planning process. Heritage Overlay Zones govern issues such as bulk and mass of new development, height, the retention of fabric, colours and preferred building materials.

The nominated site thus has two overlapping levels of heritage legislation. If the site were inscribed the Commonwealth government would 'endorse' the Heritage Overlay Zones as the buffer for the site – but how this would be done is not clear, nor precisely how the scope of the setting of the World Heritage site would be defined and whether this would coincides with the Heritage Overlay Zone.

The nomination indicates that no formal buffer zone is proposed as the Heritage Overlay Zone protection would be sufficient. However the site is bordered to the south by the central business district within which there are few heritage listed buildings. Also the axial arrangement from the front of the building south to the Houses of Parliament needs defining and reinforcing. There would seem to be a need for better protection than currently offered by the Heritage Overlay Zone.

#### *Management structure:*

The Museums Board Victoria has overall responsibility for the Royal Exhibition Building with day to day

management delegated to the Melbourne Museum Division and specifically to the Director.

The City of Melbourne has been appointed as the Committee of Management for the Carlton Gardens. The Parks and Recreation Group of the City of Melbourne undertakes the planning management roles directly. Day to day maintenance is carried out by private contractors.

#### *Resources:*

Day to day management operations for the Royal Exhibition Building is financed from its commercial revenue stream. The exhibition building used as an exhibition venue generates sufficient income to ensure its financial stability. Museum Victoria provides a budget for site interpretation. Funds for capital works are provided by the State Government of Victoria.

The City of Melbourne funds management, maintenance and capital works for the Carlton Gardens.

Staff on the site as a whole (including the new museum) has expertise in conservation practices, as well as in research and curatorial areas. Specialist architectural conservation advice is sought from consultants for the Royal Exhibition Building, and from landscape architects, arboriculturalists, conservators and conservation managers for the Carlton Gardens.

### ***Justification by the State Party (summary)***

The Royal Exhibition Building has outstanding universal value for the following qualities:

- Rare surviving manifestation of the international exhibition phenomena;
- The only surviving Great Hall of the 'Palace of Industry', the focal point for international exhibitions;
- The buildings and gardens are broadly representative of the themes and architectural characteristics shared by other structures and sites;
- The buildings and gardens are unique in having maintained authenticity of form and function;
- The exhibitions were a shop front for the industrial revolution which shaped some of the greatest global social and economic transformations.

## **3. ICOMOS EVALUATION**

### ***Actions by ICOMOS***

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the site in September 2003.

### ***Conservation***

#### *Conservation history:*

The Royal Exhibition Building underwent a major restoration project in 1995 during which the decorated interior finishes were restored to their 1901 form. Prior to that in the 1980s, a programme was undertaken to bring services up to date. Further conservation works were

undertaken in 1999-2001 to repair rendered facades, windows, doors, the east roof and exterior painting. All work has been undertaken in accordance with the ICOMOS Australia Burra Charter.

No conservation history for the gardens was detailed in the nomination dossier.

*State of conservation:*

Major restoration works that have been undertaken over a number of years have left the Royal Exhibition Building an excellent state of conservation and repair.

Overall the gardens appear to be well maintained. The draft conservation plan states that the tree canopy in the gardens is in fair to good condition and mentions that shrubberies are overgrown or degraded and require attention.

*Management:*

Two separate management plans have been produced for the site, one for the Royal Exhibition Building and a second (a conservation management plan still in draft) for the Carlton Gardens. A Master Plan is being developed for the gardens due for completion at the end of 2003. This will encompass the conservation management plan. Both plans have been informed by the principles of the Burra Charter.

Allied to the production of the garden plan is a debate on the future form of parts of the garden, given the impact of global warming and the need to consider 'water-wise' landscaping in the southern hemisphere. At the time of submission, no definite conclusion had been reached on the questions of planting or replacement of trees in the gardens, and, in particular, whether certain exotic plants should be replaced with local alternatives.

The separate plans reflect their different management authorities for the Royal Exhibition Building and the Carlton Gardens. The Melbourne Museum is responsible for the exhibition building and the Parks and Recreation section of the City of Melbourne for the gardens.

Although it is understood that there is a good informal working relationship between the two institutions, it would be preferable if there could be one overall integrated management authority comprising representatives from both institutions. Such a body could develop long term sustainable management practices for both the buildings and the gardens together. From discussions during the mission there seemed to be acceptance of this in principle.

*Risk analysis:*

The following are put forward in the nomination:

- Development pressures:

It is stated that there are no major development pressures within the gardens as the whole area cannot be sold without an Act of Parliament. However one significant development has already taken place in the building of the new Melbourne Museum, which covers more than half the north garden.

- Environmental pressures:

It is stated that poor air borne pollution is not a problem for the building structures and plants.

- Natural disasters:

The greatest risk is perceived to be fire as a substantial part of the building is timber. To minimise this risk a full sprinkler system has been installed and a direct connection made to the fire brigade.

- Visitor/Tourism pressures:

Although the new Melbourne Museum attracts over 800,000 visitors a year, this number is not considered detrimental to the Royal Exhibition Building or the gardens. The greatest pressure on the gardens comes for the annual flower show – it is stated that damage from this is repaired immediately.

***Authenticity and integrity***

*Authenticity:*

One of the key issues connected with this site is the issue of authenticity. The site is being put forward as an exemplar site, one that represents the great exhibition movement. It is not suggested that the Royal Exhibition Building is the best Great Exhibition Hall built during the 50 years or so during which great exhibitions were in vogue, rather it is suggested that the Royal Exhibition Building is a representative of the genre, one of the few great halls to survive, the only one left built to display industry, and the only one to have remained in use as a hall, still connected to its surrounding land.

In terms of authenticity consideration needs to be given to the ensemble of hall (used to display industry), decorated interior and surrounding park.

The Royal Exhibition Building has survived relatively unchanged in its fabric. Two small wings were demolished in the 1950s and 1960s. What has been lost – or covered up – is the interior decoration connected to the great exhibition period. It is understood that much of the second scheme does survive, albeit over-painted. However the decision was taken to restore the third scheme, which was unrelated to the great exhibition movement, but associated with the opening of the first Australian Parliament, an event of great national significance. What has also been lost from the interior is the Great Organ housed in one of the wings and the high level walkways, although there is a proposal to re-construct these.

In the grounds, it is not possible to say that what is there now is a complete reflection of the decorative scheme from the great exhibition period. Much detail has been lost (such as the cast iron fencing), some features have not survived (such as the parterres to the south) and perhaps most significantly a large part of the north garden has been covered by the new Melbourne Museum. This large new building, prominently sited facing the rear of the Royal Exhibition Building is one of the problematic aspects of this nomination.

The new building is on the site of the temporary exhibitions buildings. These were not designed to last beyond the exhibitions, whereas the main hall was seen as a permanent structure. It was however the intention – carried out – that as soon as the temporary buildings were removed the space would be landscaped as a setting for the permanent structure.

If the site had been successfully inscribed some years ago, it would have been difficult to justify an intervention of this magnitude. On the positive side, it could be argued that the new Museum adds to the vitality of the site. However in terms of authenticity of the whole ensemble, the new building detracts from the setting of the Royal Exhibition building and removes part of the north garden.

*Integrity:*

Equally importantly the new building impinges in the integrity of the site. If the value of the site is connected to the way the layout in Melbourne reflect the general 'form' of great exhibitions around the world, then undoubtedly a part of that form has been lost with the building of the large new Museum.

**Comparative evaluation**

The key question is whether the Royal Exhibition Building and associated gardens is outstanding by virtue of the way it represents the great exhibition movement. What needs discussing is whether its form is a key exemplar of the movement and how intact that form still is. Consideration also needs to be given as to whether what survives is an exemplar in terms of the aims of the great exhibition movement.

The great exhibition movement espoused innovation and change: exhibitions were set up to show skills, craftsmanship and the new limits of technology. In many exhibitions, the structures of the buildings themselves were part of the display, in showing how innovative technology could be stretched to the limits. The Crystal Palace in London was one the largest cast iron and glass structures ever assembled, the Eiffel Tower in Paris one of the tallest cast iron structures: both were built to showcase technology. On the other hand the Royal Exhibition Building was more cautious in its approach. The construction mainly of brick and timber was not in itself innovative. The architecture is pleasant but not outstanding and it is following rather than setting trends.

Great exhibitions aimed to be innovative and to give meaning to modernity. They displayed technological invention and achievement and celebrated diversity and industry. They also showed the ability of peoples to understand the extent and variety of the world's resources – both natural and man-made – through classification systems. In many cases the great exhibition buildings were afterwards used to set up museums for either technology or arts – and that purpose was woven into the exhibition aims. Thus the purposes of the exhibitions were carried forward.

The Royal Exhibition Building was used after the second exhibition as an exhibition forum until the building became part of the parliament in 1901. It is only in the last ten years or so that it has re-gained its use as an exhibition centre.

The nomination document gave an analysis of surviving great exhibition buildings. Although a considerable number survive such as the Eiffel Tower, Petit and Grand Palais in Paris, the Glasgow Fine Arts Building, the Memorial Hall in Philadelphia, the Palace of Fine Arts in Chicago, and the Palace of Fine Arts, St. Louis, none of these structures were built as a Hall of Industry. [Since the nomination was written the complex at Santiago in Chile

has been identified and more information about this has been sought.]

All apart from the Eiffel Tower were used to display fine arts. If one accepts that the primary focus of the great exhibitions was the Great Hall of Industry, then the only site to have retained its building is Melbourne. However if one is looking for buildings to represent the Great Exhibition movement and its ideals, there are other contenders.

**Outstanding universal value**

*Evaluation of criteria:*

The property is nominated on the basis of *criteria ii, iv and vi*.

**4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Recommendation for the future**

There is no doubt that this site is of national significance and one that is of value to the people of Victoria. The way it is looked after reflects the value with which it is held. It is however more difficult to justify its outstanding universal value.

The association of the complex with the Great Exhibition movement is very strong, as its scarcity value. However the integrity of the site has been compromised by the introduction of a large new museum. Secondly the quality of the exhibition building cannot be said to reflect the highest quality the great exhibition movement produced not its overall ideals.

The building could perhaps be considered as a particularly Australian response to the Great Exhibition movement, or to have significance as an exemplar of the Great Exhibition movement in the Australians, or to have been particularly influential in generating response to industry and the ideals of the exhibition movement through interchange of ideas in areas comparatively remote from the main centres of the industrial revolution. But these aspects were not analysed in the nomination dossier.

**Recommendation with respect to inscription**

That the nomination be *deferred* in order to allow the State Party to explore further the cultural qualities of the overall site and to consider other potential outstanding universal value, as well as questions of authenticity and integrity. This would allow more research to be undertaken which could consider:

- Comparative analysis of extant exhibition complexes, their qualities and significances and their influence in terms of exchanges of ideas related to technological innovation and change.
- The authenticity and integrity of Carlton Gardens as a part of the overall exhibition site.

ICOMOS, March 2004