

MELBOURNE TIMES

A METRO NEWS PUBLICATION

ISSUE 23
WEDNESDAY
JUNE 20, 2001



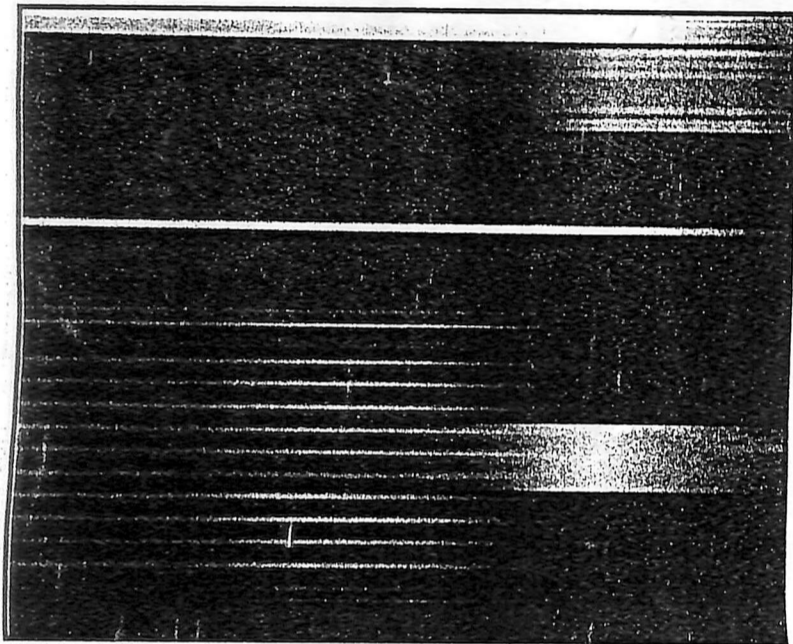
future trams

- ▷ Apartment tower — catch on convent deal
- ▷ Celebrations held over at Gentle Bunyip
- ▷ Special education feature

newsfeature

Hi-tech trams with wheelchair access. Super stops with toilets and vending machines. Car-free tram lanes. This is not a fantasy.

Melbourne's public transport system is about to be transformed. By INGRID SVENDSEN



SLEEK and silver, the tram looks like something from the set of *Blade Runner*. It glides into a long railway station-style tram stop and comes smoothly to a halt.

A small ramp automatically slides out from the tram body, allowing parents with pushers, those in wheelchairs and the elderly to roll and shuffle off safely. There is no conductor, but the driver checks a video camera mounted on the outside of the tram to make sure that passengers have alighted safely, before moving off.

Once on the platform, passengers can rest on a seat under cover, con-

sult a high-tech, "real time" timetable for their next connection, use a public toilet or buy a drink or newspaper from a vending machine.

As Melbourne's long-suffering travelling public shivered at tram stops during last week's cold snap, such ideas seemed as remote as the Australian republic.

Yet under well-advanced plans being pushed by Melbourne's corporate public-transport operators, this vision splendid is coming soon to a tram stop near you.

Yarra Trams, which operates half of Melbourne's tram system under a 12-year franchise deal, is about to

embark on a \$100 million upgrade of rolling stock and facilities.

First in line for an overhaul is the 17-kilometre route 109, which traverses the city from the beach at Port Melbourne to the leafy eastern suburbs, taking in Collins Street, Victoria Parade and Victoria Street, Richmond.

Under the scheme, Melbourne's current fleet of 20 and 30-year-old trams will progressively disappear from the route in favour of sleek low-floor vehicles, costing about \$3 million each. The first of the new trams will be in service by September.

Cattle-yard tram stops precariously squeezed next to the city traffic will also go.

In their place will rise covered railway-style platforms, complete with sheltered seats and mod cons such as toilets and kiosks.

With design details now being thrashed out, the first "super stop"

Melburnians have a disability, a figure expected to rise to about 750,000 over the next decade. Clearly travellers with disabilities and limited mobility represent a huge untapped market.

But the companies and disability advocates believe a better service will benefit everyone. Yarra Trams expects the improvements will more than treble its patronage figures on route 109, to 100,000 a day.

"The vision is for higher-frequency, high-capacity transport that is accessible to all and improves the streetscape and the urban environment," Yarra Trams' asset development manager, Glen Munro, says.

"That's our vision and we're working on what we have to do to try and achieve that."

John Phillips is one of a select group of Melburnians to have glimpsed Yarra Trams' vision for Melbourne's travelling future. Late last year Phillips took part in an

keep vehicles off the tram tracks.

Melbourne's most familiar tram tableau - a tram driver furiously ringing the bell trying to shift a single-occupant vehicle blocking the track - is not one that would be seen in Europe. There, trams use separate reservations or have exclusive on-road space.

The windswept tram stop perched precariously next to the traffic is also a peculiarly Melbourne concept. Tram stops in many European cities have luxuries such as undercover seating. Many cities run the trams next to the footpath, sparing commuters the dangers of boarding in the middle of busy roads.

A former mayor of the Richmond-based Yarra Council, Phillips believes the route 109 upgrade offers a myriad of "exciting opportunities" for his car-besieged city.

Stand on the verdant Victoria Parade tram reservation and watch two lanes of cars and a tram simul-

Coming to a

is due for installation at the corner of Collins and Spencer streets within the next few months.

The ambitious scheme is part of a push by tram companies to dramatically improve patronage and meet anti-discrimination requirements by providing trams that can be easily boarded by all.

Low-floor trams and 30-centimetre-high platforms will allow those in wheelchairs to roll in and out. For many people with disabilities, it will be the first time they have been able to get on a tram.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data suggest more than 600,000

eight-day tour of France, sponsored by the French-owned Yarra Trams. Along with a bevy of state and local government transport officials, Phillips viewed the latest in tram design and transit facilities in Paris and regional cities.

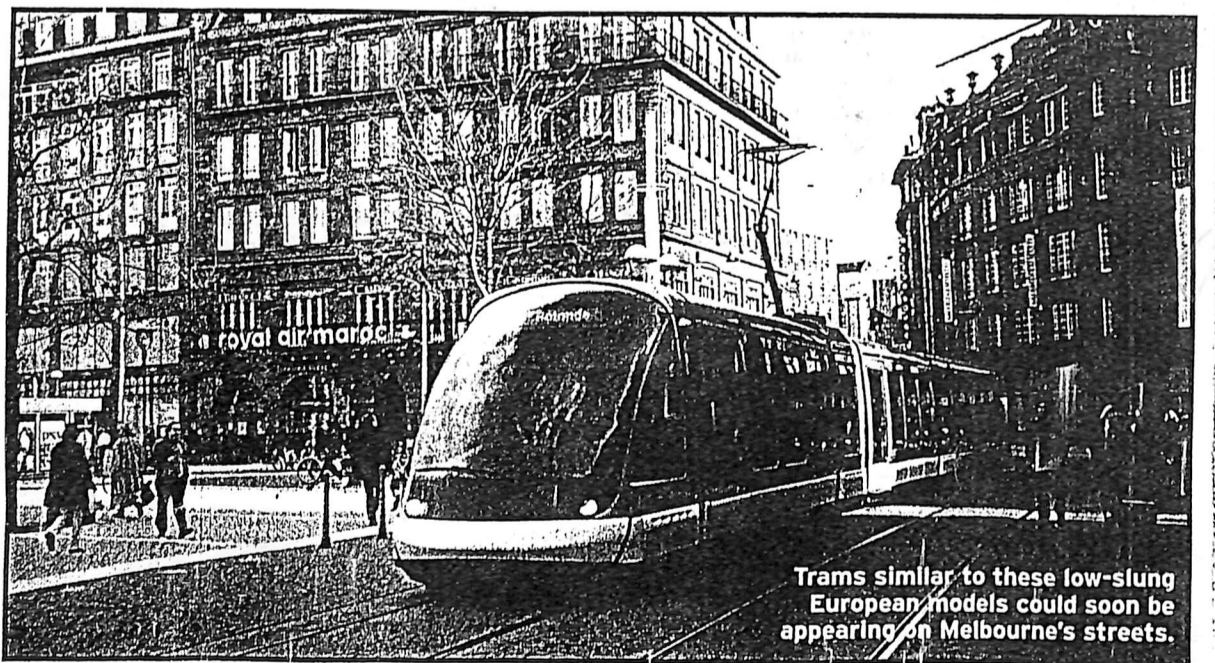
While Melbourne prides itself on its trams, many delegates, including Phillips, returned with the view that it lags sadly by international standards.

European countries including France have discovered what car-crazy Melbourne is only beginning to appreciate - that the only way to run an efficient tram system is to

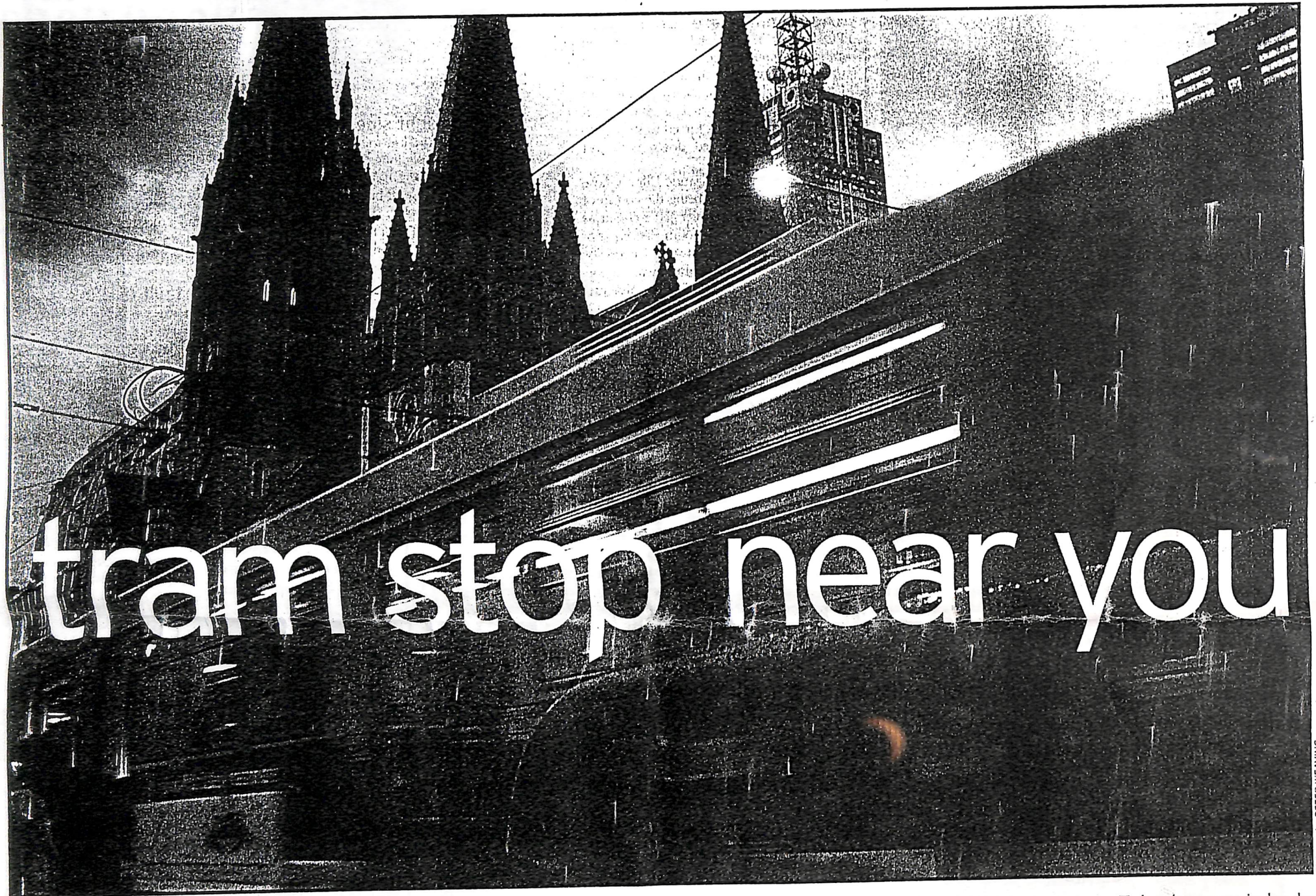
taneously attempt to squeeze into Melbourne's Victoria Street Vietnamese quarter, and it is clear the potential for improvement is unlimited.

Victoria Street has a lot going for it. It is a thriving local shopping strip boasting the best collection of Vietnamese restaurants in Melbourne and a colourful array of Asian grocers. But the crush of cars that chokes the street and mires the trams in gridlock makes it a "nightmare", according to Phillips.

Definite plans for Victoria Street as part of the route 109 upgrade are at least a year away. But in the



Trams similar to these low-slung European models could soon be appearing on Melbourne's streets.



Pictures by PETER WEAVING

meantime, Phillips is imagining what could be.

Inspired by the French experience, Phillips has a dream of Victoria Street as an "Indo Chinese Chinatown". With the tram tracks moved to the pavement side of the street and cars moving unobstructed along two centre lanes, Phillips is dreaming of food stalls on the street and a "bustling market feel".

Making the dream a reality would not be without its problems. Yarra Trams wants better but fewer tram stops to improve travel times, a move criticised as a service cut by stealth.

Parking is shaping as a major battleground. Any scheme to provide separate lanes for cars and trams in narrow, inner-city thoroughfares like Victoria Street is likely to mean the abolition of car-parking spaces. With off-street car parks virtually non-existent near Victoria Street, trader opposition is likely.

Cash-strapped local councils also face problems. Less metered spaces means less revenue. The City of

Melbourne expects to lose \$460,000 a year when 91 spaces go from Bourke and Collins streets as part of the route 109 upgrade. Already, the council has told the government and Yarra Trams it expects compensation.

Despite the potential problems, Phillips is convinced the only way to get a quicker, more reliable service is to "separate the tram tracks from the cars, visually and physically."

"Council potentially supports the realignment of Victoria Street. Personally, as a result of the French experience, I think it has a lot going for it," he says.

Disability rights advocate Frank Hall-Bentick also visited France last year, on a separate, self-funded trip.

He was initially sceptical about the stories he had heard of French trams but came away a convert after seeing accessible trams travelling unhindered by cars in the southern city of Lyon.

"There was some opposition from local store owners because they were worried they would miss out on

trade if no one could park, but that didn't happen. Everyone was pretty happy," Hall-Bentick says.

However not everyone is convinced that Melbourne's flagging tram system needs "big bang" solutions.

The president of the Public Transport Users Association, Paul Mees, accuses Yarra Trams' executives of "planning by slide show".

Mees has travelled the world researching trams. He says while Melbourne's run-down system is "pretty ordinary" by international standards, it is vastly superior to France's. The French system looks impressive but carries fewer passengers than any in Europe, he maintains.

While he supports accessible trams and improved stops, Mees says they are unlikely to provide a panacea for Melbourne's under-used tram system.

"Basically what they are proposing is a package of fairly modest service improvements combined with a severe service reduction in the form

of less stops and presenting it as the most exciting thing in the universe," Mees contends.

Mees says the solution to the problem that plagues Melbourne's tram system - cars' domination of the road system - is a painstaking and unspectacular series of changes to road lanes and traffic signals to give trams priority.

But for many of Melbourne's battle-weary commuters, who have had to contend with the withdrawal of conductors and the advent of unwieldy and unpopular ticket machines in recent years, the modernisation program is the first sign that transport privatisation may pay a public dividend.

Both tram companies are contractually bound to introduce new trams. (The city's second carrier, M Tram, is watching the route 109 experiment with interest, and plans to introduce the first of 59 new low-floor trams early next year.)

Six months ago, disability campaigners were blockading Swanston Street in protest at inaccessible

trams. Today, they are excited at the promise of a new era.

With Yarra Trams wanting to replace its entire fleet with low-floor trams in the next nine years, the optimism seems justified. Questions remain about how the potential \$600 million-plus bill will be paid, but Hall-Bentick, the chairman of Disability Rights Victoria, believes the government should approve Yarra Trams' bid for more public funds.

Hall-Bentick says the \$600 million is less than the cost of the mooted airport railway link, and cheaper than some of the current crop of government-backed freeway schemes. It would also benefit more people, he believes.

"If you improve the system and make it safer, smoother, cleaner and faster, people will use it because they will enjoy using it," Hall-Bentick says.

"Public transport is so important to a city like Melbourne. We can't just have cars, cars, cars, in the city. It's crazy."