

A museum's transport of delight



Fishermans Bend is a golden chance to preserve history, writes Jon Faine.

The final nail was hammered into the carcass of our car industry with the announcement that Holden were closing its Fishermans Bend headquarters. Along with it we lose the world-class design studio. Car fanatics

and Holden collectors are weeping into their oil cans, but this decision affects every Melburnian.

But it also presents us with a unique opportunity. We can convert the soon-to-be abandoned buildings into a world-class transport museum, a tourism and educational drawcard, a showcase of innovation spanning from 100 years ago to the present and into the future.

The story of modern Melbourne is the story of the local automotive industry. Our prosperity today is built on this history, which we largely ignore. The first car made in Australia was fabricated in High Street Armadale by Herbert Thomson and Edward Holmes in 1896, only 10 years after Karl Benz had ditched the horse and instead married a four-wheeled carriage to the newly invented internal combustion engine.

Melbourne became the epicentre of Australian engineering: post-gold rush prosperity was cemented by industry. The Holden coach-building operation – putting handmade wooden and steel bodies on imported truck and car chassis – was booming for decades even before General Motors kicked off the Holden brand after WWII.

Innovation and invention – creative commerce – became the key to Melbourne's growth. Jobs flowed, and with them the city grew. It is no coincidence that Melbourne is the nation's creative hub – we were industrially creative long before “the arts” became our calling card.

But now, in 2020, we have to look not just at our past but our future in a rapidly transforming world. And we can learn much about what happens next from understanding our own history.

For more than 20 years, taxpayers have splurged at least \$50 million annually on the F1 Grand Prix at Albert Park. The true figure is undoubtedly more, probably \$70 million, but for

the sake of the equation let us all pretend the reputed annual fee of \$50 million is correct. Do the maths – take \$50 million and multiply it for each of 20 years.

More than \$1 billion for 20 weekends. Value for money? Hobart got MONA for \$75 million. It provides tourists and locals alike with a venue seven days a week, 52 weeks each year. It has spawned a thriving satellite economy and made Tasmania one of the “hot” travel destinations in the world. The F1 Grand Prix costs about one MONA every year. And it lasts for a weekend.

For a city the size and sophistication of Marvellous Melbourne, we are “undermuseumed” and need to improve our offer. Visitors flock to Victoria for the penguins, the Apostles and Great Ocean Road, pour into the NGV and the MCG for the Sport Museum. Federation Square attracts huge visitor numbers and when ACMI re-opens there will be more to enjoy. Hosier Lane hosts pedestrian traffic jams to enjoy the street art, and Queen Vic Market – especially the Night Market – pull huge crowds.

But museums? Jeff Kennett stopped the Melbourne Museum being built on the river bank so that the casino and convention centre could get prime billing. Sadly, ever since, the Melbourne Museum has struggled in Carlton Gardens. Despite a terrific offer, it is often left off the tourist trail.

ScienceWorks is about to get an exciting upgrade, and if the money can be found to do it properly there is every reason to be optimistic. Hopefully it includes consolidating the museum’s various storage sites into one huge space. Like all cultural institutions, 90 per cent of their collection is in storage.

The Australian War Memorial in Canberra is about to start an eye-watering \$500 million overhaul. Even before this extraordinary and questionable expansion, the collection is overwhelming. It will cost more than any other cultural program in recent years. Is this really our No.1 priority?

The PM has also announced that taxpayers are shelling out for a theme park at Botany Bay. Currently the site of refineries and heavy industry we are paying \$54 million for a Captain Cook “memorial park”. Most people will see it from the window of a jet as they approach Sydney Airport. Few will detour from Sydney Harbour to Botany Bay, through the smoke stacks and the truck traffic.

While all this federal money is being pumped into Sydney and Canberra, Melbourne is at risk of missing the best opportunity we will ever have to understand our own evolution from gold rush boom town through to one of the world’s most liveable cities.

The iconic main buildings at Fishermans Bend are earmarked to become part of a new University of Melbourne engineering precinct. The concept is slowly evolving and shows great promise. Easily included would be a new museum dedicated to exploring the technologies and impact on our lives that grew from the manufacturing of cars, trucks, trains, ships, aircraft and bicycles.

Around the world, transport museums are major tourism drawcards. Imagine riding a restored vintage tram from Docklands to Fishermans Bend, and after touring the transport museum then floating to ScienceWorks on a historic steam-powered ferry.

The iconic Holden and Ford factory car collections and many other historic vehicles can be featured alongside the cutting edge design studio – including clay modelling of concept cars. The 3D printers and latest carbon fibre technology can be contrasted with lost crafts including coach-builders making panels to restore historic machinery. An industrial version of Sovereign Hill.

Fishermans Bend presents an unmissable opportunity.

Jon Faine is secretary of Melbourne Transport Museum Inc.