



# Astronomical Society of Victoria Inc.

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AUSTRALIA

## **MELBOURNE OBSERVATORY**

### **A Statement by the Astronomical Society of Victoria Inc.**

The Astronomical Society of Victoria (“ASV”) sees a very positive future for Melbourne Observatory. It is a fine example of a 19<sup>th</sup> century observatory, together with many of its original instruments. The site will gain further international recognition when the Great Melbourne Telescope (“GMT”) is returned to its original house. This is planned for 2019.

However, ASV is alarmed that the planning fundamentals necessary to guide the future of the Observatory are not yet properly identified and agreed. Meanwhile major decisions are looming. ASV believes that the location of a new Herbarium proposed by the Royal Botanic Gardens of Victoria (“RBGV”) poses a serious threat.

This situation is unacceptable because significant public assets of great heritage and historical importance are involved.

The only public planning process underway – RBGV’s 20-Year Master Plan for the Melbourne Gardens – is clearly inadequate and yet is due for public release as early as March 2017. Invitations made last August for public input to the Master Plan did not include any mention of the Observatory at all, despite its now being managed by RBGV and sharing huge historic, scientific and cultural values.

Far deeper consultation is required on the critical needs identified below, namely:

- Development of a specific plan for Melbourne Observatory.
- Updating of the Statement of Significance (“SoS”) for the heritage listed Melbourne Observatory, before major works are initiated.
- Closer examination of the heritage responsibilities placed upon RBGV, as custodian of the site, by the 1995 Heritage Act.
- Deeper examination of the options identified by RBGV for location of a new Herbarium.
- Initial consideration of how a “Science Precinct” within the Melbourne Observatory and the adjacent Gardens would work and the location/space needed for its component scientific parts.
- Recognition of astronomical operating principles and practices.

**The ASV calls for a program to be agreed upon now to address these issues. Its reasons follow.**

## **A BACKGROUND OF SHARED AMBITIONS**

There have been continuous astronomical activities at Melbourne Observatory since 1862.

ASV began its interaction with the Observatory in 1922 and has provided its expertise since 1947, particularly by providing guides for public demonstrations. More recently, ASV has worked in partnership for almost a decade with Museum Victoria (“MV”), RBGV and the Bureau of Meteorology (“BoM”) to realise the shared ambition of creating, particularly within Melbourne Observatory a world class “Science Precinct” to help bring greater understanding to the community of the critical importance of the physical and observational sciences in interpreting our world and the heavens above.

ASV acknowledges RBGV’s backing for this project and its support for the return to the Observatory of the restored Great Melbourne Telescope (“GMT”), originally installed there in 1869.

ASV appreciates RBGV joining MV and ASV in adopting a 2019 goal for the return of the GMT to its purpose-designed “GMT House” and agreeing in principle to work with MV in seeking substantial funds for refurbishment of the GMT House.

The GMT attracted thousands of visitors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was recognised by contemporary Melburnians as a potent symbol of “Marvellous Melbourne”. It was of global scientific importance and had the distinction of being the largest fully steerable telescope in the world for several decades. ASV envisages that a restored GMT at Melbourne Observatory would again become a major tourist attraction, as well as an educational resource.

ASV also recognises the need for a new Herbarium to safeguard and display RBGV’s world class collection of 1.5 million botanical specimens and supports such a project, provided it is not located on the Observatory site.

ASV also supports, in principle, explaining the contribution to community development of the critical physical and observational sciences and technologies practised at Melbourne Observatory. This covers not only astronomy but also meteorology, mensuration (mass, length, time), magnetics, surveying, seismology, telegraphy and others.

The realisation of these ambitions must surely recognise the immense scientific, heritage and cultural values of Melbourne Observatory. Astronomical operating principles must be adopted to ensure that it again becomes a first class venue for public viewing of the heavens and for ongoing learning and research in astronomy and related fields.

## **PLANNING IMPERATIVES REQUIRING ATTENTION**

### **1. Updating the Statement of Significance for Melbourne Observatory**

- Heritage Victoria should be requested to update the SoS for Melbourne Observatory, already a heritage-listed site.
- The current SoS was prepared about 20 years ago.
- An updated SoS should be available for guidance before any irreversible decisions are taken.
- The case for an updated SoS would be strengthened by all Project partners supporting it. MV and ASV do. The views of the BoM should be sought.
- Regrettably, and acknowledged by all, serious mistakes were made when works were carried out on the site about 20 years ago by RBGV. Significant heritage values were lost for all time. A repetition of such mistakes would be unacceptable.
- Since then some listed Observatory buildings have not been cared for sufficiently well and have suffered damage. ASV appreciates that RBGV is now working to rectify these problems.
- An updated SoS may improve the possibility of World Heritage listing at some time in the future.

### **2. Meeting the Provisions of the 1995 Heritage Act**

- ASV assumes that RBGV will act to meet its legal heritage obligations and does not wish to repeat the mistakes of the past when important aspects were ignored and Melbourne Observatory was compromised.
- Where issues of judgement and values are involved these should be addressed by transparent consultation, against the background of the Act's provisions.
- The key provisions of the Act require custodians to avoid contraventions of the Act arising from construction, alteration, demolition or removal of listed buildings or altering the appearance or physical nature of a place or the state of land registered under the Act. Custodians are also required to act on readily available evidence citing substantial cultural significance.
- While ASV is not privy to a complete understanding of RBGV's plans, it is arguable on prima facie grounds that the location of a new Herbarium or any other new building on the Observatory site could infringe these provisions. ASV requests RBGV to explain why it believes this would not be the case. ASV considers this to be a matter of urgency since major decisions are looming.

### **3. Location of a new Herbarium**

- ASV has been advised by RBGV of a preferred location of a new Herbarium on the "Southern Cross" Lawn within the Observatory site but also that RBGV continues to investigate other options, including elsewhere in the Domain.
- The ASV understands that the decision on whether a new Herbarium could ultimately be located on Domain parkland is not within the RBGV's control but

urges it to press that alternative with relevant authorities, especially given its close working relationships with the Melbourne City Council (“MCC”).

- The ASV considers the Domain parkland option to be vastly superior to anything in the Observatory site because it would provide:
  - Far more planning flexibility for a Herbarium including room for future expansion.
  - The opportunity, in conjunction with the MCC, to create linkages between its plans to highlight and interpret the floral and ecological features of the Domain and the priceless Herbarium collection and expertise.
  - An impressive entry point, specifically to the Gardens, which would be clearly visible from Birdwood Avenue. This would considerably reduce confusion, particularly with the higher visitor numbers anticipated following development of the new Metro Line and Domain Station.
  - A separate, clearly identifiable and safer Observatory entrance, correctly reflecting its formal status as a distinct reserve.
  - A catalyst to encourage the MCC to become involved in the overall project. This would provide an unmatched opportunity to celebrate the “Marvellous Melbourne” period of the city’s history, when the Melbourne community of the Victorian era embraced the GMT as an iconic symbol. The tourism potential of the entire project would be greatly enhanced.
- ASV totally rejects the building of a Herbarium or any other structure anywhere within Melbourne Observatory. This would reprise the damage done to the Observatory’s heritage values as a result of RBGV’s Observatory Gate Stage 1 building works in the mid-1990s. Curtilage was degraded, sightlines of heritage importance were lost, modern buildings were inappropriately juxtaposed with heritage buildings and objects of significant heritage value were destroyed. Such a loss of heritage values for all in the community must not be repeated and should be rectified to the full extent possible.
- ASV sees significant astronomical threats to the scientific and public use of Melbourne Observatory if the proposed Herbarium were placed within. Also, the investments in the restored GMT and GMT House would be detrimentally affected. These threats would arise particularly from heat and light pollution from such a building which can markedly affect the use of a large telescope. The GMT will be one of the largest in the world dedicated solely to “public” viewing. ASV recognises that RBGV has indicated that it would seek to minimise such problems but ASV remains unconvinced that it can do so to the necessary degree. RBGV’s views have been formulated in the absence of an understanding of operational astronomical observing criteria and with no recognition of the scientific expertise within the ASV. Consultation is essential.
- ASV sees similar threats to the other historic telescopes – both those still located at the Observatory and others that are available to be re-instated. These comprise a valuable collection, which could be further enhanced by reinstatement of other instruments and exhibits such as those pertaining to weights, measures, time, weather, seismicity, gravity, magnetism, etc.

- ASV is of the view that more informed, expert scientific input and relevant public discussion is urgently needed before RBGV's new 20-Year Master Plan, including a new Herbarium, is announced.

#### **4. Conceptual Planning for a Science Precinct**

- ASV supports the concept of a "Science Precinct" as a means of recognising the importance of the many sciences practised at Melbourne Observatory in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Botany should be covered within the much larger area of the Gardens but could be linked conceptually through interpretative techniques.
- ASV also strongly supports the idea that such a "Science Precinct" should have contemporary relevance by showing how these same physical and observational sciences now contribute to understanding and management of current issues – sustainability, climate variation, ecological processes and so on. With design input by educational professionals and the use of modern technology, the precinct could become an important educational resource, particularly to encourage young people to become interested in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. It should also provide a focus for academic collaboration, to support studies at undergraduate and post graduate level. This might offer funding opportunities.
- Melbourne Observatory covers a small area. In order properly to cater for astronomy and the other sciences originally carried out there, its buildings and grounds need to be returned to public use - to demonstrate their original purposes and to display historic instruments and appropriate interpretive facilities and exhibits. Currently much of the site is used by the RBGV, apparently for storage and also for parking.
- To the ASV's knowledge, no attempt has been made to develop even a conceptual draft for Melbourne Observatory, let alone for a "Science Precinct" – certainly not via the RBGV's 20-Year Master Plan. This oversight needs to be addressed.
- The ASV requests that RBGV invites MV and ASV (and BoM if it wishes) to join it in considering these matters, which will raise heritage implications and affect the use of buildings, current and perhaps planned. This should commence as a matter of urgency.

**NEXT STEPS**

ASV looks forward to active cooperation with all its partners in developing this overall project, particularly with RBGV. However, ASV believes that it has identified a number of important threshold issues that need urgent attention before any major decisions are taken. Past mistakes must not be repeated.

ASV undertakes to engage constructively in a process of consultation to resolve these issues at the earliest opportunity.

Signed at Melbourne on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of January, 2017

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