

The Case for a Reconstruction Plan

*(As presented by the Trustees' Special Committee
in Deputation to the Premier on Monday, 14th
February, 1944.)*

Sir Keith Murdoch, President of the Trustees, said:—

The Trustees of the Public Libraries, Art Gallery, Industrial and Technological Museum and National Museum are the advisers to the Government on these institutions, as well as its executive managers and the public's trustees. It is as advisers that they come now, in the form of a special committee with the four sectional heads, to put specific recommendations and plans for the future.

As you know, the institutions are fourfold. The great Public Library serves the whole of the State, both as the community reference library of 600,000 books, constantly turned over, replenished and preserved, and by a lending library which circulates its books throughout the State.

The Art Gallery is the repository of the community's art treasures, greatly endowed by the Felton Bequest which has given it a unique position amongst Australian galleries and indeed amongst Empire galleries outside Britain. That is, as regards the beauty and value and wide representation of its varied and wonderful treasures. It has an historical section with many rare and beautiful things concerning the early life of the State, and has bronzes, glass, textiles, furniture and ceramics including sections outstanding in their merit outside the great cities of Europe and North America and beyond comparison with others in Australia, due in part to the Felton Bequest, but as regards Chinese ceramics in great part to the lifetime work and generosity of Mr H. W. Kent who presented the State with a collection of great value and beauty. And there is Mrs Colin Templeton's gift of her superb collection of European, mostly English, ceramics—unexampled south of the Equator. The John Connell collection furnishes a splendid basis for furniture and period rooms.

The third section is the Industrial and Technological Museum which occupies one hall only, but has working exhibits and technological treasures which attract great attention, and the fourth is the National Museum, which is the State's repository of its natural history specimens and occupies all the floors of one section of the building.

In certain respects, the Trustees have worked under great difficulties. The building belongs to the conceptions and the needs, not even of one generation ago, but of three generations. Our forefathers then designed what we now have. Their designs are still uncompleted but little has been added for many years. When the deepest crisis of the war was passed and we felt that a period of reconstruction was coming, the Trustees sought the best possible advice about the future of their responsibilities and they appointed a committee comprising Mr Percy Everett, Chief Architect; Mr Leighton Irwin, who has given a lot of time, including one year's travel, to the study of hospitals and libraries, galleries and museums; and Mr J. F. D. Scarborough, the President of the Institute of Architects here. They were asked to advise what was needed in the way of buildings to bring us up to modern first-rate standards, and cover needs for 50 years. These architects gave a full year to their deliberations and examined in particular the whole of the present buildings and the expert views of the staffs.

Their recommendations which are closely reasoned and to which modern principles and practices have been applied in detail, may be summarised thus:—1. The existing site of five acres is adequate for only two units, for which it is first class. 2. The Libraries should remain where they are, but require revision around the central dome structure; the main reading room being changed into a stack room. 3. The present art galleries cannot be successfully modernised or made adequate. A better site can be found for new galleries. 4. The Technological and Industrial Museum, which has extensive and important functions in industry and education—particularly new forms of adult education—will require large space for modern working exhibits of industries and technical processes and the exhibition of its historical sections. It should be near the library and the technical school and should be developed in the existing buildings on the present site. 5. The Natural History and Entomological collections require development with attractive habitat groups and dioramas and need a new building and a new site.

The Trustees believe that these conclusions are not only proper but unavoidable and pressing. Our directors and departmental experts fully agree. The Australian Galleries and Museums Institute—a Federal body—have endorsed them.

All these developments are necessary for the proper functioning of the institutions in our Victorian community and for the true service of the people.

May we look for a moment at the present position? The institutions have long been handicapped by lack of space, staff, and money; but no amount of staff will enable the present site to do the job. The library itself is an enormous storehouse of books, newspapers, and essential records. It has various needs. It needs an archives branch. It needs greater accessibility to books and more intimacy and attention for readers. It is, according to modern standards, ineffective and out of

date. In addition to supplying Melbourne's needs, it should be the central stack of books radiating through the whole State through regional free libraries and the trustees believe that in addition to our building needs, attention should be given to the creation, with the municipalities, of public libraries and free libraries in an extensive way; more and more are people dependent upon a flow of books, instead of their own shelf of classics, and the most intelligent communities and virile democracies have seen to this.

The Art Galleries are fairly spacious but inadequate. They are scattered, high ceiled, ill-lit, ill-ventilated and difficult or impossible to modernise. We were told this by the great British expert, Sir Sidney Cockerell in his report in 1936; he said there could be no real cure except new galleries. The fact is indisputable. The Technological Museum is crowded into one hall and is a jumble. The National Museum has its staff of experts—taxidermists, and scientists, working in basements and roof rooms and its possessions are wretchedly housed and displayed. The fauna and flora of Australia are acknowledged to be amongst the most fascinating in the world. How much is human life broadened by a knowledge and understanding of this animal and vegetable life, the wild, natural life! A hall of dioramas, and many rooms of habitat groups of animals and vegetation—what a splendid thing for the State. British and American cities have them. Nothing much more can be done where we are. Completion of the buildings would help but not solve our problem.

Now, sir, we come to the question of sites. The architects discussed four sites—Melbourne Hospital, the Russell Street-Exhibition Street block adjoining the Museums, the Domain site, and Wirths' Park site. They expressed no final opinion, and the decision is, of course, finally one for the Government. But the Trustees point out that particular interest is being shown in a National Gallery site, because it is felt that this necessary new centre would be a popular and extensive place of recreation and study, of enjoyment of leisure, of education and expression through ALL the Arts. The people will undoubtedly want a chamber for music there, a well-equipped small theatre for lectures and for dramatic work; they will want some class rooms and provision for the children as well as the adults of the State to pass through, to get cultural experiences at present available with difficulty or not at all. And the art galleries themselves must be equipped to show the great artistic treasures of Victoria, and the contemporary developments, to their best advantage. Space, color, light, historical sequence, close inspection of chosen works, quiet, easy changeability, good students' rooms, both painting and drawing—all these are needed. We have to provide for a modern community becoming ever more aware of human capacities and of the importance of colors, and form, and design, and understanding of the plastic arts. This is why the Princes Bridge site or Wirths' Park has become so very

important. The Trustees have decided that it has outstanding advantages. As has been pointed out by the Institute of Architects and the Town Planning Commission—see Journal of R.V.I.A. of July, 1941—the entrance to the city will be immensely improved by the widening of St. Kilda Road where it approaches the Bridge; this appears most advantageous; but in any case, Sloss Street will be eliminated, sunk, or moved in the interests of easy entrance and of improvement of the city's southern gate. This makes the Wirths' Park site a magnificent area of 9½ acres. An important building, such as the cultural galleries and rooms now proposed, would command large views and be in itself a noble and elevating influence at the city's gates. It must be envisaged, of course, as having direct access from St. Kilda Road, at which level its public rooms would be; the back views don't matter; galleries have no back views—they have no plain windows and the most modern galleries have indeed no windows. The city's great transport system serves the site as no other can be served. And it is important with galleries and museums that they like churches go to the people, they must be placed where the people congregate and where the ordinary people go. What a tremendous stimulus to art in this State would be a National Gallery so close to the footsteps of us all! We urge most strongly that Wirths' Park site be now preserved for all time for public use and that our claims for new National Galleries upon it be fully examined.

Now, sir, something has been said about the country aspects of this matter. We would point out that in addition to the fact that a clean and strong Melbourne strengthens and influences the whole State, and that a great State needs a great capital, a city to be proud of and to draw upon as a reservoir and factory of the country districts' most varied needs—in addition to that, the country will be benefited by our institutions being better provided for their large country activities. The Library distributes books to country areas; we wish these areas were ready to receive much larger numbers. The Library is the dynamic centre of library work and interest and influence. The National Gallery has pictures on loan in 28 institutions—libraries, country galleries, shire halls, and so on; we have 78 schools and will soon have 14 more which we keep supplied with splendid colored reproductions of great paintings; we have cases of ceramics and exhibits in galleries and museums. Our Director's advice and visitations are much sought. We would indeed like to see galleries in all country towns, and would be able to help with circulating exhibits. We have sent some of our best to the country. There is no gulf between us and the country. We will help country centres in all possible ways.

Now, sir, we have put before you a comprehensive programme of works. It is, of course, a long-distance programme. Some of it is to extend over years. It is not for us to ask for priorities; it is for us to advise what is required. But, of course, we do not suggest that this programme should come until after

necessary housing schemes, hospital needs, some school needs, or indeed of employment-making reproductive works. We would claim to be educational; indeed, vitally so, and Mr Medley will address you on that aspect. And we would claim emphatically that these needs of Victoria should be planned and got ready so that there should be no delay when men and materials are available and are crying out for use. Vast employment problems will confront the Commonwealth as fighting men return to their homes, and munition workers and war workers cease their war duties and look around for work and career. The Trustees felt that—although their needs are more of the spirit than of matter and affect more the soul of the State than its immediate material wants—they had a peremptory duty to be ready for the moment whenever it might be when slackening of employment comes. Here are great works to be done and hands should not be idle at any time whilst these things are to be done. But they require planning and we now ask that you provide us with the money to prepare for you master plans. This will need engineering and architectural work and certainly quick visits to America and Britain and perhaps Russia of an expert or experts. We want to be entirely ready for you soon; we ask you to hold Wirths' Park site; we ask for authority to spend up to £5000—it may be much less—upon complete plans and readiness. We would ask you to remember that the State has not for very many years spent anything on the purchase of works of art; nothing; it has left it all to the Felton Bequest, and some poor funds in Trustees' hands. Now these magnificent collections ask the State to house them. And the people of cultural interests—musical, artistic—readers, lovers of drama and ballet—all ask you for your interest and leadership. We ask you to remember that the form, the cleanliness, the cellular composition of a city reflects and determines the form, cleanliness, and composition of its inmates. "Show me your city," said the ancients, "and I will tell you what people live therein." A city must be like a house. It must provide for all the activities of its inmates; must give them their varied needs. And man cannot live by bread alone. These institutions can broaden and beautify and color life; make it less drab, widen its vision and teach it to see new truths. And it is within your power and responsibility to do these things. You, Mr Dunstan, have done some fine things for Melbourne. It is proper that we acknowledge it. You built the Royal Melbourne Hospital; you largely rebuilt the University. Now you can do this. We urge it upon you as a great gift to the generations of fighting Australians and to their sons and daughters.

Dr. J. F. Mackeddie (Vice-President):—Some people are saying that the proposed work would hinder other necessary public works. That, of course, is ridiculous. This work would go on concomitantly with these other works. The claims of cultural Melbourne demand new buildings and a notable site. The munitions of the mind were as important as any other munitions.

Mr. W. Slater, M.L.A.:—The case is undeniable. Our proposals are not intended to be put into operation until other urgent works are dealt with. Great social needs will necessarily occupy a high priority when the war ends, but the Trustees' proposals will take their due turn in the years that lie ahead. The State should in no circumstances lose the magnificent opportunity to acquire the Wirths' Park site, to be preserved in perpetuity as a cultural centre.

Sir David Rivett:

Those who are charged with forward planning in the affairs of this country have to face their task with a high sense of civic responsibility. The time ahead when the fighting services will be demobilised will require greater advance preparation and planning than it required after the last war. It will be harder than last time, because there are more troops, who are nearer to us, and who probably will not be as patient as they were last time. We must look ahead in every phase of the life of the community.

I do not like the name museum for either the Industrial and Technological Museum or the National Museum. I do not know to what Muses they are the temples. I would rather call the first the Industrial Gallery. As such it should fill a most important place in the community.

Wonderful collections of machine tools, gathered together in the factories of the State for war purposes, should be available to draw upon for working exhibits for the Industrial Gallery. Victoria, with its great brown coal resources for power, must become a very strong secondary industrial State, as well as a great primary producing State. The war has developed a public machine tool consciousness that placed new demands on the Industrial Gallery. The Gallery should let the public see and understand the tools and processes on which the State's industries were built. In a modern Industrial Gallery these machines could be shown working.

In the present museum there is no room to swing a cat, let alone to work big industrial machines. The quarters are entirely unsuitable, as well as far too cramped.

The National Museum, another uncomfortable bedfellow in the building, is more like a mausoleum than a museum of natural history. Only Phar Lap is properly set up. The other animals are wrong in shape and posture, and hopeless in color. As for general arrangement, it is beyond words.

This museum should be developed to a point where it can be of great scientific and practical use, as well as of educational value and interest to the public. The entomological section, for instance, should have type specimens of all our insects, and should fill an important place in the control of insect pests of all kinds.

We should be able to have in this museum extensive dioramas exhibiting our fauna against their natural backgrounds. In a civilised community, in fact, such dioramas should take the place

of zoos in which animals are kept behind bars in completely unnatural surroundings.

It is obvious, therefore, that if a new Natural History Gallery goes up, it must have vastly more space. At present the museum shows only one-fifth of its specimens—if it show that many.

Mr J. D. G. Medley:

Education at the schools' level today is tending to make more and more use of agencies outside the schools. Obvious examples are the radio and the cinema. Far greater use will be made in future of big public libraries and museums if they have the facilities. It is impossible at present to use them as they should be used because they have neither the facilities nor the space.

I cannot see any possibility of supplying these facilities on the present museums and library site. I know that education authorities would support me in advocating that provision of facilities which will make the teaching value of these institutions available.

My second point is that there must be very great developments after the war in adult education, to which we have paid far too little attention in the past. As adult education improves there will be an enormously increased public interest in such things as the library and the museums.

The proposed plan of decentralisation of the four institutions centralised now at the Public Library and National Gallery seems to be the only way of providing for the development that is demanded of us. We are asking to be allowed to prepare a long-range plan to meet the developing needs. The cultural institutions of Melbourne must be able to develop with the rest of the city and the State. We, as trustees, put before you these recommendations as to what we believe ought to be done to keep pace with that development.

The Premier (Mr Dunstan):

I have listened with the greatest interest to the case you have presented, and appreciate the importance of these matters in the cultural development of the State.

In the block of buildings housing the Public Library, the National Gallery, the National Museum and the Technological Museum you have a wonderful and priceless collection. All four sections I have no doubt are capable of improvement. It is a duty devolving upon us all to try to show those treasures to the very best advantage, and to make each section of the fullest possible value to the community. All must agree that the buildings are not suitable.

I am very pleased with the proposals for up-to-date libraries and art galleries in country centres, associated with the general plan of development you have presented. It is important that it should be realised that the scheme that has been presented is not for the city only, but that country requirements have their place in it.

A very comprehensive programme over a number of years has been proposed. I notice you have not given cut and dried plans for a site, although you have indicated a preference for the Wirths' Park site.

Sir Keith Murdoch: The trustees have a very strong predilection for that site, and have made a recommendation that it should be reserved.

Mr Slater: I know of no trustee opposed to Wirths' Park site.

Mr Dunstan: The best site will be decided on, entirely on its merits. We believe that sufficient and suitable accommodation should be made available for your purposes. When the war is over, the money available for public works will have to be allocated according to the value and urgency of the works proposed. Big developments will be imperative in electricity, water supply, irrigation, housing, roads, and other national works. Whatever money is allocated will have to come through the Loan Council, and will then have to run the gauntlet of the National Works Council, which will examine all proposals according to their relative urgency.

I am quite in favor of suitable buildings for your needs. I realise that man cannot live by bread alone. It is absolutely essential to attend to the cultural requirements of the people, and I believe that great opportunities are coming for development of that work. Whatever may be necessary to meet those needs is the responsibility of the Government of the day.

As for site, I believe that for an art gallery and cultural centre there should be an atmosphere of restfulness, away from the hustle and bustle of the city, where people may gaze on beautiful works and let the rest of the world go by, as it were.

So far as the general principles of the case you have presented go, I am in entire agreement, and I can assure you that the Government is prepared to help you to obtain suitable and satisfactory premises. I am anxious to encourage the artist, and to have proper displays of art. As you have said, the educational value of an art gallery, library and museums cannot be measured in pounds, shillings and pence. It is essential if the people are to take greater interest in these things that our collections should be housed under better conditions than they have today.

I can promise you that your recommendations will be sympathetically submitted to Cabinet. I do not think it would be wise to count on an over-ambitious scheme. There should be proper plans for a scheme capable of expansion from time to time, so that we could build on proper lines, adding to the scheme as finance becomes available.

In addition to the speakers Mr A. E. McMicken and Mr H. W. Kent comprised the deputation. Mr Fleming Cooke (Acting Chief Librarian and Secretary), Mr Daryl Lindsay (Director of the National Gallery), Mr D. J. Mahony (Director of the National Museum) and Mr E. H. Penrose (Director of the Technological and Industrial Museum) were in attendance. Messrs W. Slater, J. J. Holland and A. Michaelis, M.'sL.A., introduced the deputation.