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FOREWORD

Melbourne is a remarkably cultured city, but paradoxically has not enough museums for a sophisticated city of this size. We have avoided the Brisbane trap, where the vandal Premier Joh Bjelke-Peterson in the 1980s ordered, sometimes overnight, the demolition of historic buildings in order to toss key sites to developer mates. Sydney has also lost too many of its treasures, although a debt is owed to the union movement and activists who protected The Rocks from the white shoe brigade.

Melbourne's core of gold rush architecture and civic buildings has a few missing teeth, but a remarkable number have survived and been repurposed. The Old Magistrates' Court and Police Watch House are notable and celebrated examples. When the then Victorian Government commissioned new modern purpose-designed court facilities, and in the 1990s launched an entire new legal precinct, the historic buildings at the other end of the city were immediately claimed by the adjoining RMIT administration.

An opportunity presented itself, and thankfully the combined heft of the legal community saved the key assets for public purposes instead. I happened to be in the right place at the right time, and was delighted to be the catalyst for the first few meetings about establishing a Justice Museum. Many contributors volunteered, the Law Institute provided support, legal studies teachers joined in, and much of the behind-the-scenes heavy lifting was done by the late John Phillips, who later became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Victoria.

Colin Rimington in this book outlines some of the key figures who came together, united by a shared passion to preserve a unique artefact, a treasure, a relic from Melbourne's legal past.

The 'Kelly Court' was my stomping ground as a young inexperienced legal aid lawyer. Working at Fitzroy Legal Service between 1984 and 1987, many was the time when I had to front up to John 'Darcy' Dugan or one of the other Magistrates and beg for leniency for one of my regulars, no doubt up to no good again. I loved the ambience of the courtroom and the historic and atmospheric courtyard, with nervous lawyers and their even more nervous clients pacing up and down, often cigarette in mouth. The cells were absurdly Dickensian, the Watch House also a step back in time. The acoustics were appalling, the facilities less than basic, the furniture as uncomfortable as the reception I usually got from the bench.

We initially hoped to create a stand-alone Justice or Law Museum, much as has been done in some other Australian capitals. The challenges were enormous, the fundraising, technical and commercial aspects turned out to be far more complex and involved than we naively realised. To forge a partnership with existing entities instead of reinventing the wheel made perfect sense, and the National Trust was invited to take up the challenge in what has become an enduring and successful small museum.

Every time I drive past the corner of Russell and La Trobe Streets, and see the queue of tourists and school kids waiting to visit and learn from the historic displays inside, I smile to myself knowing that all those tedious meetings and seemingly endless discussions were all worthwhile.

Jon Faine
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