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Fed Square is not just a nickname – destroy it at our city's peril

Dimity Reed

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The apparent agreement to demolish a building in Federation Square and replace it with a building for the Apple Corporation brings up issues which we as a society need to dwell on. The first is a moral issue.

Federation Square was created and built to commemorate the making of a nation from a disparate collection of states and territories. This was no small achievement and it took extraordinary commitment – by some remarkable men to the idea of making a nation – for it to come to fruition.



Outcry over new Apple store at Fed Square

Hundreds of people condemn the decision to demolish a large building at Federation Square to make way for a new "flagship" Apple store.



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The making of Australia was not achieved by a civil war or a war of independence but by rational argument and debate and quiet persistence. There was no loss of life, just the development of an idea into a reality.

2001 was the centenary of that achievement. Federation Square commemorates the making of Australia as a democratic, egalitarian society and its success is that it expresses that aspiration to perfection. We Australians of all beliefs, ages, origins and interests go there to meet friends, eat, see movies, hear concerts and explore exhibitions or simply to sit in the cool of the day in a deck chair.

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We celebrate sporting wins together there and mourn losses. We see old years out and new years in. Fed Square enables us to be together or alone and in doing that it is a quiet achievement. It is a public place which celebrates and demonstrates the ideals which drove Federation. And we would be fools to misunderstand its role in Victorian life or its philosophical underpinning of how we became who we are.

The second issue is to do with architecture and urban design. Making public spaces is a tough art and rarely successful in the modern world. The Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Rockefeller Centre in New York and Federation Square are the stars in this small galaxy of major buildings edging public spaces.

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When the winning design for Federation Square was announced it was generally derided because it didn't look like East Melbourne terraces, the Town Hall, Parliament House or the Windsor Hotel; in short, it bypassed our built history and looked to the new century. And, clever little Vegemites that we are, we learned to love it. And not only love it but use it as being central to our public social lives.



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It was a major achievement to meet a complex brief involving the creation of some public institutions – the NGV Australia, the Australian Centre of the Moving Image, Deakin Edge and the Melbourne Visitor Centre – in a series of buildings around one major public space which dribbles off in places to become smaller spaces fronting bars and cafes.





The proposed Apple store (gold roof) is a departure from the rest of Fed Square's look. Photo: supplied

The architecture which so alarmed Melbourne in 2001 is a family of buildings, each individual but united in a shared approach of materiality and design energy. It is a whole vision, skilfully expressed. It works.

And it is here we must address the madness of the design of the proposed Apple store.



Apple's new store (left) proposed for Federation Square. Photo: Apple

This extraordinary thing looks like the first stab at a design for a Portsea beach house. What were they thinking? Indeed, were they thinking?

If Apple wants to be in Fed Square, then it must recognise the quality of the environment it aspires to be part of and that means being in one of the existing buildings. If the powers that be yearn for Apple then the only way that can happen is if Apple guts an existing building and creates, internally, the white glass environment that defines its brand.



The view from the Fed Square Apple store balcony. Photo: Supplied

There must be no demolition of any existing buildings and there is

absolutely no way that a new building can slot into this architectural family, this built representation of our nation's history.

Commerce is the next issue to be addressed. Apparently it is the lack of rental income that has encouraged this proposal.

If this is so, then the current decision makers should seek some clever youngsters to look anew at the possibilities. It just might be that the current thinkers are too old, too tied into old paradigms to respond creatively to these issues. Or do they just want to sit in a sponsor's box at the Australian Open?

It seems to have flown over the heads of the people involved in this proposal that it is a clear and distressing illustration of the fracture that is affecting the western world: the split between the decision-makers and the concerns of the people. It is widely seen that this fracture is intrinsic to why the young are questioning the value of democracy as a governing principle. Secret meetings and secret agreements are a dangerous path to decision-making.

Everything here returns to the first issue: morality. This proposal trumps the others as it threatens the fabric of our society. To sell our soul to an American Corporation which many Australians are yet to be convinced pays quite enough tax to the ATO would be a Faustian deal.

Fed Square is not just a nickname but a representation of who we are. And we destroy that at our peril.

Dimity Reed is an architect and writer and was RMIT Professor of Urban Design.

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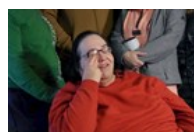
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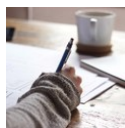
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