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A rendering of Melbourne's future Apple Store, which will be built in the city's Federation Square. // Apple

The Problem With Australia's Next Apple Store

KRISTON CAPPS JAN 5, 2018

The company's latest flagship will displace an Aboriginal cultural center in Melbourne.

When Federation Square first opened 15 years ago, Melbourne residents were skeptical. Understandably so: Its deconstructivist buildings were literally edgy; its abstract bluestone-paved plaza was like nothing else in town. This was Melbourne's first proper public square—a civic center explicitly devoted to culture—and it took some getting used to.

Since then, Federation Square has become the heart of Melbourne, as *The Age* tells it. While the multifaceted geometries and sharp façades of the buildings may not be for everyone, even residents who don't care for the design grudgingly admit that area has emerged as one of the city's most recognizable features.

Others simply see Federation Square as lucrative property, including its ostensible caretakers. Just before Christmas, the government of the state of Victoria announced that the Yarra Building, one of those jagged prism-shaped structures that gives Federation Square its flair, would be demolished. The building, which currently houses an Aboriginal culture center, will be replaced by an Apple Store.



Supporters of cyclist Cadel Evans gather in Federation Square in 2011 to celebrate his victory in the Tour de France.

(Brandon Malone/Reuters)

Needless to say, some Melbourne residents are furious. In a single stroke, the state government proclaimed its intent to both interrupt the cohesive design vision of Federation Square and undermine the civic mission that made it central to Melbourne. The proposal raises a question for this city, and for many other cities as well: Can anybody stop the relentless push to corporatize public space?

The new design by Norman + Fosters—the architectural firm behind Apple’s flagship flying saucer in Cupertino, California—would replace the quartz-like Yarra Building with a floating golden panini. While handsome enough, the Apple Store design is out of step with the other buildings on Federation Square, which were designed as a concept by Melbourne’s Lab Architecture Studio. (One of the lead architects behind Federation Square, Donald Bates, has also consulted on Apple’s plan.) The demolition plan raises the prospect that the government sees Federation Square more as a set of assets than as a singular entity.

Furthermore, Apple’s plans violate Federation Square’s Civic and Cultural Charter—a set of public guidelines that function as the plaza’s constitution (truly a novelty, says this American). The City of Melbourne and Government of Victoria enshrined their shared vision for the area in this document. It might not have the binding authority of law, but it plainly establishes Federation Square as a civic district, with a preference for arts and nonprofit entities and clear boundaries for commercial uses. Leasing storefront space to a tavern is one thing under the charter’s operating principles. Nuking a building and evicting a cultural center is very clearly not.

The proposed Apple Store is being touted as one of the company’s flagship “Town Hall” concepts, and the first in the Southern Hemisphere. John Eren, Victoria’s Minister for Tourism and Major Events, has said that the new store will draw more than 2 million additional visitors to Federation Square per year. How could the Koorie Heritage Trust—a cultural center for the Aboriginal peoples of New South Wales and Victoria, and the current tenants of the Yarra Building—hope to compete at the door?

The colonialist optics of this forced migration are not great, although the Koorie Heritage Trust aims to find space elsewhere in Federation Square, according to reports.



Cheering crowds gather in Federation Square to celebrate the closing of the Commonwealth Games in 2006. The Yarra Building, which will be replaced by an Apple Store, is seen at center right. (Tony Feder/AP)

Gadget stores will always outpace arts institutions in revenue and attendance. By this measure, Victoria might as well tear up the leases for the other facilities on Federation Square, which house the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and the Ian Potter Centre for Australian art. Federation Square could indeed be more profitable if it sold Minions tchotchkes.

But it wouldn't be a more public space. The whole reason for consolidating cultural institutions in a purposely designed (if funky and angular) civic square is to ensure their mutual success and their access for all. Apple, which is currently the largest public company in the world, does not need the public subsidy of a beautiful plaza to thrive. And as Melbourne residents have shown over the last 15 years, Federation Square doesn't need an Apple Store to get by, either.

Dissatisfied Melbournians have plenty of reason to grumble, as *The Age* explains. A leading opponent of the project, Aboriginal Affairs Minister Natalie Hutchins, was consumed by her husband's death and unable to weigh in on the government's decision. Victoria's announcement came just five days before Christmas, at a time when many are distracted. (Still, a petition to save the Yarra Building quickly garnered 16,000 signatures.)

Foes and supporters of the Apple plan may be talking past one another: Some residents and visitors call the Yarra Building an eyesore, and they welcome a sleek replacement; critics have largely focused on questioning the propriety of the plan to privatize public space. The issue has divided the state cabinet.



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Melbourne residents, at least, can point to the Civic and Cultural Charter to make an originalist, textual argument for saving the Yarra Building. That's not the case in Washington, D.C., where the city government has decided to give Apple a disused architectural gem, a former Carnegie Library, to be used as retail space. While in this case, the building, and the urban park it occupies, would be preserved, it would also mean giving a massive and historic public subsidy to a company with a quarter-trillion dollars in cash.

That's just the thing: Apple doesn't need Melbourne's help to open an Apple Store. The city has five Apple Stores already. Where Apple does need Melbourne's help is in building an Apple Store in a publicly subsidized, widely beloved, riverfront-facing downtown urban park. To its credit, this is a company that understands that treasured civic spaces are precious, worth more than the cash it costs to construct them. That's something that Victoria would do well to remember.



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Kriston Capps is a staff writer for *CityLab* covering housing, architecture, and politics. He previously worked as a senior editor for *Architect* magazine.



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