

Arts Centre Melbourne’s Theatres Building and iconic Spire celebrate 40 years of performing arts history



Photo courtesy of Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE, 1 OCTOBER 2024 – Arts Centre Melbourne’s much-loved **Theatres Building and its iconic Spire** will celebrate its 40th anniversary on 29 October 2024. Throughout October Arts Centre Melbourne will mark the occasion with the release of a **new documentary series [Building An Icon](#)** presented by Tim Ross, **[architecture and design tours, a unique furniture installation](#)** inspired by architect Roy Grounds and an **[Australian Performing Arts Collection display](#)**.

The bold and beautiful Theatres Building and Spire, home of the much-loved State Theatre, Playhouse and Fairfax Studio, was the vision of pioneering mid-century architect Sir Roy Grounds, while Oscar-winning designer John Truscott masterminded Arts Centre Melbourne’s lush interiors. The official opening on 29 October 1984 was a glittering party for the ages - the culmination of decades of planning, advocacy and construction.

Forty years later the beloved cultural landmark is undergoing its first major upgrades with the refurbishment of its glorious heritage elements and improvements to accessibility to ensure the Theatres Building can continue to welcome all Victorians.

“Arts Centre Melbourne’s Theatres Building and Spire is the glowing centrepiece of Melbourne’s arts precinct, and we are proud to honour its legacy as a site for world-class performance and artistry. We invite the community to celebrate and reflect on this significant milestone by attending a show, joining a tour, watching our documentary series or just taking in the beautiful architecture and design of the building,” said **Arts Centre Melbourne’s Chief Executive Officer Karen Quinlan AM.**

The *Building an Icon* series will be released this month, showcasing the rich history and cultural significance of the Theatres Building and its iconic Spire. Hosted by mid-century modern design enthusiast Tim Ross, the three-part series features exclusive interviews and rare archival material to illuminate the story of how this cultural landmark was created on the banks of the Yarra. In conversation with guests including architect Victoria Grounds (daughter of Sir Roy Grounds), and Truscott historian Denise Whitehouse, Tim Ross explores how the unique blend of striking architecture, decadent Hollywood-style interiors and mid-century Australian art so successfully brings together people and performance. The series concludes with a focus on the future of Arts Centre Melbourne. For a sneak peek watch the trailer [here](#).

Design enthusiasts will have the opportunity to view the [Sir Roy Grounds furniture collection](#) at Arts Centre Melbourne from 28 October – 6 November. The newly released collection is designed by Melbourne-based K5 Furniture in collaboration with Roy Grounds’ daughter Victoria Grounds and architectural historian Tony Lee. In line with Grounds’ original designs the range exemplifies his restrained, minimalist style.

Members of the public are also invited to join a [limited-edition tour](#) of the architectural, art and interior design highlights of the Theatres Building from 12 October - 9 November. Participants will hear how Grounds’ bold vision shaped Melbourne’s cultural landmark, experience the decadent interiors created by John Truscott, view highlights from the Public Art Collection and learn how upgrades to the Theatres Building as part of the Melbourne Arts Precinct Transformation will meet contemporary needs while preserving heritage.

Also on display throughout October in the Smorgon Family Plaza is an Australian Performing Arts Collection display - [Worlds Under the Spire](#) – showcasing set models from the Australian Performing Arts Collection that represent productions staged in Arts Centre Melbourne venues since 1984.

History of Theatres Building and Spire

- As early as **1942**, the Victorian Government had begun considering the effect World War II was having on the provision of public buildings. In **1943**, the architects recommended to a post-war reconstruction committee that a separate gallery and an auditorium to hold 1,000 people should be built on the Wirth Brothers’ Circus site, on the southern bank of the Yarra.
- In December **1959**, Roy Grounds, by then a noted architect, was appointed to the project. His master plan was approved in December **1960**. The project was planned in two stages – first a gallery, and then a performing arts centre and spire.
- Stage two – **“the Arts Centre”**– proved problematic. The original plan was to put the theatres and concert hall underground in one building, topped by a copper-sheathed spire. It soon became evident that the cost would be prohibitive. Ongoing geographic difficulties of the site, where thousands of years ago a river had flowed, also forced the Building Committee to revise their plans, moving the concert hall to a separate site and raising the theatres halfway out of the ground.

- This decision added three years to the project, with construction beginning in **1973**. Under the chairmanship of **Kenneth Myer** and the direction of General Manager, **George Fairfax**, in **1979** the Arts Centre Building Committee appointed **John Truscott** – one of Australia's most successful designers and director of the arts, and an **Academy Award-winning film designer** – to redesign Roy Grounds' planned interiors for both the **Melbourne Concert Hall** and **Theatres Building**.
- The Theatres Building opened in October **1984**. The Playhouse premiered ahead of the rest of the building, with **Melbourne Theatre Company's** *Medea* gracing the new stage in **May 1984**. *A Stretch of the Imagination*, presented by the **Playbox Theatre Company** (which later became 'The Malthouse'), opened the [Fairfax Studio](#) and **The Australian Ballet's** *Sleeping Beauty* cut the ribbon in the [State Theatre](#).

The Spire

- The Spire has become an iconic landmark in the Melbourne skyline since it first rose from the site in **1984**.
- The original plans for a single performing arts building envisaged a **126-metre Spire**. However, the changes to the original building designs meant the Spire, too, had to be rethought.
- Sir Roy's revised **137-metre design** included spectacular gold webbing around its lower section, simulating the flowing folds of a ballerina's tutu. This design was subsequently adopted, although the height was reduced by 22 metres to 115 metres.
- Years later because of increasing structural deterioration of the original upper Spire structure, the opportunity arose to replace the tower and add a further 46 metres to the original construction.
- Completed on **12 January 1996**, the Spire now reaches **162 metres** above street level and is topped by a 10-metre mast. The total weight of steel in the Spire and mast is 97.7 tonnes.
- The new design included a network of dramatic night-time lighting that includes:
 - 6,600 metres of fibre-optic tubing
 - 17,700 metres of power and control cables
 - 14,000 bud lights on its skirt
 - 150 metres of neon tubing on the mast, 496 computer control devices to manipulate the colours and movement of the lights plus 900 power and control plugs.

Images can be found [here](#).

For more information visit artscentremelbourne.com.au

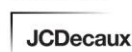
Arts Centre Melbourne acknowledges the traditional owners of the land on which we stand, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people, and pays respect to their Elders, past and present.

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