

LEX LOCI'S TRAVELS

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An irregular one-pager from The Public Land Consultancy



Lex, Artworks, and the Gas & Fuel

Our Lex is wandering around the National Gallery of Victoria, at Federation Square.

That's where the NGV exhibits its collection of Australian art. Lex understands art to include paintings, sculptures, ceramics, cultural artefacts and so forth. Here's Arthur Boyd and Margaret Preston and Emily Kngwarray and Albert Namatjira. And here's a model of... What?? The Gas and Fuel buildings!!

It must be art, because it's in an art gallery. But for pre-millennials like Lex, the G&F towers were the antithesis of art, of culture: a blot on Melbourne's urban landscape.

The towers occupied the airspace over the railyards, precisely where the NGV's Australian gallery now stands. Built in 1965 by the Bolte Government, they dwarfed St Paul's Cathedral and obliterated the view of the City from the South.

Lex has two complementary questions: (1) if government needed office towers, why build them here, and (2) if this land was available to be developed, why government office towers? Complex, but at the core of the answers will be the idea of ['free land.'](#)

The laws of economics apply everywhere (surely - otherwise they're not laws, are they?) but somehow accounting systems treat public land differently. A public sector

entity building something on freehold land will factor in the purchase price of the land. The same building on public land which the entity already owns or controls costs less (economists will be squirming here, but it's true!)

Demolished in 1996 by the Kennett Government, the G&F towers gave way to Federation Square - including the NGV.

Lex's two complementary questions apply to Fed Square, just as they did to the G&F, but they now have more accessible and plausible answers. The 'free land' factor has been submerged by factors relating to urban function, social amenity, and civic pride.

Back to the NGV. What's its excuse for commemorating this repulsive eyesore? Lex reads that what he's looking at is not a sculpture, but an installation. The artist is one Callum Morton, whose works *'memorialise outdated forms of modernity, and present a melancholic urban archaeology.'*

Well that's a relief. The work is exhibited not as an exemplar of architectural excellence, but as a cautionary reminder of the dangers of letting governments loose on public land, unsupervised.

See you there! Lex Loci