

Testing time for Convent's success



As the Abbotsford Convent enters the final stages of its first five-year plan and begins work on the next stage, ACF Chairman HAYDEN RAYSMITH reviews progress and analyses the recent public debate initiated by a group of tenants

On most measures the Abbotsford Convent has been an outstanding success, surpassing all predictions for its growth as an exciting new arts, learning and cultural precinct for Melbourne.

This year, for example, the Abbotsford Convent became the first place in the Asia Pacific region to gain membership of the European Network of Cultural Centres, an achievement that will allow artists at the Convent to link with visiting international artists and global artistic programs.

More than 10,000 people are visiting the site each week to enjoy the arts, the markets, the food, the gardens, the buildings and a host of other experiences in a village-like atmosphere that evokes many important parts of Melbourne's history - that's one third the number of people who visited the National Gallery of Victoria last year and more visitors than all the other arts venues in the City of Yarra combined.

The site houses over 110 lease holders and hundreds of individual tenants and sub-tenants. They include solo artists, writers and designers, wellbeing practitioners, arts organisations, a school, a radio station, a bakery, restaurants, cafes and bars.

Six years after the Victorian Government signed over the Convent as "a gift to the people of Victoria" following a long local community campaign to save it from residential development, the Abbotsford Convent is ahead of schedule on growth and refurbishment, with two thirds of the space in the Convent's eleven buildings now open for tenants.

But some people are unhappy. As reported in the *Sunday Age*, a relatively small number of tenants are concerned about the direction of the Convent, the management style and board engagement. Alternatively, other tenants are dismayed and bewildered by the ferocity, language and arguments of the critics. The site is abuzz with the debate.

As the Abbotsford Convent Foundation prepares its second five-year plan, including a recalibration for the precinct's vision, we acknowledge we have made mistakes.

We underestimated the difficulty of managing the dual roles of being a creative director for a new venue and a landlord. Encouraging and managing a large group of creative people while also being concerned with the complexities of commercial tenancy, risk management, building regulations and heritage controls, in hindsight, was a challenging task for a small dedicated team. The tension has led to misunderstandings and, on occasion, disagreement.

At times, there has been a sense from some tenants that because the site was "a gift to the people of Victoria", there should be minimal management and they should be free to do as they please. . In a precinct as complex as the Convent, strong management and governance are critical.

The board has acknowledged that changes need to be made for the next phase of the Convent's development because of its rapid growth, particularly the emergence of a large tenant community, which did not exist when the new Convent was created.

A consultant Chief Operating Officer has been engaged to focus on tenancy issues and internal management issues, liberating the Chief Executive Officer to concentrate on the equally critical issues of creative direction, community development, government liaison, fundraising and bringing new activities to the site.

The board has established two joint tenant-board working parties to report on communications, governance, tenancy and vision. Good progress is being made in these forums. Leasing policies are being discussed with tenants and a review process is underway.

I acknowledge that part of the second five-year phase of the Convent's development needs to include board renewal and we will be asking the tenant representatives as well as other stakeholders to help develop governance options.

The present board, which receives no remuneration, is skills-based and includes people who were prominent in the community campaign to save the Convent, as well as a group of professionals who developed the Business Plan which persuaded the Victorian Government that the Convent could succeed as an arts, education and cultural complex for the whole community.

Twice the board membership has been assessed by an independent expert. In 2008 the highly regarded consulting company OPPEUS reviewed not only membership but performance and practice, benchmarking the board against other company and community boards. Recommendations from that review have been implemented. The next 12 months is a time for a larger degree of board refreshment to meet the new challenges.

A key condition from the Victorian Government was that the Convent would be self-sustaining. The Convent receives no ongoing subsidy and must cover all of its \$1.8m annual operating costs from income generated from its activities. This revenue must also cover the cost of maintenance of old buildings, the car park and infrastructure as well as maintaining the gardens and public spaces.

The Foundation has raised more than \$10 million from Government, the philanthropic community and the general public for capital works. It has been spent on building refurbishment and infrastructure. There is much more to be done.

The business focus has been the subject of some criticism by some tenants. We do not back away one jot from a business focus, but this is always in the context of our primary objective to create an outstanding arts, learning and cultural precinct.

It is curious that some of the fiercest criticism of our "too business-like" approach comes from commercial tenants who are there to make a profit, some for social purpose and others for more usual and perfectly acceptable commercial purpose.

The board continues to be heartened by the great support we are receiving from a large number of tenants and the wider community. The relatively few vocal opponents of the board and management are noisy and active. That is their right and we have been listening to them.

It would be more constructive if they worked with the other tenants and board members through the forums that have been established. Instead there are worrying signs that the debate is being influenced by outside interests who may not have the best interests of the Convent at heart.

The Convent tenants and the wider community need to watch this debate carefully. Sometimes things are not always exactly as they are portrayed by the most vocal observers. In the meantime the board is focused on a successful transition to the next stage in the development of a place recently described by prominent Queensland artistic director Zane Trow as "the best example of virtually unfunded community cultural development in the country; nothing touches it". – **September 2010**