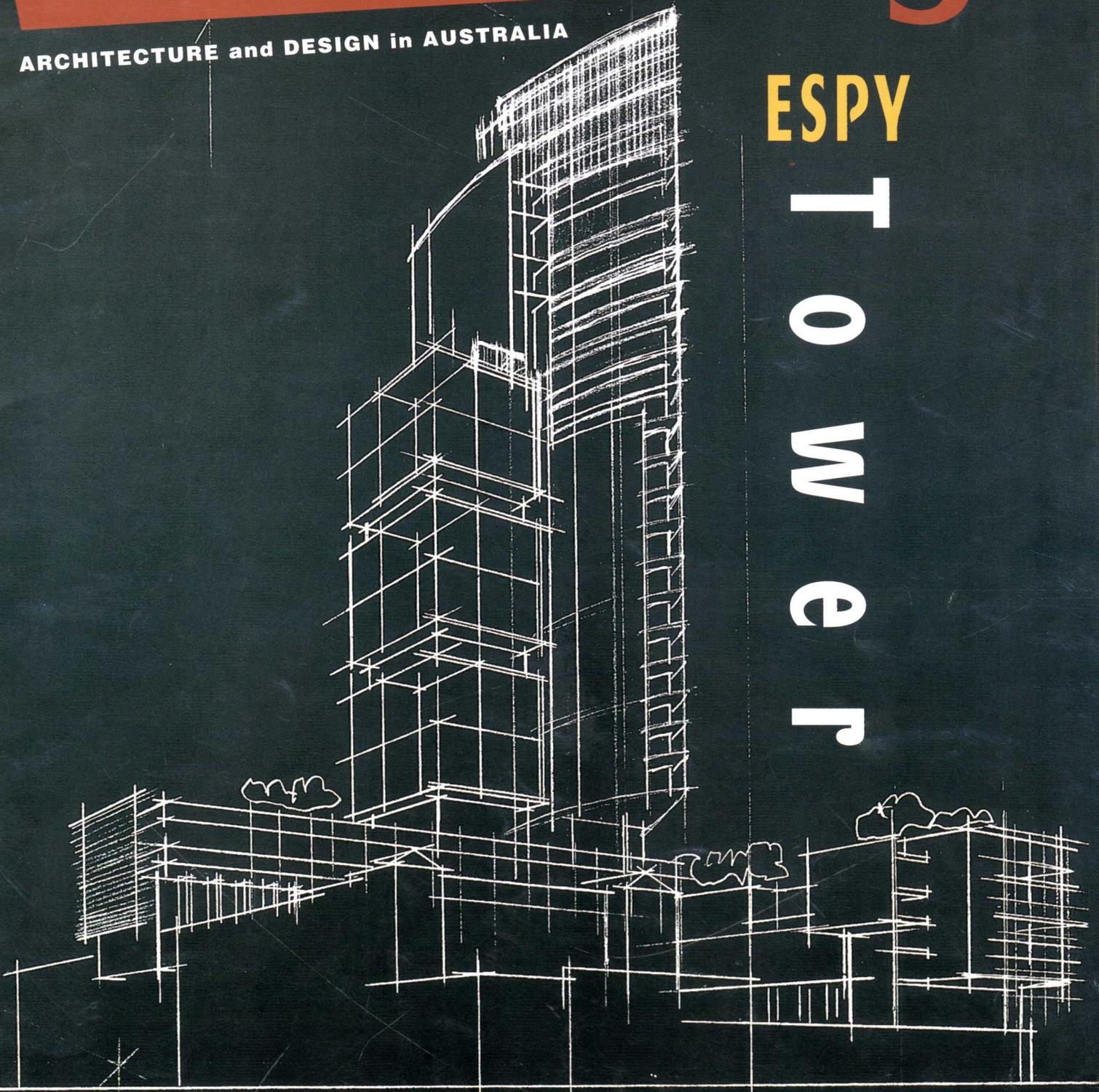


# ANTIPOD Design

ARCHITECTURE and DESIGN in AUSTRALIA

ESPY

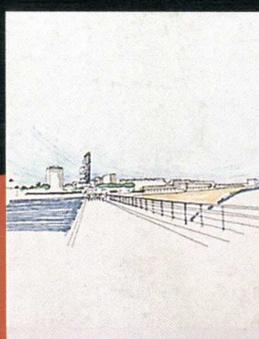
TOWER



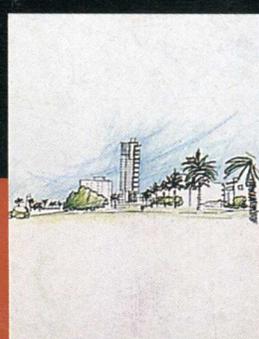
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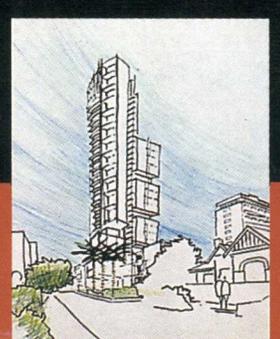
VICTORIA STREET TOWARDS BAY • 3



ST KILDA PIER TOWARDS SITE



ALFRED RESERVE TOWARDS SITE



VICTORIA STREET TOWARDS BAY • 1

The Acton Peninsula Project • Architecture on the Gold Coast • NAWIC News  
• RMIT Faculty of the Constructed Environment Alumni News



The winning proposal from St Kilda pier.

# at the Esplanade Hotel

Leon van Schaik • RMIT University



Nation Fender Katsalidis' proposal at street level on St Kilda's Upper Esplanade.

**THE** redevelopment of St Kilda's Esplanade Hotel is one of the hottest emotional issues on Melbourne's coolest strip. A decade ago, when cranes swept the City's skyline and no-one said 'no' to new development, the fight to stop the Espy being destroyed was long and bitter. But eventually the locals won and the developers went away with their tails between their legs. The objections then were based on aesthetic, cultural, social, and amenity grounds, with the locals arguing that the '87 proposal was grotesque in design terms, anti-social in urban design terms, that the old Espy (planned for demolition) was an important building in the area and in the local music and poetry scene, and that the shadows cast by the proposed tower would destroy the pedestrian environs around the site.

This time around, the developer is Becton and the proposal is the result of an architectural competition. The jury was chaired by the Minister for Planning in John Cain's Cabinet, Evan Walker, supported by Melbourne University's Haig Beck, Local hero/restraunteur/developer, Donlevy Fitzpatrick, and entertainer, Ronnie Burns.

# Becton's Tower

Becton partner, Hamish Macdonald, says it took the company nine months to decide to buy the site, “We didn’t need this in our lives. We knew it was a passionate part of Melbourne and bought it in the full knowledge that the site had a height limit on it. And also in the full knowledge that it was the one site where you could argue for height. It was a very considered decision.”

Having decided to buy it, Becton decided on an urban planning competition. They wanted to test the views of some key players in the architecture and development arena.

“The questions we posed were: ‘What do you think of this site and what can we do with it?’ We got a range of responses, but most said that it was the best site outside the CBD. Although Will Alsop’s design was over the top, he said it was the best site in Melbourne. Everyone came back with big proposals – eight out of the nine said that we could do something special and still maintain the Hotel.”

“Standing on the pier, you must be able to see the pub. I want this to be a work of art. I want to have the same reaction as when you see a Gaudi building and say, “No-one built that to make a buck. I want to have some fun at the base, but to do that you need some height. I like the juxtaposition on this site with a \$1m apartment on the top and all this other stuff at the bottom.”

“It’s the social tension which makes St Kilda so good – and I like that. I think, with the correct attention, we can produce a building that’s terribly vibrant and a real part of the place. Our task here is to differentiate ourselves from the commonly held perception of the developer.”

Will Becton succeed? Leon van Schaik, Dean of RMIT’s Faculty of the Constructed Environment, comments here on the competition, the difficulties, the site and the possible outcomes.

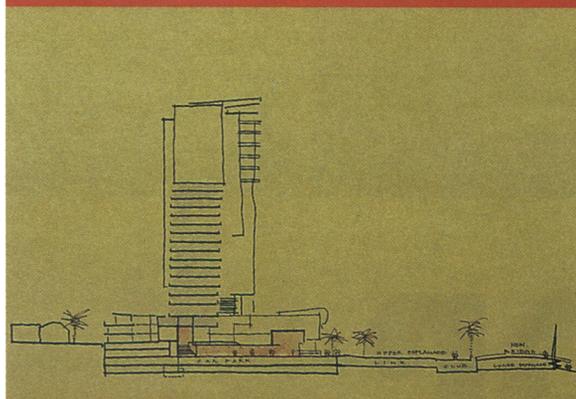
**BECTON** is a developer noted for its overt pursuit of excellence. This has led Becton into some needlessly conservative design, but not until now into controversy. I believe that the Tower design by Nation Fender Katsalidis (NFK) for

the Esplanade Hotel site on the St Kilda foreshore is an exemplary outcome to less than ideal circumstances. I take Becton’s part in this controversy, and this article explains why.

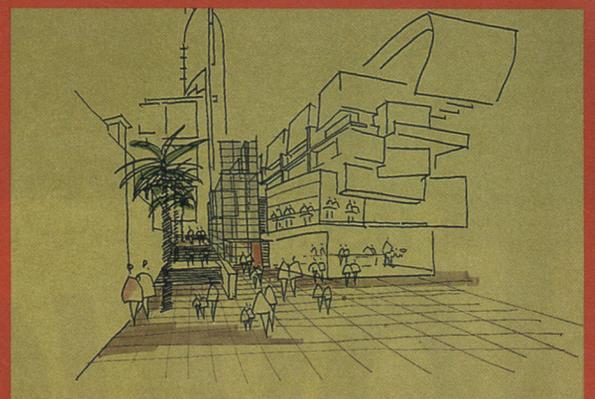
These circumstances have their origins in the development process of Melbourne, which is (as Brian McGoughlin pointed out in “Shaping Melbourne’s Future” CUP 1992) a ‘settlement’ process of survey, law and engineering. The first identified pieces of property, the second made it tradeable, and the third made it reachable and hygienically occupiable. The process did not and does not contain the means to over-arching visions of what a city should or could be.

The singularly primitive instruments possible within this framework promote an urban development process that can best be described as ‘churn’. As our research into the history of subdivision in Melbourne proved (38 South, RMIT 1991), the history of Melbourne is a history of painful establishment of environments of quality that then are overwhelmed by a second wave of development. This second wave capitalises on what has been achieved by the first, but also destroys what it admires. What conceivable meaning does the term the ‘Paris-end’ of Collins Street have today? Is not the destruction of St. Kilda Road’s mansions a loss that impoverishes this city? Why else do the authorities erect signs to tell us that it is a ‘Boulevard’? In this process of development signs and symbols constantly replace content.

Are there alternative modes of development? There are. Most of them are predicated on conditions unattainable in the New World. They require Imperial authority, like the boulevards of Haussmann, so much hated by contemporary Parisians; or the Bloomsbury Squares derided as sterile modernity by contemporary Londoners (and now lauded as the very model of the humane by conservative theoreticians like Scruton). Or they require the social ownership of land, like the magnificent parkland public housing at Roehampton in London. While social housing has often resulted in wonderful environments in Scandinavia, its mean application in Melbourne’s Housing Commission days gives it little credence here, even were we not so enslaved



NFK proposal north elevation

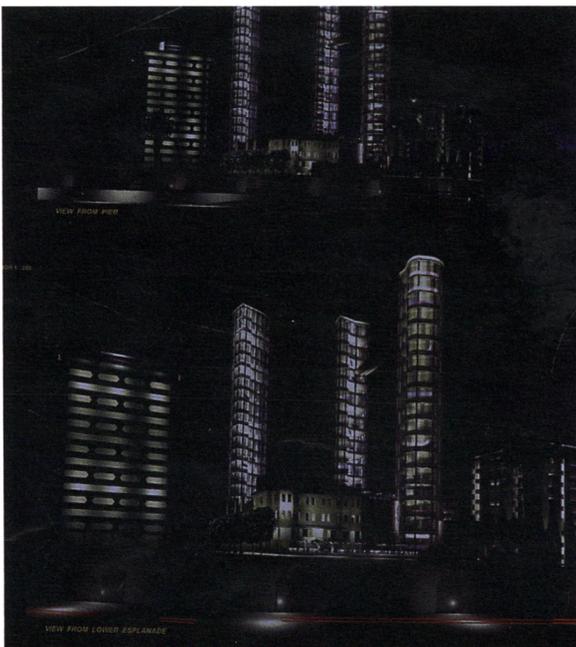


NFK proposal west elevation

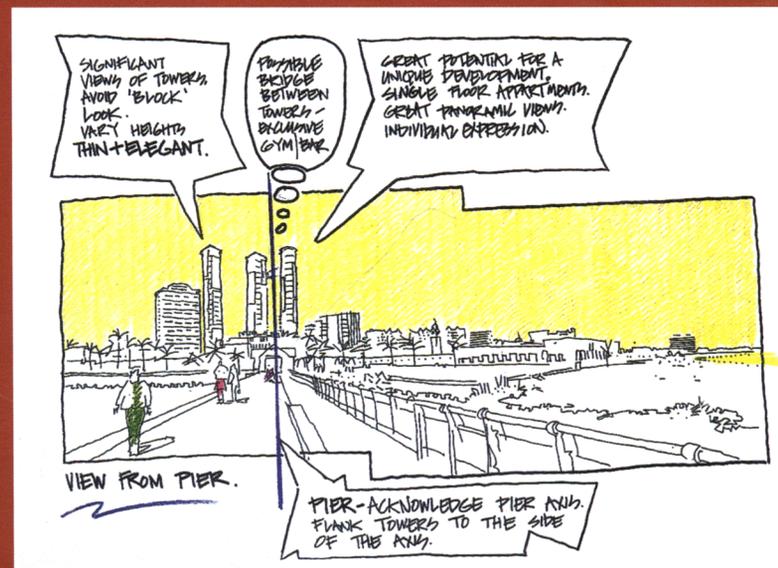
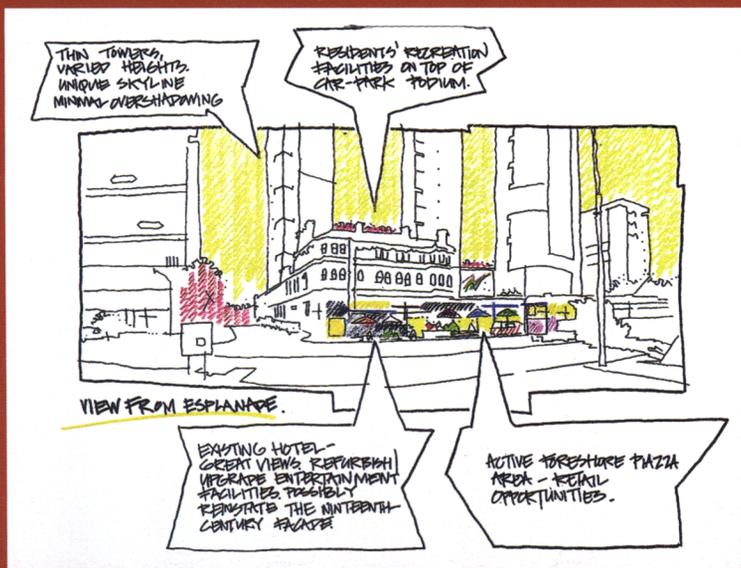
to the ideology of economic rationalism. Institutions in the New World do achieve urbanity, but usually through one person's vision, such as Jefferson's University and this does not persist from generation to generation. Australia lacks the wealth and the sensibility, it seems. Australia's most august institutions shun design. The ANU is a sorry place compared to what it otherwise emulates in Harvard and elsewhere.

So what could we hope for? The utilitarian vision embodied in the settler psyche of Australia locks it into a 'flatland' of undifferentiated mediocrity. Sensing that the city cannot spread indefinitely without loss of quality, Melbourne is given a Code that enables another wave of 'churn' through the mature gardens of its middle suburbs. Mediocre medium density results. We lose on both counts: the truly arcadian suburb is replaced by a degraded 'Town House' environment. Let us imagine what would have happened if Melbourne's leaders had taken note of the writings of Norman Cohn, Karl Popper and so many others who laboured to bring home to us all the lessons of this traumatic century. In embracing economic rationalism the New World has failed to heed their warnings about totalising systems, so it is not perhaps surprising that the New World has not considered the implications of their thinking for the form of the city. This thinking has been done, and in a magnificently accessible way, by Colin Rowe. (Koetter and Rowe Collage City 1986).

Colin Rowe worked to conceptualise a development process that would maximise choice in New World cities, and preserve choice in those of the Old World. This was a two-pronged intellectual project. One line of research carried on from Camillo Sitte the business of describing the rich variety of urban form invented in the Old World. The other line explored the ways in which choice could be introduced into the survey-grid cities and equal-opportunity speculative ethic of the New World. First Rowe had to convince that the richness of the old came about through a process of collage. Through time, very different urban forms have been brought into association with each other sometimes so violently as to be characterised by his student Grahame Shane as 'collision cities'. As in collage, however, each



Ashton Raggatt McDougall's proposal.



piece had to be large enough to have a recognisable identity of its own. The great cities of the Old World did not emerge through 'blending in'. Once people could see how the best of the old was a result of a rich contrast between ambitions and styles from different eras, Rowe moved on to define the politics that promoted such richness.

Heeding his mentors in social, political and economic theory he argued for cities composed of competing regions, each responsible for articulating an alternative future (a concept also formulated by Peter Hall). Each region would promote different ways of living in the city, and would be responsible for articulating 'local codes' that enshrined such difference (Michael Sorkin takes this proposition up in his book of that title). I always wanted to read Melbourne's 52 cities as such entities.

Workshop after workshop led by Rowe worked through city regions to promote an urban design of difference, and of maximum choice. His ideas are enshrined in Paris' La Defense strategy, which preserved the best of the old and provided a site for the creation of a continuously improving city of Towers. I am convinced that such difference is achievable in Australia. Were the best of what has been achieved kept for succeeding generations, and radical development strategies for new generations identified, we would be in a position to greatly enhance choice and access to quality urban environments.

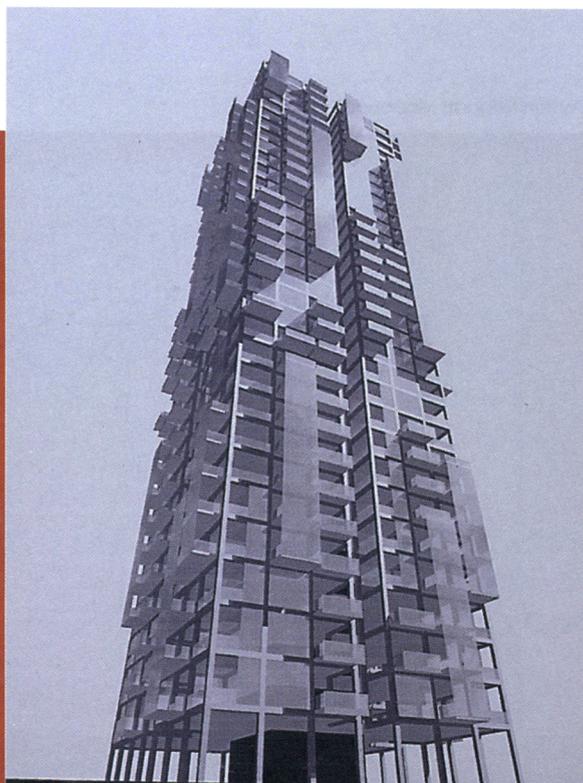
In such a scenario, Bayside Boulevards could be developed to the densities of Paris or Berlin in four storey apartments over shops and restaurants; greatly increasing access to urban locations that provide unique association with parks, river valleys, beaches – and to the amenities that density allows transport, services and café life. The mathematical modeling of Lionel Marsh has proved that linear and perimeter super block plans can accommodate far more than can towers. But, under such a scenario mini Manhattans add to the cityscape and provide another way of living.

Now to the Becton Tower. Becton took the exemplary route of a limited competition between some architects who promote distinctively different design

visions. On the way, those master strategists, ARM proved that a six storey perimeter block behind the Espalade Hotel could accommodate all the apartments in a tower; but they also demonstrated that the site was too small for this to happen in an acceptable way. They proposed three thin towers over a base at the scale of the Hotel, and were shortlisted for the final part of the competition with NFK. Presumably the costs of three lift towers ruled that out. The uniting of the Hotel with a base that places an outdoor café on the boulevard front, and respects the scale of the hotel was a common theme of the competition. DCM followed a similar route, but with a single slab block running across the site behind the Esplanade Hotel proper. They explored the shadow effect scrupulously. Alsop and Ramus floated a large pink bulbous form above a more substantial base, making allusions perhaps to St Kilda's fading bohemian role. Others tried further modishly fractured forms, but with less conviction. Nelson proposed a tower standing alongside the hotel, proving that to be a no-no.

What singles NFK's tower out is the way in which it seeks to minimise its overlooking impact on existing development by breaking up its apparent bulk. It also tries in this way to minimise overshadowing. Though there are some single storey houses nearby that are oppressed by every scheme. By the way, I am curious about the obsession with overshadowing in Melbourne. What seems to me to be vital for comfort in Melbourne is a good view of the sky. There is by all accounts too much sun and what we welcome at most times of the year is shade from ultra violet rays. This allows us to be out without slip slap slop. There are other micro climate benefits: when I lived at Nimmo Street in Middle Park, summer was made bearable by the way in which the westerling sun sank behind a tower in the late afternoon. The shadow from a tower is less oppressive than that from a continuous eight storey slab block.

The modelling of the base is also as responsive to its location as seems possible. Becton and its advisers have made a good choice. They are also working with precedent to confirm the St Kilda promontory as a mini-Manhattan. Would that this were one articulated choice between many. ▽



Denton Corker Marshall's proposal.