



Brumby banks on Yarra dream

Mike Edmonds

JOHN Brumby's plan to cover the Flinders St railway lines could reignite a debate that has been raging on and off for more than 150 years.

Questions of whether putting a network of railway tracks on the city's edge was a wise idea have been asked since the first sleeper was placed.

Princes Bridge was originally the terminus for trains from Epping and Whittlesea, and before 1859, when Princes Bridge station was built on Flinders St, the site had housed a police station and the city morgue.

As the rail system grew so did the ugly grid of tracks and overhead gear, which separated the commercial hub of the city from the nearby river and garden precinct.

In 1964, at 105 years old, Princes Bridge station was demolished to make way for two buildings that would spark bitter debate for the next 30 years.

The Gas and Fuel buildings, correctly titled the Princes Gate Towers and often dubbed an architectural crime, went up on the site.

Most who worked there loved the towers.

They were a short stroll from Melbourne's retail heart, hotels and cafes were right outside their front door, and their offices were on top of their transport home.

The Gas and Fuel buildings were designed by Melbourne architect Les Perrott.

He died in 2002, aged 75, but his legacy is still with us in the form of the Rialto Tower, the Hilton Hotel and Nauru House.

Mr Perrott's design for the brown Lego-block towers is defended these days as being in keeping with the architectural ideas of the time.

Along one side of the towers ran busy Flinders St with its trams and buses; underneath them the Princes Bridge train platforms were still in use and, at the rear between the towers and the Yarra River, Batman Avenue carried trams and cars from the city past the south side of the Jolimont yards.

The old Batman Ave is now empty of cars, the tram lines have been ripped up and the road transformed into part of Birrarung Marr along the river.

Tom Roper was Labor transport minister in 1987 when he tried to put an end to what he said was 50 years of debate about the railway yards.

He announced they would be sold for housing and other development, and all the trains moved out to a new super yard at Epping.

That was one of many plans never to see the light of day, although part of the land at the MCG end has been used for apartments.

In 1992 Melbourne architects Bill Kent and Noel Crossling suggested the rail yards be covered and a nine-hole golf course built on top.

They had Japanese backing for the plan, which included knocking storeys off the Gas and Fuel buildings and using the rest for the golf clubhouse, bars and restaurants. But the cost of roofing the yards hit that plan into a bunker.

Five years later the towers came down anyway to make

way for Federation Square.

Opened in October 2002, at a cost of more than triple the original estimate, Federation Square was bedevilled with controversy during building.

Federation Square architects Peter Davidson and Don Bates were upset by a state government decision to lower and turn side-on a glass shard because of fears it could detract from the view of St Paul's Cathedral.

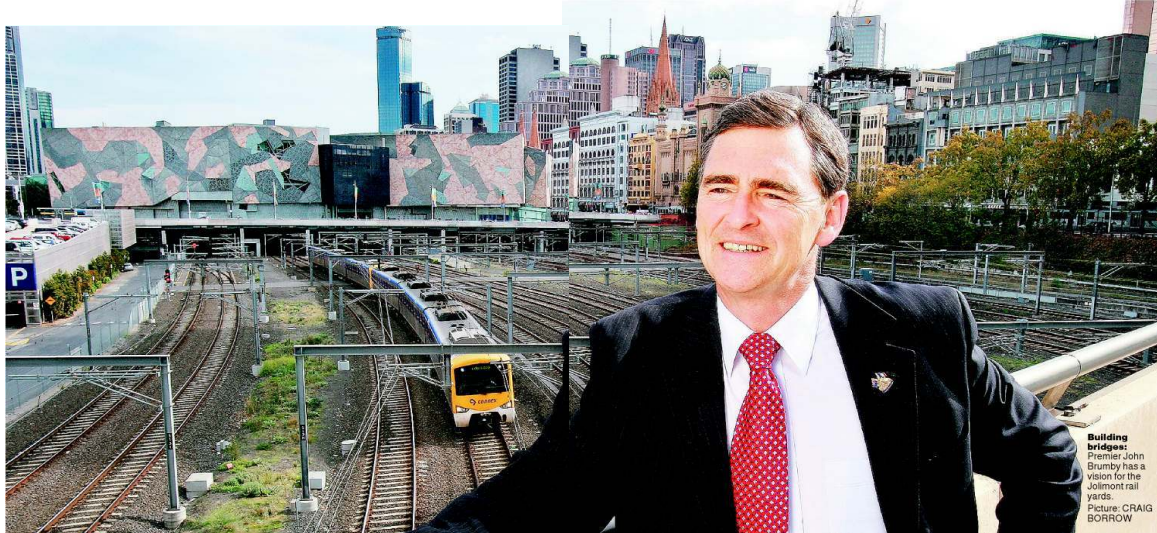
They believed they had won a worldwide competition in 1997 to design a landmark for Melbourne, and it should be built the way they designed it.

Now, the next step in the grand plan, Fed Square East, promises to be no less exciting than the first 150-plus years that led to Fed Square.

As recently as 2003 developer Daniel Grollo and Lord Mayor John So suggested decking the rest of the rail yards from Fed Square to Richmond for residential and commercial use.



Fed Square gurus: Peter Davidson and Don Bates.



Building bridges: Premier John Brumby has a vision for the Jolimont rail yards. Picture: CRAIG BORROW



“Many grand ideas have been put forward, such as roofing the area, but they have all faltered.”

– Tom Roper.

“The design has all the charm and appeal of Godzilla.”

– Opposition leader John Brumby, June 20, 1998

Left: Princes Bridge in 1958.

1800/1850 (approx)

Site used as a police station and later as the City Morgue.

1859 Princes Bridge Station built.

1964 Princes Bridge Station demolished
 Gas and Fuel Towers built.

1987 Labor Transport Minister, “Snappy” Tom Roper, tries to sell entire Jolimont rail yard area.

1992 Two Melbourne architects suggest roofing the rail yards and putting a nine-hole golf course on top.

1997 Gas and Fuel towers demolished to make way for Federation Square.

1997 Worldwide architecture competition gets 177 entries.

June 26, 1998 Premier Jeff Kennett and Lord Mayor Ivan Deveson unveil final design of Fed Square.

June 2003

Daniel Grollo (right) and John So suggest decking the yards from Federation Square to Richmond to create residential and commercial space.



“There are a lot of people who had doubts about Federation Square but the fact is the end result has been far better than what appeared on paper in the 1990s.”

– State Development Minister John Brumby, August 2003

“An odd assortment of boxes.”

Barry Humphries, August 2003.