Figure 13  The extent of the site for the Paris Exhibition, 1878.
Source: Reproduced from Victorian Icon: The Royal Exhibition Building Melbourne.

Figure 14  The Sydney Exhibition Building, 1876.
Source: Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.
The Melbourne exhibition was relatively modest in scale, but it was successful enough for such events to become a regular occurrence. Held every few years thereafter, the exhibitions became increasingly grander and larger.

In Europe, exhibition activity continued in Paris with the building of the Palais de l’Industrie in 1855 (Figure 10). This was followed by the London International Exhibition Building, erected in 1862, which has a central dome, arched entry, long nave and mansarded pavilions at either end (Figure 11). The building was designed by Captain Francis Fowke, an engineer and architect on the staff of the Department for Science and Art, who had already supervised the construction of the original Crystal Palace and had obtained further experience in Paris in 1855 where he was Secretary of the British section at the Exhibition. The exhibitions continued the themes of industry and invention, attracting manufacturing and commercial interests. Visiting exhibitions became a family affair, as the illustration in Figure 15 shows parents and children viewing the exhibitions.

Opportunities for merchandising were also capitalised on. Cafés at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1867 included Spanish, Swedish, Austrian, Turkish and Chinese (Figure 16). The invention of hydraulic lifts was demonstrated by carrying the visitors up to the galleries (Figure 12).

By 1878 exhibitions had become huge, as can be seen in the Paris Exposition site (Figure 13). Everything was under the one roof and arranged on a ground floor and gallery level. A building typology which emerged with Fowke’s London building of 1862 became more defined and developed in Paris in 1878 (this was subsequently to appear in the design of Melbourne’s Royal Exhibition Building).

The Antipodes were not far behind in their enthusiasm for exhibitions or their ability to stage them. Sydney built the first great exhibition building in 1879 for the Australian International Exhibition which lasted for six months (Figure 14). However, it was burnt to the ground in 1882 and many superstitiously thought that the fire was connected to the storage of convict files in the building. Melbourne was much luckier in its choice of exhibition sites and longevity of buildings constructed.

2.3 Melbourne Exhibitions Prior to 1880

For the 1861 Melbourne exhibition, the original ‘Crystal Palace’ in William Street required renovation and extension, and when the exhibition closed, the building was deemed to be too small for future use, and was demolished. When the next exhibition was held in 1866, a series of temporary annexes were erected in the grounds of the Public Library (now the State Library of Victoria) in Russell Street. This opportunity came about because Sir Redmond Barry, the founder and trustee of the library, had been an ardent supporter of Melbourne’s exhibitions since the first one was held in 1854.

The exhibitions of 1872 and 1875 continued to be held on the library site, with the latter necessitating the construction of further annexes. The 1875 exhibition was then the most successful exhibition to date, with over 240,000 visitors attending over the seventy-six days it was open. At the closing ceremony, Sir Redmond Barry announced that it would be the last at which he would officiate either as president or commissioner. He thanked the Trustees of the Public Library and Museum for making their premises available, but added that ‘such a concession could scarcely be made again’. He then suggested that ‘steps should be immediately taken to secure a site for the erection of a building in which future exhibitions might be held’.37
Figure 15  The exhibitions were a family affair, as depicted in this illustration of the London Exhibition of 1851.
Source: Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.

Figure 16  The Exhibition Hall in Paris, showing the exhibits from many countries 1867.
Source: Reproduced from Victorian Icon: The Royal Exhibition Building Melbourne.
Amid speeches of self-congratulation on the success of the 1875 exhibition, businessman and member of the legislative council, Caleb Joshua Jenner made the prophetic suggestion that 'Victoria should hold an exhibition to which the whole world should be invited'. Jenner anticipated the date for the next exhibition would be 1879, and saw no reason why, if the exhibition were properly managed, 'every country in the world should not be represented'. The purpose of holding an exhibition was twofold; it was not simply to sell things, but to symbolise, and thus disseminate, the ruling ideals of an industrial age. In addition, an exhibition was also a place for people to be seen.

2.4 Planning the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition

2.4.1 Choosing a Site

Beginning with the first Exhibition site in Hyde Park, London, in 1851, the requirement for exhibition sites became clear; it was a park setting and a prominent location – preferably close to the city centre. Several sites were reviewed in Melbourne and eventually the Carlton Gardens was chosen. The location was ideal: close to the city, on high land, and of adequate size. Negotiations with the City of Melbourne for the use of the gazetted Public Park resulted in an agreement in which public access rights were traded for an upgrade to the park landscape. The Council forfeited use of the whole park for the year-long period of the International Exhibition. In return for the use of the site, the Government undertook to substantially upgrade the park around the perimeter, in the south as part of the Exhibition, and after its completion, to restore the parkland in the north.

2.4.2 Victoria Opens Her Doors to the World

The need for a new purpose-built and permanent exhibition building in Melbourne coincided with a push for the first truly international exhibition in Australia. Although the first five Melbourne exhibitions were clearly modelled on the Great Exhibition, they were essentially colonial, or inter-colonial, in their scope. Planning for an international exhibition in Melbourne had been underway since 1877 and the proposed 1879 exhibition was carefully scheduled so that it closely followed major exhibitions to be held in Philadelphia (1876) and Paris (1878). In this way, it was envisaged, quite logically, that the various international exhibitors at these events could simply send on their exhibits for display in Melbourne in 1879. However, the plans for Melbourne's exhibition faltered amid political turmoil and Sydney held an exhibition in 1879 instead.

Meanwhile, the Victorian Commissioners to the Paris Exhibition enthusiastically felt that the time was indeed ripe for a major international exhibition in Melbourne. Melbourne, they extolled, was:

now the site of a populous and well-built city presenting all the evidences of wealth and civilisation taking rank with the foremost cities of the world. ... The rapid progress of Australasia is one of the marvels of modern times. But yesterday it was colonised by a few enterprising men, while to-day it possesses an extensive trade and a population of millions.41

The city was poised to be home to a 'palace of industry' which symbolically, and perhaps prophetically, marked the path down which Victoria's economic future was to march. The exhibition was envisaged as something of an interchange where Victorians, particularly, could display more of their arts and manufactures to an international audience, amongst
whom, it was anticipated, would be influential persons who would 'prove of great practical value' to the advancement and development of the colony on the international stage. The Victorian Commissioners saw the Paris exhibitors as a captive and receptive audience and they proceeded to invite the world to their doorstep.

2.5 A New Exhibition Building

2.5.1 The Proposal

By August 1877, three possible sites were being considered for the new exhibition building: Royal Park, Carlton Gardens, and an area south of the Yarra, where the Arts Centre currently stands. The City Council subsequently passed a resolution in favour of the 63 acre (25.4 ha) Carlton Gardens site. The next step was to push a bill through Parliament to allow for the official reservation of the site, as well as the appropriation of funds. It would also authorise the appointment of Exhibition Commissioners, who would have complete control before and during the exhibition, and Trustees, who would have control thereafter. The International Exhibition Bill, however, was first rejected by the Legislative Council, who viewed the proposal as needlessly extravagant, and at odds with their policy of supporting local manufacture in favour of imports.

Notwithstanding this setback, an architectural competition was launched for the new exhibition building in the Carlton Gardens. Eighteen entries were received and the three place winners were announced in May 1878: Reed and Barnes were awarded first prize (£600); Lloyd Tayler, second prize (£200); and Peter Matthews third prize (£100). Reed and Barnes (see Figure 17), were, at that time, Melbourne's most distinguished firm of architects and had entered under the aptly chosen pseudonym of 'Advance'. The core of their winning scheme was a large rendered brick building, cruciform in plan, that incorporated a range of Italian Renaissance and Gothic influences, including corner turrets, triumphal arch porticoes, and, most prominently, a vaulted dome modelled on that of Brunelleschi's Duomo in Florence. This main building was flanked by a pair of similar but lower annexes, with deep foundations to allow for the display of heavy machinery. The resulting U-shaped complex was to be the 'permanent' component of the exhibition, which could be retained for future use. It would be complemented by a massive configuration of temporary annexes that extended northwards.

With the building design more or less finalised, a second attempt was made in 1878 to pass the International Exhibition Bill through the Legislative Council. Earlier that year, two events had taken place which had considerably changed the social and political climate in Melbourne. First, ongoing animosity between the two houses of the Victorian Parliament reached its peak on 8 January, later dubbed 'Black Wednesday', when numerous legal officers, judges and civil servants were dismissed. Secondly, the publicity surrounding the Paris exhibition, and particularly the success of Melbourne's exhibits, renewed enthusiasm for a similar event in Melbourne. Not surprisingly, when the bill was read in Parliament for a second time in August 1878, it was finally passed.

2.5.2 Construction & Completion

The long-anticipated Melbourne International Exhibition was officially scheduled to open in October 1880. This allowed almost two years for the completion of the buildings and the laying out of the grounds. Tenders for the main building were called in December 1878, and the contract was awarded to prominent local builder David Mitchell.
Figure 17  Accepted design for the International Exhibition Building, by Reed and Barnes, 1878.
Source: Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.

Figure 18  Sir George Bowen laying the foundation stone of the Melbourne International Exhibition Building, 1879.
Source: Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.
The contract for the temporary annexes was awarded to another firm of builders, Walker and Holliday. Mitchell’s contract was signed on 3 February 1879, and the foundation stone was laid by the Governor, Sir George Bowen (Figure 18), sixteen days later amid much pomp and ceremony and the cheers of 10,000 citizens and dignitaries. Only a few weeks later, it was reported in the *Argus* that most of the foundations had already been laid.

Construction thereafter proceeded swiftly, with various revisions being made to the architects’ original design to further expedite prompt completion. While a contemporary measure of the rate of progress deemed it to be ‘at railway speed’, by current standards the rate at which the project proceeded must have been something akin to an express train.

The original buildings only provided for 243,658 ft\(^2\) (22,635 m\(^2\)) of space; but by mid-1879, the Commissioners already found they needed double that. This was progressively expanded as the demands made by overseas and local manufacturers grew. In February 1880, exactly one year after the contract was signed, the shell of the main building, with the exception of the dome, was completed. The temporary annexes at the rear of the site were also progressing well, with almost half of them ready for roofing. With the exhibition due to open in October 1880, in the early part of the year, more exhibition space was requested. The United States requested an additional 35,000 ft\(^2\) (3,251 m\(^2\)), and the British requested an extra 20,000 ft\(^2\) (1,858 m\(^2\)). Rather than turning anyone away, and motivated by the magnitude of the German and Austrian contribution, the Commissioners constructed more and more annexes. Success was on the verge of getting out of hand and ultimately 907,408 ft\(^2\) (84,298 m\(^2\)), almost four times as much as originally envisaged, was provided; a remarkable feat of construction and project management.

In addition, spaces outside were set aside for machinery and agricultural equipment, refreshment-rooms, kiosks, buildings showing the working of the Victorian school system, administration offices, for customs officers, police, a post-office, a hospital, retiring rooms, and sundry other facilities. The main building and the temporary display annexes eventually covered a substantial proportion of the 20 acre (8 ha) site located centrally in the Carlton Gardens, which had been reserved as a permanent exhibition ground, plus a substantial proportion of the northern area of the gardens (Figure 19). Despite the demands for space, the Exhibition Building was smaller than its overseas predecessors – the nave, set above large and capacious cellars, is 500 ft (152.4 m) long, while the top of the outside of the dome is 220 ft (67 m) above the ground. The viewing area (promenade deck), which still runs around the exterior of the dome, afforded views of Melbourne, the Bay and the surrounding country. It was one of the great attractions of the Exhibition. Originally there were steps up into the interior at all the entrances – they now only remain at the south and west, having been removed elsewhere presumably to facilitate vehicle entry.

### 2.5.3  *John Mather’s Decorative Scheme*

Once the building was constructed, no time was lost in decorating its interiors. Tenders were called in December 1879 and the contract was let early January 1880. John Mather, notable as an outstanding easel painter and artistic decorator, was the successful tenderer, putting in a bid of £4,700. The task of painting acres of ceilings and walls was enormous. Approximately 30 men painted in the nave, transepts and dome areas under the watchful and experienced eye of foreman James Paterson. Paterson’s first independent commission was at Kamesburgh, the mansion of Exhibition Commissioner William Thomson, JP, in Brighton. The murals were mostly left to Mather.
Figure 19  Plan of the 1880-81 Melbourne International Exhibition.
Figure 20 The dome of the Exhibition Building with Mather’s decorative scheme. Source: Reproduced from Victorian Icon: The Royal Exhibition Building Melbourne.

Figure 21 Remnant of Mather’s decoration in the dome. Source: Lovell Chen archives.
It is not known if the interior scheme was specifically based on earlier exhibitions (such as the 1862 London Exhibition), but given the influence of previous international exhibitions on Melbourne, earlier interior schemes may have been referenced. More generally, the fashion or preference for such elaborate schemes, including the use of figurative and allegorical decoration, was well established by the time of the 1880 Exhibition. J G Crace, a prominent London decorator, was responsible for the latter, and his scheme influenced a number of subsequent exhibitions (including the 1879 Exhibition in Sydney as well as the 1901 scheme in the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne, see Section 2.12.2 below). It has also been noted that Crace himself was influenced by Henry Cole and the circle associated with his school of design at South Kensington. This included techniques such as the use of painting to highlight structural elements within buildings (columns, dome, ceiling, etc); stencilled decoration for wall expanses; and figures emblematic of commerce, arts, sciences, etc.

Mather's scheme is known today from illustrations and written descriptions, and save for the dome was generally designed to provide a quiet and neutral background for the spectacular and brilliant exhibits. Sober tones of blues and greys produced a cool and light background which was embellished with borders, bands and friezes of abstracted floral and foliated forms in reds, white and greens. In the naves and transepts, interlaced designs of a Quattrocento or Renaissance in character were applied to the trusses, not too dissimilar from the 1901 decorative scheme which is visible today. Beneath the clerestory, the lining boards were panelled out while the columns below had capitals, friezes and dados which contrasted with the decorated cornices and balustrading along the balcony. At the back of the balconies were art galleries which, unlike the Crystal Palace, contained both plastik and fine arts.

The dome was painted to imitate a starry sky in a circle of clouds (Figure 20). High up in the dome the iconographic theme was unequivocally spelled out in an inscription which boldly began 'How manifold are Thy works, O Lord'. The edges of the dome arches were decorated in a guilloche pattern, similar to the 1901 decorative scheme, while the soffits and the upper wall spaces were articulated by a series of diapered rectangular panels. As a foil to the repetitive decoration in the nave and transepts, the lower section of the dome was a tour de force, alive with activity and allegorical images. The arch decoration was pure propaganda and self-promotion related to the arts, industry, science and agriculture and, importantly, Victoria's pivotal place as host nation on the world stage. On the north arch, a white-robed figure of Peace, who stood with outstretched hands to receive a laurel wreath and the exhibiting nations, was depicted 'introducing Science and Art to Victoria'.

Opposite, on the south arch, the visitors were depicted responding to Victoria's invitation: a costumed Arab, a pigtailed Chinese seated on a tea chest, an Italian with a lyre and palette, the Greek had manuscripts and broken statuary, while the Hindu knelt on an oriental carpet. Above the eastern archway, Science instructed the Arts, showing the progress of the modern world: torchlight gave way to gaslight, spinning wheels were supplanted by sewing machines and the electric telegraph superseded beacon signals, even William Caxton gave up the quill and hand press for something faster and more modern. It was a hive of industry.

By way of contrast on the western arch, Peace and Plenty rewarded 'Labour, Happy Youth and Contented Old Age'. Room was also found over the arches, for the arms of the exhibiting nations. Here the French caused a problem by not having any recognised coat-of-arms, so a shield with an encircling wreath of oak leaves was arbitrarily adopted and installed. At gallery level on the piers were panels contained allegorical figures of Manufactures, Commerce, Agriculture, Science, Painting, Music, Sculpture and Architecture. Even after this effort, Mather still mustered enough energy to enter a painting of a Gippsland
sunset in the Fine Art Section of the Exhibition. Nothing of Mather’s scheme remains visible today however, buried under subsequent over-painting, fragmentary sections remain in various areas. During the restoration work on the dome in the 1990s, a large section of the original scheme, containing laurel wreaths, was discovered in the interior of the dome drum (Figure 21). This is also no longer visible.

2.5.4  Henry Fincham’s Organ

Inside the main building, the west transept was being fitted out as a Concert Hall, with a huge pipe organ installed by the noted colonial organ builder, George Fincham (who was also a Commissioner of the International Exhibition). The organ, installed at the west end behind a stage, was at once graceful and imposing, forming a rich jewel-like element at the end of the nave. It contained 78 stops and 4,726 ft (1,440 m) of pipes and 651 sq ft (198 sq m) of reservoirs. It was larger than that in St Paul’s, London and cost £5,560 9s 0d. The guests enjoyed the power of the organ during the opening ceremony, in its accompaniment of hundreds of vocalists in a specially written cantata and rousing Hallelujah Chorus. Sadly, it progressively fell into disuse and was vandalised before being finally destroyed. One pipe remained downstairs in the Exhibition cellars, which is currently part of Museum Victoria’s collection. Other pipes are reputedly in private hands.

2.6  New Carlton Gardens: 1879 Onwards

2.6.1  Planning the Gardens

The overall configuration and planning of the 1879 design for the Carlton Gardens is attributed to Joseph Reed, of Reed and Barnes, who prepared plans as part of the original design (Figure 22). Core elements of the gardens scheme included the broadly symmetrical design, axial views, central focus on the building with the grand avenue approach, southern and eastern forecourts, and the site of the French and Hochgurtel Fountains. Swanson, in his 1984 Melbourne’s Historic Public Gardens: A Management and Conservation Guide, notes that it is probable that Reed and Barnes also advised the gardens sub-committee. Reed and Barnes’ landscaping contractor was the firm of Taylor and Sangster, of Toorak and Mount Macedon.

William Sangster was contracted to lay out the Carlton Gardens in 1880, and has been attributed with some rearranging. Sangster was responsible for the garden at Como, South Yarra, and for William J Clarke’s grounds at Rupertswood, Sunbury. Clarke, who was President of the Exhibition Commission, was criticised for employing friends and associates on Exhibition work. Sangster was responsible for laying out paths and flower beds, construction of the two lakes in the South Garden, selecting, supplying and placing the trees and plants, and maintaining the grounds until after the closure of the Exhibition in March, 1881. Garden historian, Georgina Whitehead suggests that Sangster’s love of the picturesque was antipathetic to the formal and Baroque design of the Exhibition Building, and he was not happy with all elements of the design.

2.6.2  Preparing for the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition

With the transfer of control of the site from the Council and Lands Department to the Exhibition Commissioners, the Carlton Gardens saw massive change. Two thirds of the site was completely obliterated by the construction of the Exhibition Building, leaving only the walk across the north of the site, and the bottom (southern) third of the Carlton Gardens.