Since the early 1980s Melbourne’s Lower Yarra River was used by the city’s noxious, manufacturing and maritime industries as a source of water, a convenient sewer, and main transport link with the outside world. By the 1890s the sluggish, meandering, and narrow Lower Yarra had been transformed into an industrial river. Major industries were scattered along its banks and the city’s main ports located along its lower reach. By 1980, many of these industries had, or were in the process of closing, while the port had consolidated further downstream. During this period of deindustrialisation Melbourne had largely ignored the Yarra; some commentators argued there was good reason for doing so. In its determination to improve the quality and public perceptions of the Lower Yarra, the Age newspaper launched a campaign to ‘Give the Yarra a go’. The campaign was claimed to be one of the paper’s most successful, and resulted in major changes that fed into the river’s post-industrial transformation. This paper examines the context and background to the campaign, its results, and continuing legacies. It also examines the question – does Melbourne’s CBD remain with its back to the river, or has it finally become a riverside city?

**Keywords** — Melbourne; Industrialisation; Lower Yarra River; The Age newspaper

**INTRODUCTION**

Melbourne has rarely, if ever, been perceived as a riverside city. Instead it has commonly been viewed as a city with a river flowing through it. This river, the Yarra, initially valued by the early European settlers as the only substantial source of flowing fresh-water in the area, had its lower reach rapidly transformed into an industrial river, from the late 1830s following the city’s establishment. From the mid-1840s onwards the Lower Yarra became renowned as a putrid, malodourous, highly polluted, working river. Vital for servicing the industries scattered along its lower reach, the Yarra also served, although somewhat inadvertently, as the city’s main sewer and provided a key route for communication and trade with the outside world. By the 1970s Melbourne as an industrial centre was in decline, the Lower Yarra dotted with decaying remnants of the former celebrated age of industrialisation and the wealth it created. Melbourne remained a city with a river flowing through it: a neglected and polluted river that looked little more than a large open stormwater drain. One of the most exposed sections to public view, silently flowing ‘upside down’ along the southern edge of Melbourne’s central business district, was just behind Flinders Street Railway Station. This image changed however for a period of six months in 1980. From February to August of that year Melbourne was perceived as a riverside city, and the Yarra a degraded waterscape in need of a renaissance. So, who or what was responsible for this brief shift in the population’s perceptions of the Lower Yarra?

Melbournians reawakened to the Yarra on the morning of the 23rd February 1980, when the Age Newspaper published
the first in a series of articles under the campaign title of ‘Give the Yarra A Go’. The campaign commenced with the publication of the first article written by the then editor Michael Davie under the by-line “TODAY ‘The Age’ opens a campaign to restore the Yarra to the people” (Davie 1980 p.3). A brave statement, considering that by 1980 the Yarra had suffered over 100 years of use and abuse as an industrial river, and was the object of critical remarks. The campaign was indeed a daring endeavour considering it was launched against a history of such disparaging descriptions of the Yarra as: “It is the filthiest piece of water I ever had the misfortune to be afloat on…” (Goudie 1894, p.42). Despite being acclaimed as one of the age’s most successful local campaigns that led to a range of projects and restoration works, there is little mention of it within the literature (Smith 2004). At the time of writing it appears the campaign has received minimal research and analysis.

This paper examines the campaign using newspaper archives, journal articles and books on associated histories of the Lower Yarra, organised in four sections: establishing a history of how and why the Yarra was perceived as a blight on Melbourne’s urban fabric leading up to the campaign; the campaign itself; responses and outcomes; and, ongoing legacies.

Figure 1. The Lower Yarra - the focus of the Give The Yarra A Go Campaign

THE LOWER YARRA RIVER: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND A HISTORY OF INDUSTRIAL USE

The Yarra’s condition from the late 1840s until 1907 largely shaped Melbourne’s psyche regarding the river, as newspapers provided graphic descriptions of its condition and contents. For example, on 8 April 1881, during a flourishing period of industrialisation along the Lower Yarra, the Health Committee of the City of Melbourne inspected the reach to determine the causes of pollution entering the river (The Argus, 8 April, 1881, p.7). The tour commenced just above Dights Falls, viewing and smelling such horrific sights as solid waste from abattoirs being sent into the river and patches of thousands of thread-like worms along the banks amongst fetid heaps of pollution. Further downstream the committee observed: dead animals caught in trees from recent flood flows; various drains discharging thick, black putrid plumes; refuse and foul runoff from the City of Melbourne’s Corporation Tip, adjacent to Princes Bridge where the tour ended (The Argus). On the 16th April, the committee resumed its tour from Princes Bridge going downstream, “to discover a state of affairs disgusting in the extreme” (The Age, 16 April, 1881, p.6). Along this section of the Yarra the committee members noted discolouration of the water due the entire drainage of the city entering the river. They observed numerous animal carcasses floating in the water, while experiencing a succession of odours and witnessing discharges from boilings-down establishments, soap-works, abattoirs, wool-washers and the gas works. All sites had adjacent stagnant and putrid marshes that when full, flowed into the river (The Age, 16 April, 1881).

Located along the river bank between the noxious industries was a range of maritime and engineering workshops and manufacturing establishments (Parsons 2009). Due to the continual threat of flooding, land along the Lower Yarra had been reserved by the crown, with the government encouraging industry to develop it for minimal rents (Parsons 2009). This was the case for large sections along the Lower Yarra’s banks, the river providing an access route for materials and goods, a free water-supply, and a method of cheap waste disposal (Parsons 2009). In 1907 the Lower Yarra, downstream of the city was described by the Australian Town and Country Journal as a hive of maritime and industrial activity. The journal noted several areas containing great piles of coal along the river bank, and numerous timber yards, spread along a “plain, hard worked, business like looking stream” (Australian Town and Country Journal, 22 May, 1907, p.28).

A defining moment for Lower Yarra, indeed the entire river within the metropolitan region, occurred in 1923 with the passing of the Metropolitan Drainage and Rivers Act. This legislated responsibility for all of Melbourne’s watercourses to
By 1926, however, the roots of discontent regarding the condition of the Lower Yarra were being expressed from a range of sources. The noted surveyor, town planner, and commissioner of the Melbourne Metropolitan Town Planning Commission, Saxil Tuxen, wrote “What We Might Do with the Yarra” published in the Melbourne Herald. Tuxen stated: “We have in the Yarra a priceless possession, if only we wake up to the best way to utilise it” (Tuxen 1926, p.17). His displeasure at the treatment of the river was manifest in the commission’s 1929 Plan of General Development Melbourne. The plan proposed utilising land along the Lower Yarra, from the city onwards for a system of parkland and parkway drives (Metropolitan Town Planning Commission 1929). The commission also proposed all land along watercourses be reserved for public use and returning privately owned land to public ownership (Metropolitan Town Planning Commission 1929). The location of parkland and promenade drives (a forerunner to parkways) along the Yarra had first been achieved upstream of Princes Bridge with the construction of Alexandra Avenue, over the period 1896-1901 (Bourke 2016).

Although much of the commission’s parks plan was not adopted, it became the basis for development of future parkland and the Yarra Boulevard that traverses sections of the Lower and Middle Yarra from the city to the suburbs of Kew and Ivanhoe, upstream of Dights Falls (Lay 2003). Due largely to the onset of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Town Planning Commission’s larger vision for Melbourne’s watercourses was not realised, the Lower Yarra continuing to flow as an industrial river. Discontent with its treatment continued to be published. For example, an article in the Argus in 1938 stated:

“Our lack of ‘a river sense’ is deplorable. We are a practical people, and place utilitarian considerations all too far ahead of those aesthetic. Hence do we still fail to realise all that the Yarra should mean to us.”

(De Castella 1938 p.3).

De Castella went further adding that ‘river sense’ could be nurtured by the creation of a Yarra League to promote improvements to river quality. In 1946 the passing of the South Melbourne Land Act 1946 that reserved land for a national gallery and cultural centre just south of Princes Bridge signified the beginning for development of Melbourne’s cultural and later arts and entertainment precincts (Fairfax 2002).

By the 1950s the city section of the Yarra remained the focus of anxiety for all. Despite decades of proposals and promises to clean up and beautify the river, it remained part of Melbourne’s industrial infrastructure. In 1951 a meeting of the city planning bodies was proposed to address the development and beautification of the river’s city reach (Age 1951). Following a fire that destroyed wharf sheds on the northern bank, the Parks and Gardens Committee of the Melbourne City Council reported desiring “this backward part of the city improved” calling for the formation of an overall development plan (Age 12 April 1951, p.5). The chairman of the town planning and traffic committees, Councillor Hume, called for the bridging over of the Yarra from King to Spencer Streets with a superstructure floating on pontoons to create a large area for carparking space, (Age 12 April 1951). In 1954, in a letter to the editor of the Age, W Bell reflected on how open-air cafes and riverside tea gardens should be developed along the Yarra’s banks, re-imagining the river in a similar way to the Seine in Paris, to attract locals and visitors (Age, 20 March 1954). Bell’s vision was never realised despite the opening of the National Gallery in 1968 within proximity to the river. The gallery was followed by the concert hall in 1982, and theatre complex in 1984, all designed to face away from the Yarra (Sandercock and Dovey 2002). The siting of the buildings, and disregard of the river, further enforced and reflected the deep-seated perceptions of the Yarra as an embarrassment, daring to flow past the city’s new cultural precinct.

The 1970s brought more public condemnation of the Lower Yarra as evident in an article published in the Canberra Times (1971). Journalist Rohan Rivett stated: “For its last dozen miles the Yarra 1970 is a filthy, bacteria laden, polluted, noisome sludge. Great stretches are entirely without fish…” (Canberra Times 21 March 1970, p.14). In addition to the ongoing pollution problems, the Lower Yarra had also been victim to deindustrialisation, resulting in many empty and derelict industrial sites and abandoned shipping facilities, due to relocation of the main port further downstream, scattered along the Lower Yarra’s banks. In response, the Lower Yarra Study was released in 1978 outlining opportunities for redevelopment along the river, with the aims of improving river health and enhancing its recreational role (Llewelyn-Davies Kinhill Pty Ltd. Et al. 1978). A concept report followed in 1981 that recommended the transformation of the former working river into an urban river (Kinhill Pty. Ltd Et al. 1981). This composed of improving public access along the river banks with paths linking with the existing urban fabric and to future redevelopments, and creation of areas for passive recreation along the river banks (Kinhill Pty. Ltd. Et al. 1981). The report failed to address any aspects or improvement to river health or quality, citing any strategy for the Lower Yarra was constrained by the river’s main functions as a stormwater drain and use as major port and shipping channel (Kinhill Pty. Ltd. Et al. 1981). Despite proposing transformation from an industrial to urban river, the Yarra’s main utilitarian functions were to remain paramount against all else.

THE CAMPAIGN

The campaign “Give The Yarra A Go” was launched against this history of over 100 years of suggestions and plans for improvement, as well as an industrial river. It sought to seize and capitalise on the public’s emotions contained in the perceptions, attitudes, plans, descriptions and jokes in attempting to stir interest in the river’s current condition and future plight (Melbourne Age 1980). It was envisaged the campaign would also lead to improving the Yarra’s health, quality and overall image with the wider population of Melbourne (Melbourne Age 1980). In a radio interview in 2004 former Age editor Michael Smith identified the Give the Yarra A Go campaign as one of The Age’s most successful local campaigns within the last 50 years, and claimed it led to the rehabilitation of the river (Smith 2004). Despite this credit, the campaign has received very little attention within the literature, except for occasional mention as being a major driver for gaining government support and cooperation in addressing the restoration of the river. Overall to date, it appears to have been the focus of only minimal research and analysis and has not been replicated to the same degree by other media outlets. Given its reported success, this type of campaign may suit a range of other urban environment issues and certainly other urban rivers.

In the first article to launch the campaign, editor Michael Davie advocated that the Yarra should be as important to Melbourne as the Seine is to Paris, and claimed Melbourne’s only natural asset was the victim of immense inertia existing between it, the people, and the inattention of management authorities (Davie 1980). He also identified the Yarra as being the “playground” of over 30 government authorities concerned with administration of the river and singled out the MMBW for officially referring to the river as a ‘drain’ (Davie 1980 p.3). Due to the public apathy and bureaucratic complexities of management authorities, the campaign aims were developed to be entirely practical, achievable, and inexpensive to implement (Davie 1980). Six main aims were developed: conversion of Batman car park into a garden (located directly across the Yarra from the current casino site); bringing back the boats (in the form of small public pleasure craft); development of a maritime park around the Polly Woodside (a National Trust classified three-masted sailing barque dating from 1885, now docked permanently at the South wharf complex); improve the Yarra’s water quality; construction of a path along the river between the city and Dights Falls; and converting the river and its banks into a river park, managed by a single authority (Davie 1980). Overall, the Age sought to provide improved public access and recreational space along and within the Lower Yarra, and to stop pollution from entering the river (Brown et al. 2007).

Throughout the campaign period, the Age published in excess of 40 items including editorials, articles written specifically on the individual aims and the progress towards their achievement, and letters to the editor (Melbourne Age 1980). Although several journalists provided articles, the main contributions were written by Age journalists John Larkin and Peter Ellingsen (Melbourne Age 1980). Their articles contributed and revealed a range of otherwise unknown or misrepresented information regarding the Lower Yarra. For example, by the end of the 1970s, according to Larkin...
and Ellingsen, Melburnians adamantly believed the Lower Yarra to be only an industrial or utilitarian river with its condition considered to be putrid at best, or lifeless at its worst (Larkin 1980, Ellingsen 1980). However, contrary to these entrenched beliefs, Larkin reported since the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1973 the Lower Yarra was significantly cleaner than 10 years previous with reported sightings of birds, fish, and smaller animals returning to the river’s habitats (Larkin 1980). Regarding the belief that the Lower Yarra was only an industrial river, Ellingsen reported a recent study commissioned by the MMBW that identified the Lower Yarra as primarily a resource for recreation, despite most of its length being “hidden” from view and inaccessible to the public. This was due to no formal paths or access points along much of the river (Ellingsen 1980).

Other information published about the Lower Yarra informed the public of the lack of accountability towards the river from various government authorities. An example of the bureaucratic playground described above by Davie (1980) was provided in an article by Ellingsen. The example he cited, typical of many sites along the river, involved the river’s most famous frontage along the northern bank, bordering Melbourne’s central business district (Ellingsen 1980). Although only a narrow strip of land it had become a rubbish dump and haven for rats (Ellingsen 1980). The Melbourne City Council and Victorian Railways both disowned the land, while the MMBW claimed train cleaning staff used the area for rubbish dumping. In an interview, a railways representative flatly denied their ownership of the land and the dumping (Ellingsen 1980). Upon researching the area Ellingsen discovered the railways had controlled the land for over 100 years, while the 1956 MMBW planning scheme had reserved the land for a secondary road (Ellingsen 1980). He suggested if the outdated and undesirable plan were abandoned, the river frontage could be planted with tall native trees to improve river vistas and screen the railway yards (Ellingsen 1980).

Although receiving letters from members of the local population, the campaign also roused the interest of visiting Professor in Landscape Architecture, Roger Martin, from the University of Minnesota, USA. He asserted the campaign was of great significance occurring at a time when economic and political issues globally were placed above the environment (Martin 1980). Martin also thought Melbourne was unique to have such a resource as the Yarra so close to the city’s core. Martin’s comments and Ellingsen’s example of disputed land ownership, captured the campaign’s main foci of valuing a natural resource so close to the centre of Melbourne, and acknowledging the river’s own identity and the need to be managed separately.

**Responses and Outcomes**

The media engagement and public interest created by the campaign resulted in a prompt response from the Victorian State Premier, Mr Rupert Hamer. In an article published on 8 March, just 12 days after the campaign commenced, Larkin and Ellingsen reported the State Government had agreed to commence a revitalisation of the Lower Yarra from Dights Falls to Hobsons Bay (Larkin and Ellingsen 1980). Hamer also remarked the proposals were well within the government’s capacity to deliver and pledged financial support and cooperation to achieve the six campaign aims (Larkin and Ellingsen 1980). Rupert Hamer was the state premier from 1972 until 1981, and was widely praised for his policy priorities focused on quality of life, concern for the environment and social justice (Colebatch 2015). During his term, Hamer was instrumental with the MMBW in establishing a metropolitan park system, that included the rehabilitation of a range of floodplain sites and improvements to the health of upper reaches of the Maribyrnong and Yarra rivers (Dingle and Rasmussen 1991).

By mid-March the government had set up a task force to recommend new planning controls for all of Melbourne’s watercourses, including the Yarra, and was considering the MMBW the most suitable authority to assume control for all planning and management of the Yarra (Skelton 1980). In an interview with Larkin and Ellingsen on the 8th March, Hamer not only stated full support for the six campaign aims, he was also able to detail what steps had already been taken, and had some initial responses. For example: negotiations had commenced with Melbourne City Council on developing Batman Park; and a feasibility study into developing a path along the river was in the process of being established (Larkin and Ellingsen 1980). The final article published on the 4th August reported the government had formed a Cabinet sub-committee, the Lower Yarra Advisory Committee, to control the Lower Yarra and monitor the restoration of the river (Ellingsen and Larkin 1980). Creation of the committee was a recommendation of an initial task force set up by Hamer to investigate the Lower Yarra, its creation a direct result of the Age’s campaign (Larkin and Ellingsen 1980). In effect the restoration of the Lower Yarra, from the wider effects of deindustrialisation and history of neglect and negative perceptions, commenced in earnest, initially by focusing the public’s and government authority’s attentions towards the river as a valuable, though wasted resource for Melbourne.

**Ongoing Legacies**

An article published in the Age, on the 14 January 1981, one of the final reporting on the campaign, highlighted its results and effects almost a year from its launch. Ellingsen and Larkin reported a three-million-dollar restoration plan for the Lower Yarra. The plan included landscaping along the banks, development of Batman park, and redevelopment of the former South Wharf area to include a maritime park (Larkin and Ellingsen 1981). In addition, the first stage of a path connecting the city with Dights Falls was under construction and legislation was being drafted that would make the Board of Works chiefly responsible for the Lower Yarra. The article further stated the campaign aims of improving water quality and provision of facilities for small boats had not been accomplished due to inactivity of the authorities and a lack of staff and funding (Larkin and Ellingsen 1981). By 1985 a range of projects involving many of Melbourne’s watercourses stemming from the campaign were completed including: construction of Melbourne’s main cycle and walking trail network along the Yarra and its connection along other watercourses; and funding for programs to restore watercourses across Melbourne (Brown et al. 2007).

The idea of opening the Yarra to public access became a dominant concept behind early proposals for redeveloping the Yarra’s city reach. From the early 1980s a range of proposals were developed that focused on the river and creation of a lively, open, public waterfront with high to medium rise buildings for retail, residential and commercial development, all facing the river (Dovey and Sandercoc 2005). The results were a range of projects including South Gate, the casino precinct and South Wharf. Although the Age envisaged public access to and along the Yarra, sections remain privately controlled, such as the riverside promenade used to attract consumers for shopping, dining, and entertainment into privately owned businesses (Dovey 2005). The waterfront theme was also carried into the redevelopment of Docklands, commencing during the 1990s, with a range of apartment proposals designed to face the river and create another riverside promenade (Dovey 2005).

In 2002 the completion of Federation Square and the adjacent riverside park, Birrarung Marr, on former railway yards, was heralded as linking the city with the Yarra (Brown-May and Day 2003). The railway yards had been perceived as separating the city from the river (Brown-May and Day 2003). However, like the siting of the earlier art gallery, theatre and concert buildings, the square also faces away from the river. Rather than following the legacy of Giving the Yarra A Go, the legacy of over 100 years of the perception of the river that flows upside-down appears to continue.

Although the Age’s campaign largely activated the restoration and renewed appreciation of the Lower Yarra, the river remains at the back of Melbourne, with limited access for intimate contact with its water. It is largely a backdrop and used as an aesthetic attraction for the arts, entertainment, shopping and gambling precincts lining the city reach of its southern bank. An article published in the Herald-Sun on 26 September 2017 reported the removal of over 40 hire bikes from the city section of the river (Royall 2017). While no longer a receptacle for industrial waste, the river’s use as a dump, for some it appears, continues. Although public perceptions were challenged and changed by the campaign, from this brief analysis, despite the Age’s gallant attempts to transform Melbourne into a riverside city, it generally remains as a city with a river flowing through it, and not a riverside city.
**Conclusion**

Following a history of use and abuse as an industrial river and the city sitting with its back to the Lower Yarra, the Age’s Give The Yarra A Go! campaign, highlighted its condition and public perceptions following the effects of deindustrialisation. A range of improvements to the river were active by the campaign, that were supported by a Premier and government sympathetic to the rivers plight. The campaign also initiated the first riverside path that was developed into a network of trails connecting along many of Melbourne’s watercourses. However, it was less successful in changing Melbourne into a riverside city, as evident from the siting of Federation Square, facing away from the river. Melbourne then remains a city with, a much improved, river flowing through it. The Age’s campaign although published 37 years ago still has great relevance for integrating the Lower Yarra further into Melbourne’s urban fabric.

**References**


De Castella, F., 1938. The Yarra as it might have been. Argus, Saturday 15 October 1938, p.3.


Kinhill Pty Ltd., University of Melbourne Centre for Environmental Studies & Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works., 1981. Lower Yarra concept plan. Melbourne: S.N.


Tuxon, S., 1926. What We Might Do with the Yarra. Herald, Saturday 27 November 1926, p.17.