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With car manufacturing gone and the submarine business looking shaky, South Australia is a state in need of an industrial transfusion. HASSELL

Adelaide is spending big on arts infrastructure – but who benefits?

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Somewhere in a private collection are Don Dunstan's pink shorts. It says a lot about the standing of South Australia's legendary premier that relics of his clothing are kept for veneration (sorry, "research"). But the whole of downtown Adelaide is a reminder of his dream of a city uniting its past with its future, its industry with its leisure, its secular with its spiritual self.

And without doubt the centrepiece is the Adelaide Festival Centre, opened in 1973, a few months before the Sydney Opera House, and no less iconic:



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The riverbank location of the Festival Centre offers one of the best city views in Australia. To the north, the river Torrens winds out of sight. Below, sits Elder Park. The opening night of the 2015 Adelaide Festival, held there, included fireworks and the launch of *Blinc*, an outdoor exhibition:

of unprecedented scale and significance, that transform[ed] [the] surrounds into a giant spectacular outdoor digital art gallery.

It attracted a large and diverse audience who ran through the nooks and crannies of the Festival Centre to check out digital displays in 11 locations, including the concrete shells of the massive roof.

This was Dunstan's vision for South Australia: "the Festival State". And while it has modified in particulars since the kaftan-and-key-party-era, it remains a compelling way of seeing a region that has done the hard yards in recent years.

Last week's announcement by Premier Jay Weatherill of A\$90 million in government funding for a Festival Centre and plaza redevelopment should be seen as a continuation of that vision.

The plan, which includes a revamped Convention Centre, a 24-storey office tower, a new 1,000-space carpark and a mooted casino redevelopment, is designed to "to better leverage [the] riverbank location".

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... And in the future. An artist's impression of the development. HASSELL

It comes off the back of a recent upgrade to the Adelaide Oval – A\$535 million committed by the government in 2009, with final costs around A\$610M – and the new River Torrens Riverbank Precinct Pedestrian Bridge.

Hard at work on the riverbank

But bureaucrats have been hard at work on this site for a while. In 2013, Weatherill announced a Greater Riverbank Implementation Plan. And before that, in 2010, the Rann government released a fly-through of *their* plans for the precinct.

Some things fall apart. Others fall down. Herein lies the pressing need for building renovation. As anyone who has recently used the Festival Centre's toilets might guess, there hasn't been significant investment in its facilities since the 1970s.

Its management are no doubt both pleased and relieved they finally have the money to improve the centre's façade, playing spaces and technical equipment, as well as create new entrances on the riverbank side.

“The whole precinct redevelopment will provide a sweeping multi-purpose plaza seamlessly linking Elder Park and the Riverbank Footbridge to the Adelaide Railway Station and North Terrace,” the Chair, Michael Abbott, recently wrote. As is to be expected, some of the main users of the Festival Centre – the State Theatre, the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra and the Adelaide Festival – are enthusiastic in their support.

You can take a virtual tour and get a sense of how the new plaza and its surroundings might look. It’s potentially a clever piece of private-public partnering, the state government working with the developer Lang Walker to “unlock” capacity in the site.

More infrastructure spending means a new carpark, which means a new casino, which means more revenue, which means more infrastructure spending – and so on.

What all this will cost bounces up and down like a squash ball. A rumoured A\$1 billion figure quickly reduced to A\$800 million-plus, with the Walker Corp contributing A\$430 million, and another A\$350 million to be privately sourced for the casino development.

Who benefits from this redevelopment?

A major concern is striking a balance between public and private use.

Tim Horton, the former Integrated Design commissioner, commented that the current plan is “tripling the retail, it doubles the commercial and it seemingly halves the public space”. Maybe. But the wilderness of shabby concrete that comprises the plaza now requires re-imagining.

The devil is in the detail, and the public consultations that will take place are something all Adeladians, be they culture buffs, sports fans, shopaholics or riverbank strollers, should take seriously.

But as the rhetorical dust settles two broad points can be made in respect of what is being called, non-ironically, “the master plan”. The first is that while creating precincts is fun, how they will be used also requires thought. With car manufacturing gone and the submarine business looking shaky, South Australia is a state in need of an industrial transfusion.

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An artist’s impression of the future development. HASSELL

Tourism and visitor numbers are a serious matter here, and part of the attraction of the plaza redevelopment is it will give interstaters somewhere to come to and provide for events they might want to see. But how will this work exactly?

How will the users of the revamped venues use the venues? Will they be accessible? Will they be affordable? What portion will be assigned for “home” use, what portion for outside events?

Does it matter? Yes it does, if Adelaide isn't to become a giant shop window for other people's culture; if it is to have an artistic heart of its own.

The second point relates to the dark art of economic forecasting. The claim has been made that the redevelopment project will add 1% to South Australia's GDP. Urban Development Minister John Rau says that it “is expected to create more than 2,500 construction jobs with an estimated 400 ongoing jobs”.

Meanwhile Alec Gilbert, the chief executive of the Adelaide Convention Centre, has added that the renovation of his own facilities alone will create “an additional \$73 million of economic activity per year [...] going forward for the next 25 years”.

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An artist's impression of the development. HASSELL

Warning, warning: economic impact studies fast approaching. Faced with mustering support for proposals from the big end of town, the temptation will be for the government to invoke screeds of figures and tables to give its planning economic credence.

It is a temptation worth resisting. One only has to look at the way cost-benefit analysis has been manipulated by spruikers of the Melbourne Grand Prix to realise that political decisions should not be dressed up as economic ones.

Risk must not be confused with indeterminacy. Even Alec Gilbert does not know what the South Australian economy will look like in 25 years' time. Not only does spurious econometricising fail to provide hard evidence for policy making, it undermines public trust in important assessment methodologies, and makes Australians cynical about all figures that are presented.

In fact, despite cries of “where will the money come from?”, this is less a moment for numbers than for narratives. What is the story of Adelaide going forward? What does the plaza redevelopment say about the kind of city we want to be?

This narrative needs to be inclusive, realistic and inspiring. It also needs to be honest. Both the Premier and the state have an opportunity to reconnect with Dunstan's vision and refashion it for today's tastes and needs.

It is the story the state government tells around the plaza redevelopment that will attract people to the country's most liveable city, either as residents or as visitors. And not just during “Mad March” but throughout the year.

