

# It's about who we

Merc 6 May 2017

**Richard Flanagan** says transplanting Singapore skyscrapers into Hobart will ruin the nature of our Tasmanian capita

# Want to be

**R**OME, Paris, Amsterdam and Barcelona have one thing in common. They do not allow the construction of high-rise buildings in their cities' historic heart. No one can argue their tourism or name has suffered in consequence.

As they have a history, we have a history; as they have a culture, we have a culture. It is for us to honour these things, to act as guardians of our world, and to create a new world that draws and builds on them.

There is a square mile of old Hobart — Battery Point, Salamanca, the wharves, South, West and North Hobart, the Glebe and the city centre — that forms Australia's only remaining historic city.

The development that has occurred, whether good or bad, has taken place within the human scale of our old city.

The still remarkable 19th-century streetscapes remain, and a medium height, urban and urbane city, remarkable and much loved, has arisen.

In a world of ever more, ever larger megacities, Hobart's charms become increasingly unique, valuable and, for those business-minded, profitable. As Melbourne and Sydney hurtle towards an increasingly difficult high-rise future, Hobart's competitive advantage grows.

There are some fine examples of recent remarkable commercial developments that enhance our city, from the MACq 01 Hotel opposite the Art School — already receiving international praise even before opening — to the recently approved "super green" 30-apartment complex in Bathurst St, which developers claim will be the world's first carbon-positive apartment building.

But with the proposals by the Singaporean company, Fragrance Group, to build two skyscrapers in Hobart we are confronted with something unprecedented in the history of Hobart.

## This folly is up there with so many other destructive delusions

These buildings come out of Singapore culture — the buildings you get on a small island crowded with many people. They do not come out of Tasmanian culture. Their immense height and bulk do not respect or complement a cityscape where the tallest building is 14 storeys.

The proposed buildings — in the few notional images we have been allowed to see — are not iconic buildings, but stock-standard corporate towers like thousands of others elsewhere, from Las Vegas to Singapore to the Gold Coast, blinged-up kitsch. They are best described as Singapore by the sea.

Unremarkable, unfriendly and ugly, they show no respect for our city. Much of the waterfront will be thrown in shade. Erratic wind patterns will become the norm in our city's most popular district.

Yet even if the designs were brilliant, even if celebrated



Renzo Piano

Italian architect Renzo Piano or his British contemporary, Norman Foster, were involved, it would not overcome the

fundamental problem: they are not the scale of our city. They are out of all proportion to other buildings in Hobart.

Our future great buildings need to be of our city, not hostile to it, developed in imaginative, contemporary and dynamic ways that make our world richer and our lives better. The Fragrance high-rises do none of these things.

That is why we face with these high-rise buildings not simply the choice of approving them or not. We face a much larger, more fundamental choice about what city we wish to live in, a medium-rise city or a high-rise city.

It is the choice between building a 21st-century city drawing on all that is best and unique about our world, or replacing it with a pitiful clone of what is ubiquitous everywhere else. Because if these high-rises are built, an unstoppable precedent is set, and more high-rises will inevitably follow.

Now is the moment we decide what sort of city we want to live in; when we decide whether we want a city on the European model, with medium-rise buildings, or whether we want to live in a sad and broken town where the scale and amenity of our city is destroyed, and where the distinct nature of the old town will have begun to

crumble, leaving the waterfront looking like a mouth of meth-rotted teeth.

There are further problems with these proposals, not the least being that even at this stage the public is not being told the truth about them.

While the media has, for example, been told the massive Collins St high-rise will be 75 metres high, internal council documents reveal it to be 83 metres high and 92.3 metres high to its tip, 30 metres higher than the Tasman Bridge.

The Davey St proposal, at 120m high (47m higher than Tasmania's tallest building, the 73m, 14 storey casino), has been revised from 40 storeys to 41 storeys.

What else haven't we been told? Well, this for one.

According to *The Straits*



*Times* of April 26, Koh Wee Meng, the Singaporean founder and owner of Fragrance Group, was recently fined \$12,000 "after constructing a wall to fence off his Toh Crescent property without planning permission". The fine itself was unusual, given "Koh could have been fined up to \$200,000".

Will Koh Wee Meng show more respect for Tasmanian planning laws than he does in his home of Singapore?

What happens if the high-rises are approved but Fragrance Group chooses to make changes never approved and simply cop fines?

Stopping these high-rise horrors will not be easy. Koh Wee Meng is one of Singapore's richest men, a major Asian developer, powerful and influential. He

has recruited Tasmanian public relations spokesman Tony Harrison. A tough streetfighter, Harrison made his name as a spinner for Robin Gray, later for his work for Gunns, and made headlines for his involvement with the shadowy Tasmanians for a Better Future group that in 2006 ran a controversial campaign at the height of the pulp mill controversy.

Yet what is best and most beautiful in our city exists

because Hobartians stood up for it again and again in the past against money and power.

This folly is up there with so many other destructive delusions we have stood firm against over generations: the demolition of Battery Point and Salamanca, the destruction of North Hobart, the flyovers along Davey St, Oceanport. Each generation should make its mark. Our challenge is to make it well, and not as an act of vandalism.

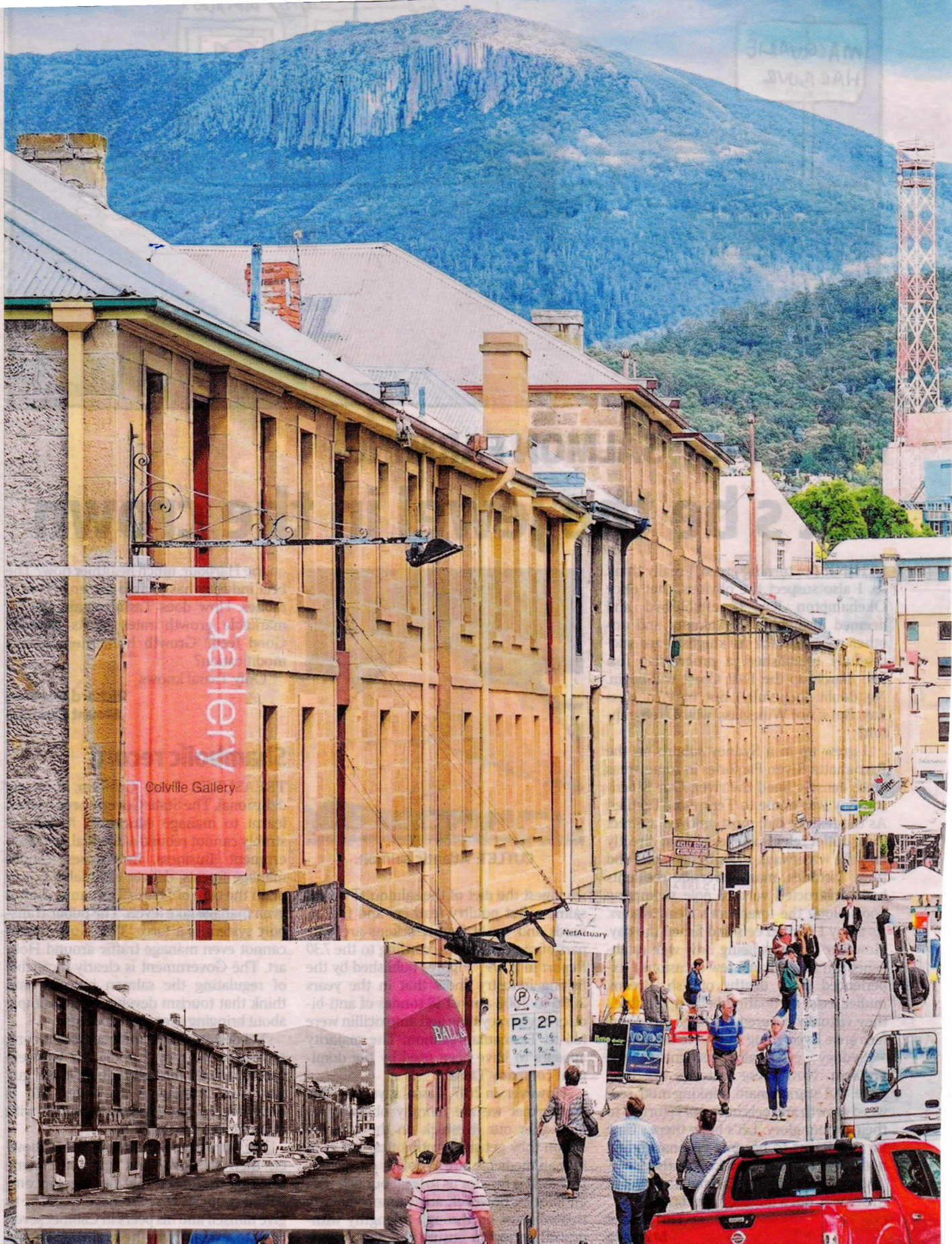
**O**N Monday night aldermen will vote on whether to grant landlord approval for Fragrance Group to use council land associated with their massive Collins St high-rise.

If you care about our city's future, ring your aldermen and tell them not to grant this approval. It is the first chance we have to tell developers what we wish our city to be — and not to be.

It is the moment we decide whether we want to create a city that is celebrated around the world, or whether we make one that bears the scars of other places, its old city a broken mouth dominated by a handful of oversized buildings and the dust that blows in the shadows between them.

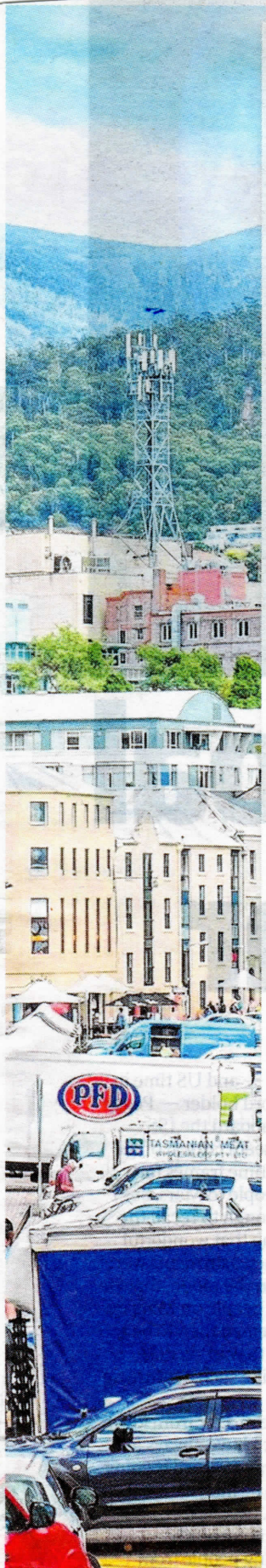
**Booker Prize-winning author Richard Flanagan is among the finest Australian writers of his generation. He lives in Hobart.**





**OUT OF PLACE:** The heritage of Salamanca Place and Battery Point, shown above in photographs from 1960 and contemporary times, will be dwarfed by the Fragrance Group's proposed skyscraper (artist's impression to the right).





**■** If these high-rises are built, an unstoppable precedent is set, and more high-rises will inevitably follow.

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