

New face of Melbourne rises 32 storeys

Simon Johanson and Jason Dowling September 15, 2010



An impression of what the building will look like with William Barak's face on the facade.

IT'S likely to become Melbourne's most significant or most controversial building.

A 32-storey apartment block at the Carlton end of Swanston Street will feature - in an architectural world first - the image of indigenous leader William Barak across its 100-metre-high, sculpted facade.

When complete in 2014, Barak's image on the Portrait building, on the former Carlton & United Brewery site, will be in direct line of site of the Shrine of Remembrance, nearly three kilometres away.

"There have been some concepts in the past for an image to be put on a building but no one has been brave enough to do it," said Daniel Grollo, chief executive of the project's builder, Grocon.

"The Shrine is about honouring a great set of Australians who made a sacrifice to Australia, and this is also honouring a great set of Australians who made a sacrifice for Australia."

The image of the tribal chief's face, sculpted in light and shade using the building's white concrete balconies, will be best seen from a vantage point on Swanston Street, near Lonsdale Street.

Grocon's Carlton Brewery manager David Waldren said: "That technique and that idea has not been delivered anywhere in the world before to the best of our knowledge. It is a world first."

Mr Grollo said: "It's not meant to be that from every angle you will get the perfect image of it; it's that you will get the perfect image in glimpses."

William Barak was an elder of Melbourne's Wurundjeri tribe and was instrumental in bridging the gulf between black and white cultures.

The Portrait was designed by architects Ashton Raggatt McDougall and will need planning approval to be completed.

Mr Grollo, who sees the building as an important social statement, said Wurundjeri elders and the Shrine trustees had given their blessing to the \$350 million project.

"I suspect people will read a lot of things into this, but it's a gesture of the nation before 1901," he said. "I will be very interested in the discussion Melbourne has about it."

Wurundjeri elder and Barak descendant Doreen Garvey-Wandin said it was time her great-great-grandfather was recognised in Wurundjeri territory.

"We're quite privileged to have his facial features looking over Melbourne, keeping an eye on us," she said.

Ms Garvey-Wandin said the depiction of dead indigenous people did not concern people of the Wurundjeri tribe, unlike in northern Australia, where Aborigines believe mentioning a dead person's name could disturb their spirit.

In fact, she said Wurundjeri elders were so thrilled with the idea they worked closely with designers to ensure the 32-storey portrait would get Barak the recognition he deserved.

Melbourne University architecture professor Philip Goad backed the proposal. "It is in a way quite haunting, that fact that the surface of the building is white rather than black," he said.

"It could be Melbourne's equivalent of Mount Rushmore."

But historian Geoffrey Blainey was cool on the design. "[I] wonder about the wisdom of using the facades of skyscrapers as historical, political, or commercial advertisement - no matter whose face or logo is on them," Dr Blainey said.

Five buildings are planned for the former brewery site, including the Pixel office and the 90-storey DCM apartment complex.

"As you see the rest of this site unravel over time, the architecture may not make as big a social statement ... but it's just as interesting," Mr Grollo said.