



Nearamnew



Nearamnew is an artwork designed for the plaza of Federation Square. Found on the surface of the plaza, the artwork consists of three parts: a whorl pattern, nine ground figures and nine vision texts, each engraved into a ground figure. Nearamnew's design relates to the global, regional and local levels found in a federally organised society.

The whorl pattern, created from cobbles of Kimberley sandstone, forms the envelope of the design. Nestled inside are the nine ground figures and nine visions. As the ground figures are also made out of Kimberley sandstone, the three parts of Nearamnew merge into one another. Relating the whole space to particular locations where the ground figures lie, and letting visitors orientate themselves through the intimate experience of reading words at their feet, Nearamnew is a creative catalyst of movement.

The location of the figures, their different shapes, and the various ways in which the texts are arranged across them reminds visitors that Nearamnew is not a book but a design for walking, talking and meeting. As a visitor to the plaza, the first step is not to look for the lines of text, but to tread the ground. Be prepared to move around the imagetexts and read the phrases, not linearly, but rather as a chain of overlapping words. As you move, spell out the letters of the ground figures and sound out the words from the stories gathered in the vision texts. As you tread, you just might have the sensation of walking in the footsteps of the many who have gone before, retracing the many discourses that have tracked through, over and under this site.

Nearamnew's choreography of nine imagetexts, float in the plaza's whorl of stonework. They symbolise the conditions necessary to reintegrate reading with treading and remobilize the relationship between people and place. Walking across the plaza, the place comes into being, and you, the visitor, contribute to the meaning of the place, sustaining it with your own voices, associations, memories and imaginings. The texts of Nearamnew are deliberately entangled and multilayered because this is how places are: constantly self-renewing patterns of people criss-crossing, improvising new meanings at that place.

Top:
Children playing hopscotch on the Children's Vision ground figure

Bottom:
The global whorl pattern made from Kimberley sandstone



Name Before Place

Melbourne, the official name of Victoria's capital city, was not bestowed until 1839. Before that, a number of unofficial names had been proposed for the colonial settlement, emerging on the banks of the Yarra. One of the many words circulating at the time was 'Narr-m', an Indigenous (perhaps Woiwurrung) word meaning 'Place on which the city of Melbourne is built'.

While the precise location of Narr-m is unclear and perhaps as fanciful as the settlers' belief that the Indigenous name for Melbourne's river was 'Yarra', the importance of the word Narr-m was not that it marked a point on the map, but that it created a talking point, when spread by word of mouth. Another word circulating at the time was Nearamnew, most likely a 'Chinese Whispers' distortion of an original mishearing of Narr-m.

Nearamnew was chosen as the artwork's name because, when broken into a tripartite form, the word holds the elements necessary for a new federal place. Starting with 'am', the middle part of the word symbolised a desire to come into being and when joined with 'near' a desire to stay together at that place. 'New' came to stand for the possibility of founding a new society – one that was different from the two cultures it straddled. But being new means investing in an on-going process of self-renewal. So the Nearamnew story at Federation Square not only recalls ancient federal structures and Australia's federation in 1901, it also spells out new forms of community in the future.

The whorl form of the plaza design refers to both a federal system of government and a federal system of water. These two systems defined the Federation Square site before European settlement.

At the time of colonisation in the mid 1830s, the political and social organisation of the Kulin peoples of central Victoria was a federal one and the Federation Square site and adjacent places on the Yarra were regarded as an extra-territorial space set aside for inter-tribal business, a pre-Federation 'Canberra'. Federal systems of government are not hierarchical but global, regional and local. Because decision-making processes weave through one another, all individuals involved in negotiation, whatever their relative status, retain their difference and independence. This apparent paradox has led one political scientist to compare the distribution of power in a federal system to the cross-section through a 'marbled' cake. Visitors to Federation Square immediately see the point of this analogy, as the main plaza is entirely built out of 'marble cake' Kimberley sandstone.

Before the Yarra was banked and its adjoining swamplands drained, the local water economy was also 'federal'. Global weather systems caused regional inundations, intermittently overflowing the Yarra, feeding and preserving a network of local creeks, waterholes and billabongs. Graphic reference to this federal water economy was found in a mid-nineteenth century bark etching collected near Lake Tyrrell in northern Victoria. A detail of the artwork shows a meander form, analogous to the whirling, infolding eddies of water in flood. Viewed from the air, the whorl form, at Federation Square, resembles the cross-section of a suspended water drop. With its lines of force, the water whorl induces a current. People visiting Federation Square, gather and dissipate according to its form.

Below:
Diagram indicating the
global whorl pattern for
the plaza



Global Whorl



The nine ground figures of Neararnnew are found at different locations in the sandstone whorl. The size and orientation of the figures assist the legibility of the site. The figures are large enough to constitute small landmarks or regions within the global whorl and act as guides or signposts to the spatial dynamic.

The ground figures are built out of the nine letters of the word 'Neararnnew'. The nine groups are divided into three groups inlaid three and the three groups inlaid at different scales. This tripartite structure is another reference to the three-part structure of a federal system. The figures assume different shapes because each of them groups and scales the letters differently. For example, in Figure 1: The Maker's Vision, the first three letters of Neararnnew (NEA) are 'large scale', the second triad (RAM) is 'medium scale' and the remainder (NEW) is 'small scale'. In Figure 2 the scale template has been moved one letter to the right, producing a large (EAR), a medium (AMN) and a small (EWN).

While the ground figures are the physical translation of the name Neararnnew they also became the first step in materialising writing, turning conceptions of place into physical perceptions. The treatment of the local vision texts reflects this by the way they translate the meanings of the words into physical diagrams or imagetexts. In this way the letters become fields of physical and sculptured forms that can be read and walked or spelled out through our feet. The act of walking makes sense of place.

Regional Ground Figures

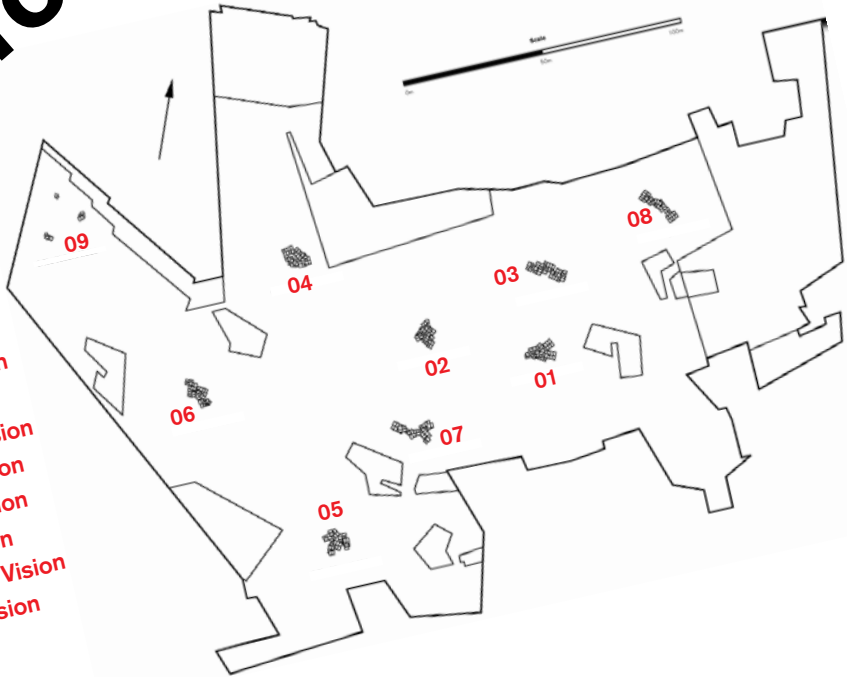
Figures



Above:
Layout for
The Ferryman's Vision
(08) ground figure

Below:
Plaza showing locations
of Neararnnew ground
figures

- 01. The Maker's Vision
- 02. The Colonist's Vision
- 03. The Child's Vision
- 04. Alfred Deakin's Vision
- 05. The Migrant's Vision
- 06. The Builder's Vision
- 07. The Artist's Vision
- 08. The Ferryman's Vision
- 09. The Visitor's Vision





01. Maker's Vision



02. Colonist's Vision



03. The Child's Vision



04. Alfred Deakin's Vision



05. The Migrant's Vision



06. The Builder's Vision



07. The Artist's Vision



08. The Ferryman's Vision



09. The Visitor's Vision

The 9 Regional Ground Figures

Images of the 9 regional ground figures.

Image on left is a detail of the overall ground figure which is shown on the right.

Local Vision Text

Representing the local level of federation, each vision text has a distinctive theme. These nine vision texts have been woven into each of the nine ground figures. Lying in wait on the plaza, the vision texts are composed of short phrases implying a number of different speakers. The unique qualities of the sandstone employed to surface the plaza enable, by carving letters to different depths, to colour differentiate the different braids or voices of the text. The font used for the vision text was specifically designed for the work and therefore named Federation Font.

The themes explored in each vision text represent the principle of federal organization at three levels: global, regional and local. Figure 1, for example, evokes Indigenous stories associated with the Federation Square site, while Figure 4 focuses on the events leading up to the formation of the Commonwealth in 1901. In Figure 5 the journeys of migrants, who converge on this place from other places, are remembered, while Figure 8 recalls the water history of the Yarra.

More information about these stories, and about the artwork as a whole, can be found in Paul Carter, *Mythform, The Making of Nearamnew at Federation Square* (Melbourne, Miegunyah Press, 2005).

The local visions are not only texts. They are also images of the stories they tell. Figure 1 represents the Indigenous creation story of the One becoming Many, bringing space and time into being, by repeating the story at ever smaller scales, until the letters seem to fill up all the available space. To read Figure 4, you need to stand either inside the rings of text or outside. This recalls Alfred Deakin's description of the federal system as a solar system, composed in equal measure of forces of attraction and repulsion. As befits a text celebrating journeys, Figure 5 is characterised by long double lines of text suggesting footprints.

The local visions are called imagetexts because they fuse ideas and diagrams, texts and image. They are visions in a double sense – visible and visionary. But they lie in wait until you, the visitor, awaken them and through your presence bring the meanings of the place alive, again and also for the first time.

Nearamnew was created by Paul Carter, in collaboration with Lab architecture studio.



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