

## How The Portland CEMA Arts Centre Came To Be

An interview with Collin Woolcock, CEMA President for 17 years, and President at the time, by Lesley Jackson. 4th August 1983.

<< Collin, would you like to tell me your version of the building of the CEMA Arts Centre?>>

Well, it's a long story, Lesley, but we'll try.

I think one of the first things one should say is that it appears, from the very inception, of the beginning of the organisation, that members were keen that they should ultimately own their own home, their own centre. I don't know if it was envisaged as a very grandiose idea originally, but it was to be their own little centre. Initially, of course, meetings were held in private homes and little hired halls and rooms wherever possible, but to counterbalance that, apparently right from the very beginning when they held a little successful concert, or play, or whatever, a little bit of money was popped aside into a building fund to, ultimately, acquire their own home. Naturally, this went fairly slowly and it took - or would have taken a long, long time, but it was coming up and the idea is what I think is important at that stage.

When I came to Portland to live first, in 1949, and I think I joined CEMA probably in 1950, there was already several hundred pounds in a building fund. I think it just grew slowly over a period of time. Each year at an annual general meeting I seem to remember somebody or other popping up and saying "I vote we transfer £50 to the building fund", or something like that, and it just grew slowly, without much impetus. But the fund was there and the idea was there.

Well, as time progressed and we found it more and more difficult as an organisation to find adequate meeting places for the groups, several things were tried [...] I can remember one exciting little place that was exciting to get into - we had to climb up all sorts of dark stairs and back of upstairs in a little building at the corner where the Commonwealth Bank is at the moment [the corner of Julia and Percy Streets, opposite St Stephen's Church]. There was a little, rickety old building there - it's been demolished long since - it was used as clubrooms for some years. And then from there we went to Bentinck Street. I think this is the real beginning of the modern story - of the fight for the Arts Centre - when we moved down to a little, er, what used to be some offices that were apparently built for Mr Keith Anderson, as his offices, adjacent to his family home as it was then, down on Bentinck Street. When he came back from the First World War he had this little office area - a couple of rooms - built, down right next to Dalgety's store [...] in Bentinck Street. And it was largely unused and the idea was put forward that we might be able to hire that and use it as a permanent meeting rooms for CEMA - clubrooms. He [Keith Anderson] was approached and he was agreed and he gave CEMA the right to use it - sole right to use this little building - for several years at a very nominal rental.

But, of course, it wasn't designed specifically for that purpose, it had its very great limitations, but it was certainly better than nothing and it was a home. It obviously had difficulties and it was cramping and, as the organisation grew and more groups came in, it became necessary to consider expansion. So the idea was put forward that we should approach Mr Anderson with an idea of purchasing just a little bit more land adjacent to this building, if he would be willing to sell us some, and we could either put a lean-to, or another room on, or knock down a wall, or do something and build on. Well, I was asked

by the Executive to approach Mr Anderson and discuss this matter with him. He listened very courteously, as he always does, and when I'd outlined the idea he said, "Well, basically I am in sympathy with your ideas and aspirations for your organisation, just allow me a few days or a week to think about it".

So a little while later he rang me up and I went down to see him and he was, as always, a jump ahead. He said, "Oh, what you've asked for isn't nearly enough, you should have much more than that. You should have a much bigger block than that and you should plan much more ahead and you should think of something much bigger and grander than what you're planning - you've got to think of the future". So he said, "I suggest that you have a much larger block," and he outlined a frontage and a depth there which went right back in and was a very lovely little block of land, of course, and a very prime position in the town. And he said, "Well, I'm not in a position to give it to you, but I am prepared to sell it to you at a very reduced rate". The rate was, I think, £1000 for this really quite beautiful block of land. So naturally enough, the building fund [rose] to that sum of money [...] so the block of land was bought, and then [came] the business of starting to design a building for it.

At that stage somebody had the idea that we should approach the architecture department of the University [of Melbourne], that they would probably like to put [it to] some senior students as a project. So we approached an architect, a Mr Alexandra, who was a lecturer at the University, and he brought down a whole team of students and they surveyed the block. It was an exercise for them to design a building for this block, and I think, from memory, a little prize was given for the one which was to be the winning exhibit [...] In due course, a very splendid looking student's design for a centre came along and this was used for advertising purposes.

Now, it was about this stage that we decided to go public - I'm not sure of the exact date - and really tried to push the building fund along. The prizewinning student's design was used, of course, for advertising purposes and a public appeal was launched and so on. Now I don't think it was ever envisaged that we would actually use this design - it was just way, way out of ... It was gold-plated sort of business and finance of it would have been impossible.

The building appeal did bring in a little bit more money and we asked Mr. Alexandra - who was in private practice as well as the University lecturer - to draw up his plans for the building, which he did, which was different from the prize student's one. I think it would have been infra dig for the master to accept his student's plans (laughs). But his were drawn up and his were used as a basis for the first approach to the Government of Victoria.

A deputation went down in 1963-4, was it? - I think at that time. The little deputation included the then Mayor of Portland, Councillor Murrell, Mr Keith Anderson, the architect, myself, June Hedditch and it was introduced by the honourable Mr Mack, who was a member of the legislative assembly, council - I forget which - at the time. We had this first approach to the Government of Victoria with a suggested figure of £75,000 as the cost of the building.

Now we had quite a sympathetic hearing from Mr Bolte, however certain difficulties appeared, obviously straight away. Although he said that he liked the idea and we should continue to work for it, he pointed out two basic things that would need to be met before the Government could seriously consider giving a large grant.

First of all, the point was he could not consider giving money to a private organisation such as CEMA, because, after all, it's public money and it should not be given to private organisations which may or may not continue in existence. But he could give it to the Town of Portland, because the Town Council is there in perpetuity and there is no difficulty.

The other factor that he raised was that tentative estimates were not good enough: we had to have an absolute final plan costed to the last ... pounds, shillings and pence at those days ... And then they would consider the economics of it and make a grant. So with that preliminary idea we came home and started to think what we could do about it.

At that stage, approximately, Mr Brendon Jarrett became interested on the architectural side and he felt that perhaps he could design something for that block of land that was simpler and less expensive than the one that the architect [Mr Alexandra] had produced - and that we could save a lot of architect's fees as well. He started work on the project of designing a building for that block of land there in Bentinck Street.

And then a further development occurred, in that the Town Council approached CEMA and informed them - informed us - that they had extensive plans for redeveloping that block of land which is now the Civic Centre block, that they were going to build a new civic hall there, a new town library and other town buildings were going into that area. They would prefer that we considered building a building such as an Arts Centre into the Civic Centre block, so that all the buildings were centralised and localised - that they would be quite prepared

a) to consider sympathetically the fact that they would become trustees, which would be required, and

b) to make an area of land available free of charge.

So that left us with the point that it was obviously, probably desirable to follow the suggestions of the Council, but it left us with the fact that we owned this block of land that we had bought from Mr Keith Anderson on the assumption that we were going to use it specifically for this purpose and honour the name of Anderson in the process - particularly his mother, Mrs Euphemia Anderson, which was his request. So we had to - somewhat diffidently - go back to Mr Anderson to see how he reacted to this idea of this change of location, change of plans. Again, of course, we found him extremely sympathetic and prepared, and more or less waiting on the doorstep for us to arrive! He seemed to know all the facts well before we did. And he said: "Well, of course you'll have to move down there - you'd be stupid not to". We'd also had this problem of drilling - of trying to get foundations - satisfactory foundations - we realised there were going to be some problems on the block of land, in that he told us that in his earlier youth he could remember a duck pond and ducks swimming in the area there, that had been gradually filled in with light filling, and that there would be some problem with foundations. Taking all these into consideration he said, "Well of course you should move down there. And not only that - there is a plan ahead to build a big motel on this land and people are trying to buy my whole - entire place. they want to buy that block of land and I can sell it for you at a nice profit and the money can go into your building fund". So this smoothed the way enormously and this change was put into operation.

Mr Brendon Jarrett continued with his designs for the new location, but we ran into the problem that the Town Council insisted that the Town Architect, who was designing all

the other buildings for the area, for the sake of uniformity, must be involved as the architect for the new centre. Although we discussed this at some length with the Council to try to get them to modify this outlook, they refused to change and so we, somewhat reluctantly in this respect, had to abandon much of the very, very good work that had been done by Mr Jarrett. We certainly don't think that all his effort was wasted or lost, but nevertheless much of his time and effort which he'd put into it was, to some extent lost, and we always remained very, very grateful to him for the effort that he put into it. So that was the position there.

In the meantime the continuation of the raising of money - particularly the work done by an opportunity shop. The ladies of CEMA for many years had worked very hard in a regular opportunity shop, and it's certainly only fair that this should be recorded as a very prominent way in which money was raised - amongst other ways, but this one was particularly successful and a particularly good effort, that money was raised over years of concentrated work. The fund was growing and growing and growing and it got a big impetus from the sale of the block of land and we were also allowed, we found, to include in our assets a valuation of the land. Although we hadn't had to outlay any money for the new block of land, it could be valued and put into our assets. So on that basis the architect went ahead.

By that stage the Town Architects were given an estimate of the amount of money that we thought we would have available, assuming a two-for-one grant by the Government, and the building was planned on that basis. When it was finally designed and costed - so they thought (laughs) - we went down and made another appointment and we made our second deputation down. This time it was ... We all went down prepared to sell our story very, very prominently to Mr Hamer, who was, of course, now Premier of Victoria. We walked in the room and we sat down and Mr Hamer said, before we had opened our mouths, he said, "Well, gentlemen, I'm pleased to see you all, and just to make you at ease, I'm going to tell you that I'm going to accept your request now before we even start" (laughs). So all our sales spiel could just be completely forgotten, we just didn't have to sell the idea again. He just said, "Right. I've read it all and it meets all our requirements and we think it's an excellent idea and, yes, you've got it". So that was that.

Yes, well that was great excitement, of course, we came out of the deputation and we wired people waiting, hanging around at Portland waiting for the result, so I sent a wire through to the secretary - I think it was Lex Chalmers at the time - letting her know immediately that the thing had been accepted. The we came home, of course, and had to just enter what was, I suppose, really, the last stage of it. The thing had been accepted, we'd had, I think, about seventy-five thousand dollars - I think, from memory, I'm not sure of the exact figure - given by the Government on a two-for-one basis. I think we put our assets at thirty-seven and a half thousand dollars - I could be a little bit out, but that's the basic order and the Government matched that on a two-for-one, making their contribution about seventy-five. But, of course, if our assets were thirty-seven and a half thousand, that wasn't all cash, because that included the value of the land, so that we had less than you'd think you would've had, you know, hundred and ten - hundred and twelve [thousand] dollars - odd cash to spend, but we didn't, we had a little less than that.

Then the architect's plans, which, of course, had been finalised and costed and were meant to fall within that price-range, then had to be put out to tender. Three tenders ultimately came in when the tenders were called and closed. I think there were an actual

three tenderers and, of course, the inevitable happened, that the cheapest one was about twenty percent above the architect's figure. So the sum of money required, according to the best tender, was way above what we had.

So what did we do? Did we ... How did we suddenly find ourselves put upon to need another - find another ten or twenty thousand dollars? I think we all felt just a little bit flattened, just temporarily, because we'd worked so hard for so long to raise the money that we had raised and thought, "now this is enough, surely", and suddenly found that it wasn't. There was no way we could go back to the Government at this stage and ask for more, so it had to be self-help.

Now, the architects had said, "All right, well we'll go through our plans and see whether we can take a few short-cuts here and there and, you know, simplify a few elaborate things, we might be able to make it a bit simpler and do this and do that". They went through it and took out some of the "frills" as it were, and managed to cut it back a little bit. There was still a small amount of a few thousand dollars - by this stage I think it was four or five thousand dollars - over and above what we had set aside as money that was available. Fortunately, the Town Council saw complete reason at this stage and they said, "Look, we're silly to hold it up any longer. There's an inflation period, prices are rising rapidly. The longer you leave it that gap will get bigger, not less. Go ahead and build it and we will pay that little bit of difference". It was only the order of - I think from memory - four or five thousand dollars. They said, "No, don't hold it up: let's go". The tender was accepted and the building started.

Now that little sum of money that the Council did put in, just to cover the final, little gap was the only direct money that the Council was called on to put into the entire building. Although, mind you, they did, in addition to providing the land, they did do a lot of outside landscaping and all that was done free of charge. That was supplied by the Council, so I think that should be recognised as a value in kind if not actual cash. So that the thing actually got off the ground and at last building commenced.

Now while this was going on, of course, we didn't quite admit to all of the money that was available for the actual building. We realised that an empty shell of a building was not going to be adequate, there would have to be a lot of furnishings go into it. There had to be all the kitchen things - quite extensive, a lot of money to spend in the kitchen with crockery and cutlery and ... stove ... and stove and fridge and so on and so on. And there was extra stackable chairs and tables and many, many other things. A projector was required and accessories that were wanted here, there and everywhere. So a few thousand dollars were carefully stashed away in a special little account, which was not to be used for the actual building itself, which was set aside for all these extras, including extra curtains and I think there was also included a stereo, you know, unit for ... And so on and music and so on, extra lighting. And so this involved, really, quite a few thousand dollars in addition, which was bought with, in effect, with CEMA money, there was a special fund for accessories, which was put on one side for these, for the extras for the building. These were purchased by the CEMA organisation and have remained, to the present day, as CEMA property, although, of course, ultimately the building was under the control - formally under the control - of the Town of Portland through its Council, which was, as I said earlier, one of the prerequisites of receiving the Government grant.

Well then the building finally did reach completion (chuckles) and the great day came when the building was officially opened in July 1974. We seem to remember the extraordinary coincidence which occurred. It was quite unintentional when the day was

planned months ahead, it was only when we actually came to look up some of the actual minutes that we found we'd actually chosen the exact date which was the birthday - was it the twenty-ninth or thirtieth birthday? of the organisation. To the very day! The inaugural day was on that exact day! So it was just one of those extraordinary coincidences.

When the great day came the building was officially opened by a minister, of course, from the Victorian Government, came down to perform the official opening ceremony and the building was launched.

So there you are, that's the basic story.

Collin Woolcock, 4 August 1983.