

STATE-OF-THE-ART

STATION

DEVELOPING OUR CITY \ Art installations are bringing new life to a Flinders Street icon, writes JO DAVY.

Cultural canvas: Artist Campbell Drake in the station's ballroom. (SUPPLIED)

When it comes to grand architectural gestures, the façade of Flinders Street Station has long held the prime position among Melbourne's landmarks.

What lies behind the clocks that frame the city's favourite meeting spot is a subject that has hovered on the public's agenda for many years.

Stories of paint flaking off the walls in the decrepit ballroom, a clock tower full of vermin and a gymnasium serving as the station's skip bin have produced a unanimous cry to clean it up.

But for Campbell Drake and the artists of Contemporary Site Investigations, Flinders Street Station's crumbling interiors were a cultural canvas that needed exploring.

"We recognised the site was integral to Melbourne's collective identity," Drake says of the project, which coincides with the Victorian government's competition to redesign the station, launched earlier this year.

Thus began their month-long occupation of the site, which will culminate in a series of temporary art installations on display from October 19 to 21.

Funded by the City of Melbourne's public art program, the project will explore the historical and cultural significance of Flinders Street Station through its disused interior spaces.

The Melbourne-based collective of artists includes Cameron Robbins, Robbie Rowlands, James Carey and Drake himself, who has produced the exhibition as one half of A&D Projects. "Each artist takes over a particular space," says Drake. "Our process is that we don't necessarily premeditate the outcomes before we get to the site. It's very much informed by 'being' on the site."

All the artistic outcomes of this process reflect the powerful influence Australia's oldest railway station has had on each artist.

Robbins has been working in arguably the most iconic part of the station, its clock tower. From many conversations with the clock's maintenance crew, Robbins discovered that the station is the home of the loudest clock in Melbourne.

"I wanted to capture the sound of this clock that's provided a pulse for the city since 1909," says Robbins, who miked up the tower and broadcasted the sound to his studio below.



CAMPBELL DRAKE \ PAST AND PRESENT



CAMERON ROBBINS

(GRETA COSTELLO)

Melbourne jazz musician Allan Browne was invited in for an impromptu performance on drums that were once used by the old railway band. The pair used the rhythm of the clock as a metronome.

Robbins also installed a pulsing light near the top of the clock tower to rotate across the city.

"The pulses of light are like clockwork and refer to the ticking that pretty much governs Melbourne," he says. "I also like to think of it as the beacon of our creative project."

Composer and sound artist Elizabeth Drake will perform several duets on a pair of grand pianos in the ballroom, accompanied by two other pianists. The duets will be broadcast across the platforms and to neighbouring Federation Square.

The clock provides a pulse for the city

Composition was kept to a minimum, Campbell Drake explains, to make the most of the ballroom's incredible acoustics, keeping the two performers responsive to the site and each other.

"It's actually cyclical," Drake says. "And because it's performed live, you have this nice nature of people coming and going from the station. The music isn't beginning, middle, end. It just rolls."

Drake's own project is the restaging of an old photograph of one of the station's paper boys. Fifty years on, Drake has tracked down Michael, the subject of the photo, and has re-created the shot right down to the socks on his feet.

The final outcome of the project will be to position Michael's grandson in full paper boy's attire on the steps of the

station. He will distribute a custom newspaper that details to commuters the history of the site and CSI's exhibition.

The group are the first artists permitted to exhibit in the station's interiors for more than two decades, a fact Drake says they are all pinching themselves over.

"Everybody has been saying to us, 'I can't believe you're actually up here' and I just say 'Well, neither can we,'" he says, laughing. "Metro have just been so fantastically supportive throughout the whole process."

One of the group's greatest allies has been Metro's projects co-ordinator, Jim Sideris, who says it's important to recognise the place that the station has in the hearts and minds of Melburnians.

"Everybody has a story to tell," says Sideris, who has worked with the team of artists since day one. "Flinders Street [Station] is the jewel in the crown of Melbourne, no question."

This long-held affinity with the station has led to side projects emerging from the official program of five installations.

Robbie Rowlands' work in the old gymnasium caught the attention of a 94-year old Melburnian who used to wrestle in the space. "He hadn't been in the gymnasium since 1938, so for him, visiting the space was like walking through time," says Drake. "We did a series of interviews with him, and he was lovely and nostalgic."

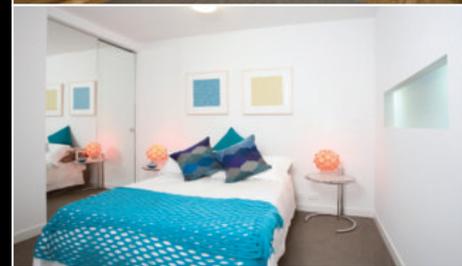
Although the level of deterioration prevents the public from physically visiting the site, the exhibition will be on display through audio and video broadcasts through the station and across to Federation Square.

Robbins says that as artists, CSI's aim is to keep disused spaces such as Flinders Street Station at the forefront of the city's consciousness. "We're almost like a microcosm of the population," he says. "The CSI artists move into an area that's quite dilapidated and we activate it so that the public begins to take interest in it again."

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» <http://contemporarystateinvestigations.tumblr.com/> Flinders Street Station, October 19 to 21.

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