

Melbourne's Famous Pet Dog: Larry La Trobe

By James Lesh

James Lesh is researching urban history and heritage as a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne.

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In Melbourne's City Square resides *Larry La Trobe*, an endearing dog statue. He captures the attention of people walking past, contributing to the everyday urban experience of being in Melbourne. Despite his small size and unprovocative form, Larry acquired civic stature after he disappeared one night in 1995. This triggered a citywide search across Melbourne to find him, propelling him into the popular consciousness.

I believe that a poor statue about the place is better than no statue at all.

– Leslie Bowles, Melbourne sculptor, 1938.²

A 1m high Bronze Dog will be installed next to one of the seats in the City Square. Care has been taken that there will be no sharp protuberances, for it is envisaged that this will be a very

popular sculpture with children.

– Public Art Committee, Melbourne City Council, October 1992.³

The City Square was an empty space
/ Crying out for a brand new Face! /
The planners of Melbourne sent out a
probe / And came-back-with-a-dog –
Larry La Trobe. / Pedestrians stopped,
patina head and coat / A top dog he
became, by a popular vote. / Everybody
took to Larry with a great shine / Now
Melbourne's mascot is a brassy canine.

– Extract from poem 'Welcome
Home Larry La Trobe' by Bruce
Stephens, c.1995–1996.

This article tells the story of *Larry* in his Melbourne context. It considers the broader relationship between dogs and cities across the world, the reasons why the Melbourne City

Council commissioned him, his placement in the City Square and then the subsequent public response to him as a work of public art. Taking the curious case of his dognapping as a pivot point, the article then examines how Larry continues to enrich the city, including the ways he has been propelled into local and international, civic, social, political and cultural spaces.

Designed by local artist Pamela Irving and cast in bronze, seventy centimetres in height, the original *Larry La Trobe* was dognapped on the evening of 30 August 1995 from Melbourne's City Square. Poor Larry was never found; rumour has it that he was drowned in the Yarra River or was buried in a suburban backyard. The *Larry* that now resides in City Square is a replica of the original statue. Few urban public art works can lay claim to this kind of history. *Larry* (fig. 1) is indeed a curious Melbourne dog.

Despite their popular appeal unprovocative everyday public art installations such as *Larry La Trobe* are rarely taken seriously in urban or art circles. From the outset, nevertheless, Larry's installation troubled some Melburnians, provoking questions about public art: Are dog statues the kind of public art that municipal authorities should commission for public space? Is *Larry* a 'good' work of art, or even Art at all? The Melbourne City Council defined 'public art' broadly in 1992: 'any original work of art, created by an artist, which is accessible to the general public [on/in] streets and squares'.⁴ Crafted by a local artist, *Larry* is both statue and sculpture, and fits the Council's criteria as a work of art, being folksy and aesthetically unchallenging, even kitsch.

Melbourne's pet dog joins the ranks of many urban, bronze, immortalised dogs (fig. 2). These dogs are bound to history, memory and commemoration; inscribing on the urban landscape paganism and religion; empire and imperialism, murder and death; local, civic and national virtue. Such monuments have lined boulevards, forums, markets and squares since antiquity.⁵ Animals and particularly canines have featured prominently, attributable to the ways in which dogs endear themselves to humankind.⁶ Dogs were the first animal to be domesticated and introduced to the city; 'man's oldest companion', in the words of the great urban historian Lewis Mumford.⁷

Whilst the Urban History of the Dog is yet to be written, there are numerous dogs that would feature in such an endeavour. At the turn of the Common Era, Cicero mentioned the *Capitoline Wolf* statue, part of Rome's founding mythology.⁸ Modern cities including Brussels, Edinburgh, Tokyo and Wellington boast dog



Figure 1: Pamela Irving, 1960–, sculptor
Larry La Trobe, 1992 (1996)
 Bronze
 Photograph: author's collection, 2012

statues, and each has its own place in local mythologies.⁹ Tokyo's *Hachikō* – the faithful dog who awaited his owner's arrival at Shibuya Station every day for many years after his owner's death – appears on countless picture books, tourist guides and postcards.¹⁰ A recent popular history on the nineteenth-century *Greyfriars Bobby* of Edinburgh suggested that that city's adored dog, reputedly guarding his master's grave, was actually concocted by businessmen as a promotional stunt.¹¹ Even dog statues are embroiled in local urban politics.

Closer to home, scholar David Paxton has speculated on the relationship between Australia and dogs, using a naturalistic perspective to tie together settler colonialism, rapid rates of urbanisation, and urban animal management.¹² A 2009 book traces this 'iconic partnership' from the First Fleet onwards.¹³ Other prominent Australian sculpted dogs include Queen Victoria's favourite dog *Islay*, who adorns a well outside the Queen Victoria Building in Sydney. Passers-by are encouraged by a recording of radio personality John Laws to place a coin in the well for a children's charity. *The Dog on the Tuckerbox* near Gundagai, New South Wales, is a bronze tribute to colonial settlement, immortalised in poem and song, which sustains national mythologies concerning Australia's pioneer history.¹⁴

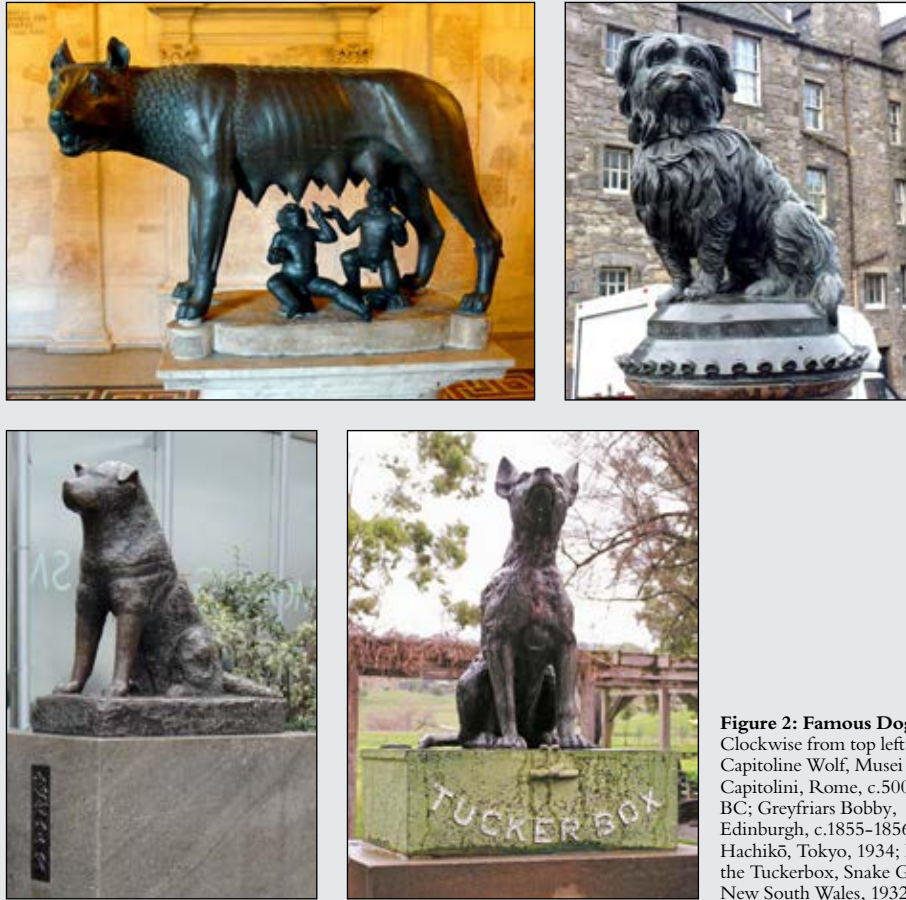


Figure 2: Famous Dogs
Clockwise from top left:
Capitoline Wolf, Musei
Capitolini, Rome, c.500-480
BC; Greyfriars Bobby,
Edinburgh, c.1855-1856;
Hachikō, Tokyo, 1934; Dog on
the Tuckerbox, Snake Gully,
New South Wales, 1932. ★

Such statues venerate ‘man’s best friend’, their owners and, like other civic monuments, the suburb, city, or nation that erected them. But this was not the case for Melbourne’s *Larry La Trobe*. When he was sculpted in 1992, he had neither past nor commemorative function. Council documents described him as something that ‘will be very popular with children’; perhaps because he would be at their height, meeting them on the street at eye level.¹⁵ Larry does not sit on a pedestal, a plinth anticipating recognition; rather his four paws stand on the ground, upright, excitable, ceaselessly forging his own place in City Square as he receives attention from passers-by. Larry’s own place in the popular imagination was seized after his placement. So how did this bronze become so famous, included on tourist itineraries, even having a kennel reserved for him at Melbourne’s Lost Dogs Home?

As a proud nineteenth-century Victorian era city, Melbourne has many grand sculptural monuments.¹⁶ The first public monument was of the unfortunate explorers Robert Burke and William Wills. Since funding from private

donors was meagre, the colonial parliament commissioned artist Charles Summers whose statue *Burke and Wills* was subsequently unveiled to a crowd of 10,000 people in 1865.¹⁷ Fashioned in the European tradition – heroic, celebratory and civic, pedestalled, bronze and solid – *Burke and Wills* has been installed at various locations over the following 150 years. This pattern of placing monuments has been embraced by towns and cities across Australia.¹⁸

As elsewhere, Melbourne public sculpture has always been bound to broader political, social and aesthetic shifts. Just as *Burke and Wills* reflects nineteenth-century Victorian tastes, other illustrious figures offer sculptural treatment that reflect their respective time period and subject, whether regal Queen Victoria and King Edward VII, cordial Adam Lindsay Gordon, approachable Batman and Fawkner on Collins Street, or the relaxed long-serving Premiers (Dunstan, Bolte, Hamer and Cain) in the Treasury Gardens. The life-size statue of Charles Joseph La Trobe installed in 2006 on the forecourt of the State Library of Victoria continues this civic tradition, in a twenty-first century form.¹⁹ Such monuments are nevertheless the embodiments of permanence and grandeur, venerating the city

and its past in a bold manner.

The historical trajectory particularly relevant to Larry begins in the 1970s. By this time, in response to changing artistic, architectural and urban philosophies towards public art and public space, more democratic kinds of art works were sought to adorn city streets.²⁰ Outdoor sculpture was commissioned as part of 'per cent for art' programs, which posited public art as integral to and a benefit of urban rejuvenation. These programs originated in North America, triggering debates about the purpose and form of public art. Some scholars have critiqued the resultant works as unchallenging and populist, sanitising urban conflict and lacking an overt political or commemorative function.²¹

Debates over public art indeed emerged in Melbourne. In 1978, for instance, the Melbourne City Council commissioned Ron Robertson-Swann's *Vault* for the new City Square.²² Dubbed 'The Yellow Peril' by its many critics, *Vault* was a challenging and assertive abstract sculpture, fashioned from many bright yellow horizontal planes. After just eight months in situ, late one evening in December 1980, it was removed from City Square, eventually taking an honoured place on the forecourt to the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Southbank. Despite its ignominy, *Vault* exemplified a new kind of civic and heterogeneous public sculpture, leaving an artistic legacy for City Square that affected future commissions.²³ Future works would be less challenging.

As one newspaper article put it, unlike the 'banished' *Vault*, Larry 'stayed on'.²⁴ Bred to be more personable and less contentious than *Vault*, Larry appeared in the original City Square in 1992 as part of the Swanston Walk project.²⁵ This project attempted to rejuvenate Melbourne's major pedestrian thoroughfare, principally by removing cars, during which the Council reserved \$100,000 for public art.²⁶ The Council sought 'proposals which incorporate a thematic and/or physical link with the chosen site [and] reflect contemporary visual arts practice to 'allow for incremental enrichment of the city'.²⁷ In early 1992, Council welcomed submissions from artists, and fourteen proposals were shortlisted that July. The Council committee envisaged the 'Bronze Dog [would be] a very popular sculpture with children'.²⁸ No other reasons for its selection were minuted in records now deposited with the Public Record Office.

Irving was paid \$1,000 for her design concept; casting and installation cost \$6,550, with 'each additional Larry' to cost less.²⁹ The original proposal was that 'sculpted "lifelike" dogs' be 'strategically placed within the walk'

at locations to be determined.³⁰ This was inexpensive, economically rational public art. Council's independent Public Arts Committee was presented with the list of proposals for comment, notwithstanding Council's decision to commission one 'lifelike dog' sometime during the previous three months.³¹ Irving had also proposed 'Bazza Bourke' and 'Clarrie



Figure 3: Larry La Trobe with Burke and Wills and City Square, 2012.
author's collection

Collins', identical dogs from the same cast, but there was to be just one Larry, a singularity that would be essential to his mythology.³² Theft of one dog statue out of three might have been less significant.

Installed in December 1992 next to a green park bench on Swanston Street, orientated towards the Melbourne Town Hall, Larry soon received company. In 1993 he was joined by *Burke and Wills*; their expedition to find a permanent home had come to an end.³³ This led to City Square's intriguing spatial tableau of sculptures (fig. 3); small versus large; explorers versus a dog; prominent and civic versus ostensibly insignificant and unregarded; both bronze statues.

Artist Pamela Irving was born in Melbourne in 1960 and has a Master of Arts from the University of Melbourne, 1987.³⁴ She takes inspiration from folk art traditions, works in print, ceramic and mosaic sculpture, and also takes part in community art practices. Irving does not explicitly challenge artistic or social conventions, employing largely genial, humorous and figurative motifs. Although Larry is of no indiscernible breed, her own dog provided inspiration for the sculpture's pleasing form: compact yet life-size, grooved body, rascally expression, adoringly cheeky eyes, endearingly tipped ears, and playful demeanour.³⁵

Seen from a distance, Larry's studded collar may appear threatening, but as one walks closer, one becomes aware that there is nothing to fear. His loveable snout and bronze coat have been worn away by rubbing and patting, traces of human adoration. The studs on his collar are smooth, he does not dominate in form or size, and so constitutes an approachable and

city's newest pet. An *Age* columnist described how 'everybody stops to fondle *Larry La Trobe* and even some adults talk to it. (I do.).'³⁸ The *Herald Sun* plastered his photograph across page three, and he appeared, cryptically, in an *Age* crossword.³⁹ The University of Melbourne's student newspaper *Farrago* toasted *Larry* as 'the recipient of countless friendly pats... [a work of]



Figure 4: 'On Larry's Trail', *Melbourne Times*, 1 November 1995
courtesy of the Melbourne Times

safe space. Sharing City Square with *Burke and Wills* and where *Vault* once stood, Larry is not grandiloquent despite being bronze and near the majestic nineteenth century Melbourne Town Hall.

Larry does boast a memorable name, a pleasing alliteration taken from the artist's uncle, Larry, and the northernmost street of the city grid, La Trobe Street. Certainly this street is named after Charles Joseph La Trobe; however, despite being bound in name, Irving has suggested no conscious relationship between the Lieutenant-Governor and Larry. Charles La Trobe may have been fond of dogs, but Larry is not his dog. Rather, Larry is a pet belonging to all Melburnians. Wikipedia contributors claim he was 'crafted to generate a sense of Australian larrikinism in the viewer', a description also applicable to the *Dog on the Tuckerbox*.³⁶ Larry is made personable by his biography and appealing form, and suggestively civic by patron, name and location.

Once in place, Larry provoked popular debate. In August 1993, the Melbourne City Council launched the 'Melbourne Open Air Sculpture Museum'. The 'sculpture walk' incorporated a range of works from *Burke and Wills* to *Larry La Trobe*.³⁷ It produced an eclectic narrative, divergent in style and theme, period and patron, only unified by being located within the Melbourne CBD. A promotional campaign for the walk highlighted Council's 'per cent for art' program, drawing special attention to the

art that is seen and remembered and relevant'.⁴⁰

In contrast, various members of the art world criticised *Larry* and the city's public art program. Before commissioning the new works, the Public Art Committee – comprising eminent Melburnians such as art historian Bernard Smith, sculptor Kenneth William Scarlett and journalist Terry Lane – recorded no objections.⁴¹ The criticism began after *Larry* was installed. Gallery director Maudie Palmer called *Larry* 'small and weird'; architect Joe Rollo bemoaned that the Swanston Street works were 'selected for their potential to appeal as objects of whimsy and curiosity'; and, commentator Virginia Trioli declared that Melbourne needed a tougher and grander public art vision.⁴² Such judgements resonated with American art critic Clement Greenberg's 1939 essay, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', which (re-) affirmed the distinction between high and low art.

Larry became a vessel for waging grander battles.⁴³ It was a debate that mixed quibbles over low and high art, questions about art works that authorities ought to commission, together with civic and urban philosophies. Termed in irresolvable modes, the conflict was ultimately one of taste and distinction; about who should be the ultimate arbiters of public taste.⁴⁴ The debate soon subsided because it was basically extraneous: *Larry* had popularly endeared himself to Melburnians, becoming a permanent city fixture.



**Figure 5: Larry La Trobe
Moomba Float, 1996**
courtesy of Pamela Irving

After *Larry* was dognapped in August 1995, Irving thought *Larry*'s theft was a prank and he would be returned; perhaps similar to the removal and subsequent return of Picasso's *Weeping Woman* from the National Gallery of Victoria.⁴⁵ But neither clues nor trail were found.

To the dismay of *Larry*'s critics, the *Melbourne Times* and the Council staged a campaign for the statue's return, dubbed 'Larry Come Home'.⁴⁶ The name resonated with an earlier generation of Melburnians who had watched *Lassie Come Home*, an American film of 1943 based on the novel of the same name set in Yorkshire during World War II. Local newspapers ran many stories. The *Melbourne Times* was on the lookout for 'loveable Larry', (fig. 4); the *Caulfield/Glen Eira Leader* wrote 'all is forgiven'.⁴⁷ 'Larry the bronze bitser dog statue' was even included in the *Age*'s 'Best of Melbourne' of 1995 under the heading 'Best Sculpture'; it was preceded by 'Best Theatre' (Princess) and followed by 'Best Established Artist' (Arthur Boyd), binding *Larry* to a grand theatrical institution and an eminent visual artist.⁴⁸ Absent *Larry* had been inadvertently propelled to fame.

The 'Larry Come Home' campaign reached its apex during the 1996 Moomba Festival, at the always exuberant final day parade. On 12 March 1996, according to the *Age*, the parade highlight was Larry La Trobe.⁴⁹ With Irving's consent, his motif was appropriated, magnified and recoloured into a float (fig. 5). *Larry*'s float joined another recreated Swanston Street public artwork, *Three Businessmen Who Brought Their Own Lunch*. The *Melbourne Times* featured the float of *Larry* on its front cover.⁵⁰ Parading down Swanston Street to

the acclamation of 150,000 people, enlarged *Larry* even passed his namesake's former abode in City Square.⁵¹ Vanished *Larry* reemerged in giant form, rising above the crowd to new heights, presiding over the city's thoroughfare, a metaphor for his now inflated prominence.

After almost a year, the original bronze had not been found, despite further rumours about its whereabouts.⁵² *Larry* was then to be (re) immortalised. With much acclaim, to the hum of an original poem, a second *Larry La Trobe* was placed in City Square on 16 September 1996.⁵³ Prominent gallery owner Peter Kolliner, who owned the foundry where *Larry* was cast and still held the original mould, gifted the replacement bronze to the city.⁵⁴ The second *Larry* had a slightly redder tinge, which distinguished him from the original pup. He was securely fastened with thirty-centimetre bolts, locked into a concrete block.⁵⁵

The Council subsequently appropriated *Larry* for one more activity. In 1997, the 'Larry Come Home' Moomba float was taken to Osaka, Japan, Melbourne's sister city, for their annual Midosuji Parade.⁵⁶ Perhaps conjuring their *Hachikō* statue, it provoked much excitement and was awarded best float. Travelled *Larry* thus became a fleeting emblem of the city. Like Edinburgh's *Greyfriars Bobby*, *Larry* too was being used to promote Melbourne, becoming implicated in urban boosterism.⁵⁷

Larry had spawned an eccentric Melbourne tale, transforming from a folksy, disputed statue to claim an authentic place in the urban imagination. This was no orchestrated campaign, and few benefited financially. Rather this was an organic and creative expression of local pride, a bit of fun for those who involved themselves. Certainly, via boosterism, *Larry* was bound to broader social, economic and urban processes; specifically, appropriated by civic-minded people and also the tourism industry. In these ways, Melbourne's bronze dog became at once distinguishable from and similar to dog statues elsewhere.

After City Square was redeveloped in 1999, *Larry* was walked to a more prominent home, nearer to the Swanston and Collins Street intersection, safeguarding City Square, and facing Melbourne Town Hall. In 2003 he appeared on the front cover of commuter daily *mX*; in 2009 he flew into Virgin Blue's on-board magazine; in March 2012 he challenged Melburnians in the *Age* super quiz in the lead-up to the Melbourne Romp – a mass scavenger hunt for children and adults alike, premised on urban spatial knowledge.⁵⁸

A prestigious engagement was his inclusion alongside Rodin, Moore and Picasso among 500 public art works from antiquity onwards, that were selected for an international coffee table publication.⁵⁹ However, the debate is still not over as of 2015; *Larry*, *Vault* and Callum Morton's Hotel on the Eastlink freeway are all apparently still 'controversial' Melbourne art works, according to a recent newspaper article.⁶⁰

Perhaps this sudden re-emergence of Larry criticism is a product of his recent activities. In 2011 Occupy Melbourne, part of the contentious transnational urban social movement, appropriated *Larry* (fig.6) as 'Occy the Occudog'.⁶¹ Occupy protestors draped a sign over his neck, reading: 'Stand for your Rights', and on other occasions forced him to speak on their behalf: 'Occupy sez, get a dog Julia', which was directed towards then-Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Appropriated as a temporary emblem

of civic activism, Larry became an expression of urban protest, occupying city space without threat of eviction.

In City Square, Larry contributes to what historian Dolores Hayden calls 'the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory'.⁶² He becomes part of everyday urban social experience. His story is understandable and relatable, readily re-imagined by children and adults alike; continuously retold in newspapers and tourist guidebooks, on the internet and as part of the Melbourne Open Air Sculpture Museum. Attracting advocacy, controversy, thievery and mystery, Larry spawned a stimulating imaginary life, seizing a place amidst civic mythologies. In the present, Larry interacts with people at street level and beyond, helping people to forge a sense of urban belonging.



Figure 6: Larry La Trobe 'occupied' by Occupy Melbourne movement, 2012
author's collection

* Source of photographs: collection of famous dogs (Figure 2)

Capitoline Wolf, Wikipedia user: Rosemania / CC BY 2.0, 2010
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:She-wolf_of_Rome.JPG, accessed 22 December 2015).

Greyfriars Bobby, Rebecca Siegel / CC BY 2.0, 2010
(<http://www.flickr.com/photos/grongar/5114712728/>, accessed 22 December 2015).

Hachikō, Author's collection, 2010.

Dog on the Tuckerbox, Wikipedia user: AYArktos / CC BY-SA 2.5, 2005
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Endnotes

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- 16 Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, chap. 7.
- 17 Ridley, *Melbourne's Monuments*, pp.39–40.
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- 22 Geoffrey Joseph Wallis, *Peril in the Square: the sculpture that challenged a city*, Melbourne: Indra Publishing, 2004.
- 23 E.g., the Committee was concerned that *Architectural Fragments*, a piece depicting classical ruins located outside the State Library of Victoria, 'may be destined the same fate as Vault'; per PROV, VPRS 8373/P2 Unit 389.
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- 50 *Melbourne Times*, 6 March 1996.
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- 52 For Kennel: *Melbourne Times*, 11 October 1995; 'Larry Licked', *Herald Sun*, 17 September 1996; for Yarra River drowning see Melanie Wright, 'Moving parts', *Australian Financial Review*, 11 December 1998. Irving continues to receive correspondence about Larry's whereabouts.
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