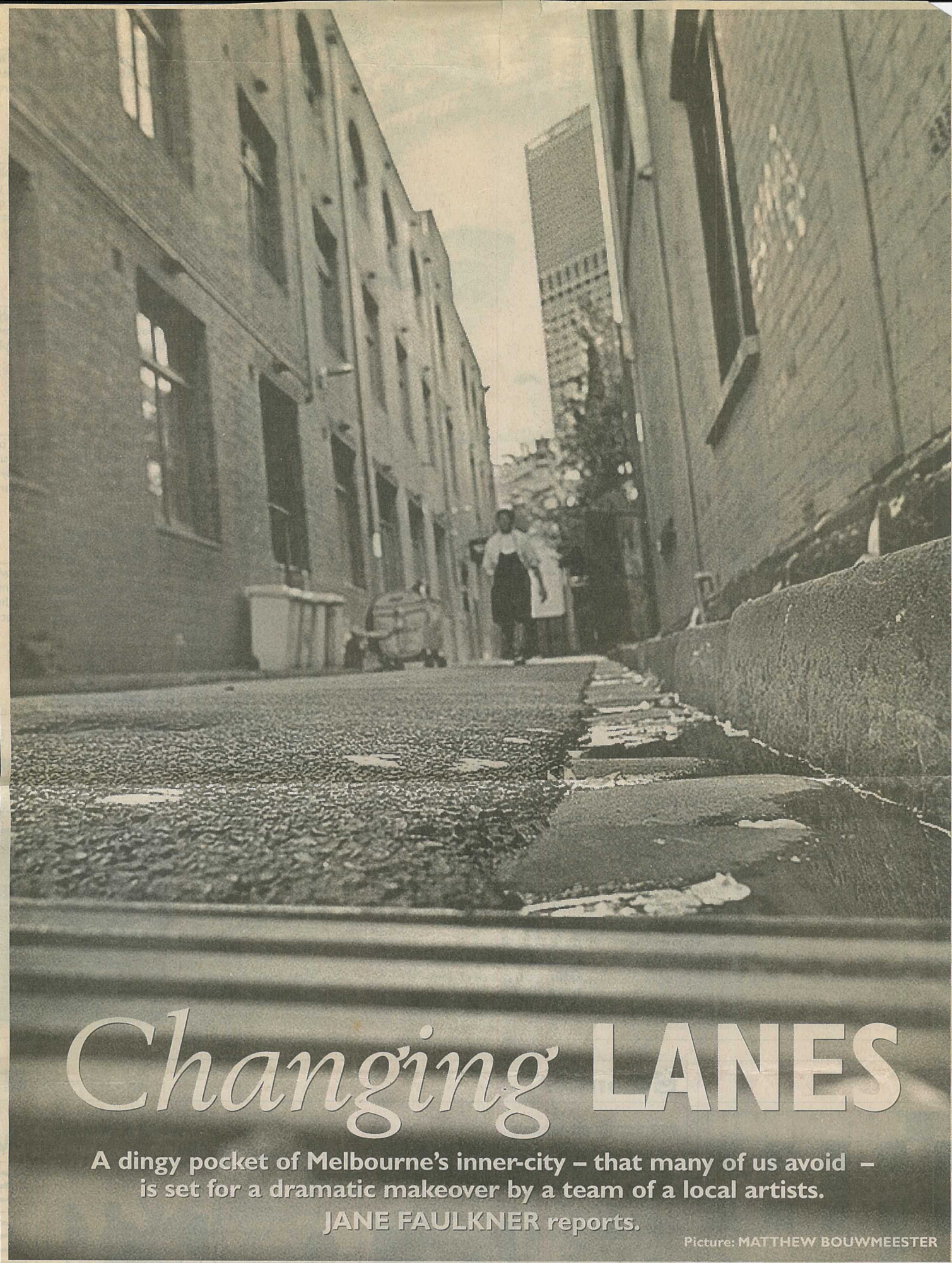


Changing LANES

A dingy pocket of Melbourne's inner-city – that many of us avoid – is set for a dramatic makeover by a team of a local artists.

JANE FAULKNER reports.

Picture: MATTHEW BOUWMEESTER

ARTISTIC inspiration can emanate from the most unlikely sources. Take La Trobe Place.The most striking feature of this laneway is just how unremarkable it seems.

There is an overpowering stench of vomit and urine in a precinct wedged between two high walls, its uneven path barely sees any light of day. La Trobe Place links busy Bourke and Little Bourke Streets, yet few shoppers or office workers scurry through, and come nightfall, it's deserted. How could anyone transform such an unimpressive site?

Artists Christopher Mether and Luke Adams think La Trobe Place is perfect for a creative makeover.

"It is stinky, and it apparently really reeks in summer. This is probably the best of the dingiest laneways in Melbourne. We've done well," says Mether cheerfully.

The two have been commissioned by the City of Melbourne, through its public art program, to revivify La Trobe Place. Four other laneways have also been earmarked, and other artists selected to transform them.

Mether and Adams will install eight powerful surveillance-style spotlights from one end to the other, activated when someone walks down the lane. Adams says once the first light is triggered, it continues in sequence so that the pedestrian must keep up; the lights set the pace. It's about encouraging a livelier thoroughfare, he says.

The installation will either amuse or scare the wit out of pedestrians.

The proposal pokes fun at security issues, but Mether says: "It can be interpreted as a benevolent guidance light to help you out, or that somebody is watching, and acting as security to keep the junkies out."

Have Mether and Adams, and the other artists unwittingly become street sanitisers on behalf of the council?

"Well maybe, but where else do you put public art?" asks Mether. "This is such a problematic space, and what we're doing wouldn't have worked anywhere else but in a dingy laneway. It's that contradiction that makes this project worthwhile."

Continued T 3

Dodgy laneways turn artful

From T 1

HISTORIAN Weston Bate says, "our laneways are very much a feature of Melbourne" and in 1994 he was commissioned to write their history — *Essential but Unplanned — the story of Melbourne's lanes.*

From humble beginnings, the lanes were the north-south links to the main east-west streets. As Melbourne burgeoned through the 1800s, the lanes offered cheap, cheek-by-jowl, accommodation to artisans and laborers of the city.

One of the most interesting is Brien Lane, says Bate, named after a butcher in 1848, and later crammed with small Chinese tenements.

"This lane probably had more vice to the metre than any other part of Melbourne, even after the gospel hall was built!

"There's a lot of interesting ecology about this city."

Now Brien Lane is about to be rediscovered thanks to Louisa Bufardeci. She's been selected to paint a colorful road mural, resembling a bar graph laden with information about Melburnians.

Nearby, in Heffernan Lane, Evangelos Sakaris has decided to link the Greek and Chinese precincts with street signs bearing ancient Greek and Chinese sayings.

Graphic designer and artist, Daniella Tigani has drawn inspiration from Brunelleschi's 15th century perspective experiments. Tigani is creating delicate, three-dimensional structures to be placed on bollards along Punch Lane. Each of the three structures can be peered through to gain a perspective on architectural history.

Around the corner, David Williams and Carol Porter will bring to life, through visual and aural representations, the Chinn family, who lived on the corner of Cohen Place and Smythe Lane during the early 20th century.

The disparate art works are expected to be on show from early next year in what is the first major project in an ongoing council initiative. The project for the five lanes has been allocated $100,000.

"These proposals are extraordinarily diverse," says Councillor Kate Redwood, chair of the Environment, Community Services and Cultural Development Standing Committee. "They are essentially ephemeral art with a strong element of whimsy and humor."

Although these exhibits are temporary, on a broader level the project is about diversifying views of art. Citing the marble purse outside the GPO, Redwood says Melbourne has "inherited some important bronzes from a previous age, but not all are immediately identifiably today, compared with more modern pieces".

"Public art is important because it represents the identity of a place, making it attractive, more enticing, and therefore, people want to be there to enjoy it," she says.

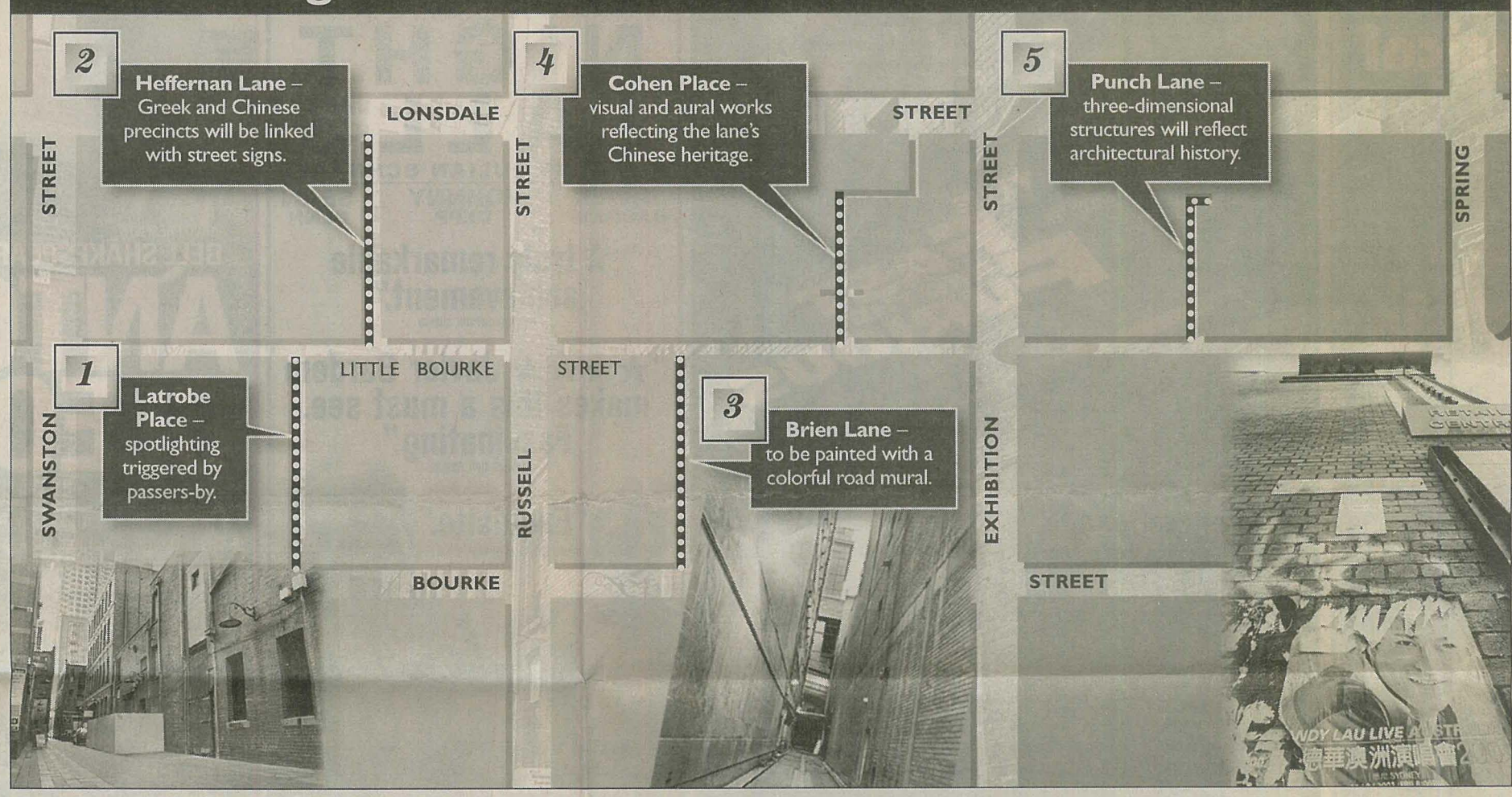
Permanent works will be a feature of the council's on-going commitment to public art.

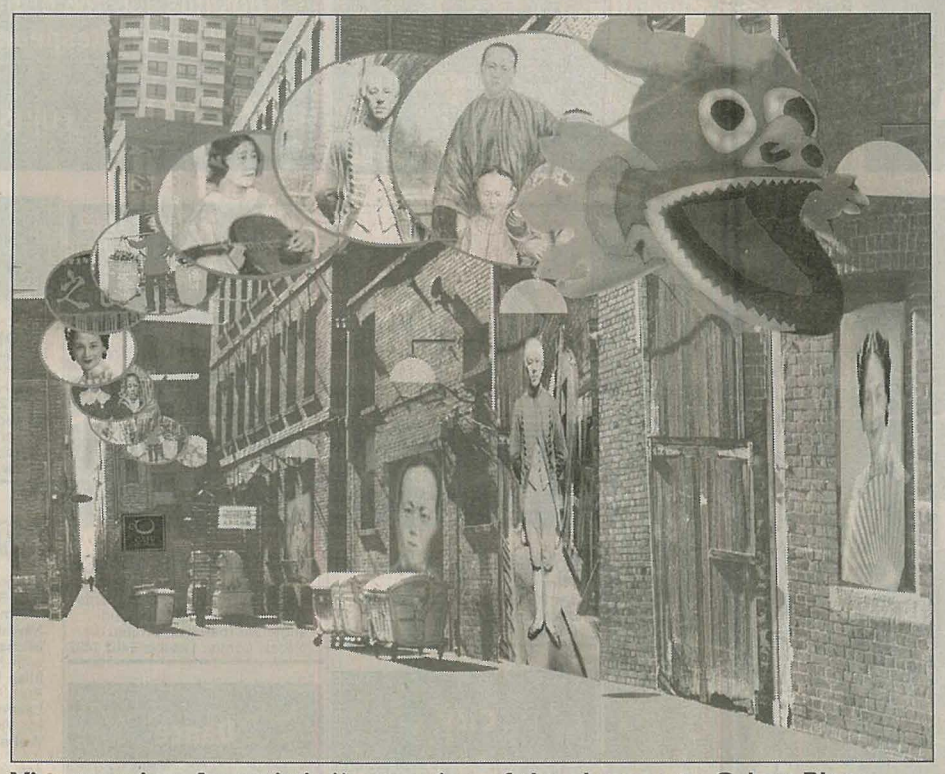
Yet Tigani relishes the idea that her first foray into public art is evanescent. Tigani usually creates fragile pieces unsuitable for outside exposure, but after traipsing through all the streets and laneways, and being forced to scrap an initial plan, she settled on Punch Lane with its bollards, austerity, concrete and bluestone. It was begging to be used as her backdrop.

The result will be a journey "viewing old or new", as well as "tracing memory", she says.

Perhaps the most elaborate proposal is that of Williams and Porter. Williams has created a soundtrack with a musical score, snippets of aural history, and a plot woven around the extraordinary story of the Chinns.

Transforming our lanes





Vice to voice: An artist's iimpression of the changes to Cohen Place.

> "Public art is important because it represents the identity of a place, making it attractive, more enticing, and therefore, people want to be there to enjoy it."
>
> *CR KATE REDWOOD*

The family, who lived in Cohen Place from the early 1900s to the 1960s, were fruit merchants. Some acted in musical comedy at Her Majesty's theatre that backed on to their abode; they organised dragon parades and lion dances, and were even responsible for running an all-Chinese football team.

Porter is screen printing their images, taken from photographs, to place on to walls and two-metre circular banners suspended five metres above the ground. The banners resemble a traditional Chinese dragon kite, the head of which is being constructed by the famous Wei Kite factory in China. And corresponding to each image, Williams is constructing hi-tech sound domes; walk under each and a sensor triggers the soundtrack.

Williams says, "there's also a beautiful voice, the narrator essentially of this story". She's Thelma Cremin, a Chinn descendant. Williams regards Thelma as the star of the show.

Before Cremin died a few years ago, Paul Macgregor, curator of the Chinese Museum, spent hours interviewing her. The result is seven hours of historic, invaluable tapes. Williams has included fragments of narration into the score.

The exhibit will be launched to coincide with Chinese New Year on February 16 and after its month-long public display, the artwork will be housed in the Chinese museum.

The artistic transformation of these lanes, albeit temporary, pleases and amuses Weston Bate.

He knows their seedy history too well. How in the Chinatown red light area of Little Bourke Street, back in 1869, "Constable Flannery could find no more than a handful of respectable people. The lanes were full of prostitutes, pimps and thieves." Let history run its own course, says Bate. Despite the metamorphosis of our lanes, they have a life of their own — a history that cannot be scrubbed clean.

In the future, no matter how much adornment or public art illuminates their paths, the so-called "seedier side of life" will continue to make its mark. It has always done so. T