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Wall of fortune

THE Queen Victoria Women's Centre is a red brick Edwardian tower surrounded by the steel and glass QV shopping precinct in Lonsdale Street. Both take their name from the pioneering hospital that once stood on the site. The tower - all that remains of the hospital - looks as aloof as Queen Victoria herself from the commercial bustle around it. "The building definitely needs some identifying features," says architect Cassandra Fahey. "I don't think anyone really knows what goes on in there or what it is."

Melbourne architect and critic Dimity Reed, who has been a patron of the women's centre since 1994, agrees. "It's a funny predicament it's in," she says. "It has a fairly male, commercial culture all around it. And because of its heritage listing, it's virtually impossible to put signage up."

When it opened in 1896, the Queen Victoria Hospital was only the third hospital in the world to be staffed and controlled by women; this was possible because Victorian women paid to build it. Asked to donate one shilling towards the project, they raised £3162 11s 9d, an amount equivalent to \$5.7 million today.

The Queen Victoria Women's Centre is launching a Shilling Wall to remind women of the hospital's extraordinary history and to raise money and awareness of the work the centre does now. By making a donation (the cheapest is \$150) people can honour a woman of importance to them. Their names will be printed on a wall - actually it will be a series of glass walls or hedges - and their details entered into a database so others can learn about them.

The double-sided glass walls will stand in new landscaped gardens surrounding the tower which have been designed to make the building look more beautiful and accessible. At present, ungainly concrete ramps stand between the historic cast-iron fence that separates the site from the street and the red brick tower. Under the new plans the cast-iron fence will remain but the ramps will be removed and gardens will be planted in their place; the two-metre high glass walls will form part of the garden.

Covering the glass walls will be a series of medallions that look a bit like an old-fashioned pendant and a bit like a flower. Each will carry the name of a woman who is being honoured on the wall.

Fahey, who designed the wall and its decorative motif, notes that the tower, as it stands, "doesn't have any celebratory, beautiful features". Fahey, the architect behind the "Pamela Anderson" house at Albert Park, describes the pattern she has made for the wall as being "plant-like, organic". But there is also a biological quality to the circular figure with its triangular cross-sections, which Fahey says refers to the many births that took place in the hospital and also to the IVF program at the Monash Medical Centre. (The Queen Victoria Hospital was transferred to the Clayton site after it closed in 1989).

The wall will honour the women who founded the hospital and will also celebrate Victorian women generally. Reed points out that women rarely have statues or portraits made of them and that the wall is a way of "acknowledging ordinary people who have made wonderful contributions".

She plans to list the names of her two grandmothers, her mother, her brothers' wives, her nephews' wives, her daughters-in-law and her granddaughters on the wall because she likes the idea of her granddaughters being able to trace her family history in this way. And she is also intrigued by the

story of her maternal grandmother, Mary Veronica Barbour, who came to Melbourne alone from Mildura in 1906 to work as a servant in St Kilda.

On the train to town, Mary Veronica gave birth to Reed's mother, Jess Barbour. "To me, it's an extraordinary story," Reed says. "Leaving home pregnant, going to support yourself in a strange city." Reed reflects, however, that many women had similarly difficult struggles. They are not public figures, although they might be heroes to their sons and daughters.

Margaret Prendergast, 63, wants to honour her mother, Marie Sims, who married Stanley Prendergast in 1928. "Mum was almost burned to death when she was three," Prendergast says. Marie's back and her right arm were badly damaged when her clothing caught fire; doctors wanted to amputate the child's arm but her parents would not allow it. Marie became a dressmaker, partly so she could make glamorous dresses to disguise her injuries.

When sleeveless flapper dresses were in fashion, she made dresses for herself with one sequined sleeve. She ran her own dressmaking business, had five children (her eldest daughter, Marion, died at 12 after an appendectomy) and lived until she was 95. Prendergast says she still has many of the buttons and other accessories her mother used and hopes to sell them one day in a vintage clothing and accessories boutique.

Accountant Kester Brown wants to honour his mother Janet Patricia Brown (nee Penfold) who had five children and returned to work as a physiotherapist when she was "about 40". He admires her for returning to her career, for her community work with a Uniting Church in Deepdene and for being "an amazing mother". Her support helped make it possible for his father, Dr Kester Brown, an anaesthetist at the Royal Children's Hospital, to enjoy a successful career, he says. "Dad couldn't have done what he did if she hadn't stayed with the family and helped to make it happen," he says.

The Shilling Wall will also remember the women who were responsible for founding the Queen Victoria Hospital. At the time the hospital was conceived, women doctors had struggled to be accepted at the University of Melbourne and the first graduates did not easily find work; issues which were the subject of lively debate in the newspapers of the day. When Wilhelmina Ferguson, a female medical graduate from the University of Pennsylvania, tried to find work in Melbourne in the 1860s, the editor of the Australian Medical Journal dismissed the possibility that women could ever practise medicine, predicting that people would wonder at women doctors "just as it wonders at dancing dogs, fat boys and bearded ladies".

Constance Stone, the hospital's founder and the first Australian woman to be a medical graduate, had to study in the US to become qualified. When she finished her studies she was employed by the pioneering New Hospital for Women in London, which provided the model for what would become the Queen Victoria Hospital. In part, Dr Stone wanted to create a hospital where she and her fellow graduates could work, unfettered by the prejudices of their male peers.

The Queen Victoria Women's Centre was established by an act of Parliament in 1994. Like the hospital whose name it carries, the centre is run by women, for women. It shares space in the tower with other not-for-profit organisations working, sometimes together, to protect and enhance women's lives. They include the YWCA, the Centre Against Sexual Assault, Emily's List and the Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition.

The general manager of the Queen Victoria Women's Centre, Cheryl Teng, says more than 6000 names can be included on the wall. There are five categories of donations, ranging from \$150 to \$5000; all of the money raised will fund programs designed to empower Victorian women. It is

intended that the names on the wall will be listed on a database, which will be accessed in the foyer, so that interested people will be able to read about the nominees.

Aboriginal elder of the Wurundijeri people Aunty Joy Mercy Wandin will conduct a smoking ceremony tomorrow at the QVWC at 10am to cleanse the land in preparation for the building of the Shilling Wall.

Work on the first stage will begin this year.

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