

# **An Eventful Tourism City: Hosting Major International Exhibitions in Melbourne**

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## **Introduction**

It is a truism that nowadays cities are using events as a tool to generate and maintain a range of benefits, including income generation, community pride, cultural vibrancy, and image enhancement. Events have become an inseparable part of any urban policy agenda.

Staging ad hoc events is not sufficient for a city to achieve its wider objectives in tourism and to maximise the benefits of the hosted events; rather, events should be integrated in the physical space, culture, and identity of the host city (Richards & Palmer, 2010). This integrative approach to events as a part of a city's wider ambitions is embraced by the term 'eventfulness'. As a concept, eventfulness is sometimes presented as a panacea for the urban problems caused by neoliberalism. Contemporary city orientation towards commercialisation, theming, and entertainment raises a question of artificial and themed urbanity where places have been transformed into entertainment productions and stages for an ever-growing number of performances and events (e.g., Smith, 2016). 'Eventfulness' implies that a city thinks holistically about events, that it elaborates event calendars, being mindful of how events affect each other, city residents, and the various sectors and stakeholders involved.

Truly eventful cities are not just responding to market trends, but are among market leaders that are provoking publics (Richards, 2015). Richards and Duif (2019, p. 21) argue that in order to compete in the economy of attraction and fascination (Schmid, 2006) and to maximise positive effects from staged events, cities require programming, which is “a coherent series of strategic actions that are developed over time”. Such activities can lead to the development of a sustainable and balanced portfolio of events (Antchak, 2017; Getz, 2017), where events complement each other and contribute to the development of a unique place identity.

This chapter explores how a portfolio of major international exhibitions has contributed to the development of eventfulness in Melbourne, Australia. The city of Melbourne has constructed an ambitious and competitive programme of major cultural events that has positively affected the brand of the destination and the overall attractiveness of the place.

Major cultural exhibitions are shown as an effective tool for enhancing Melbourne’s vibrancy and making the city attractive for tourists and residents alike. In our study, these effects were found to be dependent upon the alignment of the exhibitions with regard to the city’s context, objectives, and experiences provided. The chapter draws together the idea of an ‘eventful’ city with the concepts of storytelling and place identity and examines events as their key agents.

### **Place Branding, Storytelling and Events**

The global competition for capital and human resources (Hall, 2006), as well as endeavours by cities to be ranked as ‘best places to live and do business in’, has prompted urban destinations to think about tourism, and the visitor economy in general, as a means to achieve wider long-term goals. Therefore, places are attempting to redefine themselves as distinctive identities through enhancing their local characteristics and communicating attractive brands (Ashworth & Page, 2011). Recent research by Oxford Economics (2014) shows that investment in destination marketing and promotion not only generates dividends by attracting visitors, but

also raises the quality of life, develops transportation networks, builds a place's profile, and deepens connections through staging events.

A place brand represents the complexity of the tangible and intangible assets that distinguish this place from others and are difficult to replicate. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2006, p. 189) maintain that,

A place needs to be differentiated through a unique brand identity if it wants to be, first, recognised as existing, secondly, perceived in the minds of place customers as possessing qualities superior to those of competitors and, thirdly, consumed in a manner commensurate with the objectives of the place.

Pike (2004, 2008) suggests that a city brand represents an identity for the brand's producer, and an image for the consumer. Brand identity is aspirational and reflects the desired perceptions associated with a brand, while brand image is understood as existing perceptions of a brand (Aaker, 1996). Brand identity may be conceptualised in terms of the vision and culture of the brand, which are at the core of how the brand is positioned, what relationships it generates, and what personality it possesses (de Chernatony, 1999). Therefore, the uniqueness of a place should be identified in order to emphasise its points of difference. In many instances, however, the search for place identity is often marked by pursuing similar strategies, such as waterfront developments, creation of entertainment and shopping districts, construction of convention bureaus and stadiums, and urban beautification (Spirou, 2011).

To solve the problem of sameness and load a brand with meaning, cities need to develop and distribute authentic stories (Richards & Duif, 2019). Storytelling has arguably become one of the most in-demand strategies in city branding and destination marketing. A real or fictitious story can showcase and communicate unique competitive advantages of a place and attract desirable attention. A good story about a place consists of many dimensions linked to different facets of the city. It consolidates multiple stakeholders and inspires attractiveness and visitation

and overall meaningfulness of the place experience for both local residents and tourists. The elements of a place story can then be communicated in terms of images, core messages, and signs (Richards & Duif, 2019). Govers (2018, p. 59) argues that storytelling is a prerogative of ‘admired’ or ‘imaginative’ communities with a strong sense of belonging. Such communities enchant their audiences by creating “amazing imaginative stuff” and captivating national and international attention.

In many cities, events have been employed to communicate positive stories about places, increase ‘visitability’, as well as catalyse urban development and transformation. Events can be used to amplify visitation, diversify tourist products, regulate seasonality, rejuvenate destinations, consolidate local assets, and bolster a destination’s authenticity (Ziakas, 2014). For instance, Edinburgh has successfully positioned itself as the world leading festival city (Edinburgh Festival City, n.d.); Rotterdam has expended efforts to develop a programme of cultural events to improve the cultural image of the city (Richards & Wilson, 2004); Auckland uses events to become the most liveable city in the world (Auckland Tourism Events and Economic Development, 2018).

Cities, however, should not only employ events to market themselves to the existing or potential visitors and residents but also use events as part of ‘making the place’, both socially and culturally, through “developing a special ‘atmosphere’ unique to a place that cannot be found elsewhere” (Richards & Palmer, 2010, p. 419). The capability of events to change places might be of particular relevance for cities or destinations lacking an iconic landmark or a ‘character’, as events can add vivid atmosphere and bring in new people and ideas. Events can consolidate tangible and intangible resources available to a city, “weaving narratives to link resources and meanings into a coherent story” (Richards & Duif, 2019, p. 17).

Creativity appears to have become a leading notion in place-making and marketing. It is the strategy for a broader instrumentalisation of a place's cultural assets in a search for growth and innovation (Richards, 2011). Events as 'creative spectacles' (Richards & Wilson, 2006) provide a direct link between creativity and tourism, build networks, and enhance the feeling of festivity. Creativity challenges the serial reproduction of culture and places through the creation of new cultural forms and innovative cultural products (Richards & Wilson, 2006). A creative city becomes a place where "the surprise of discoveries and encounters is the major potential, the main productive force" (Levy, 2011, p. 33).

### **Eventfulness**

Sporadically organised events are not capable of delivering long-term positive outcomes or of maintaining attention and interest in a destination. Events should be managed holistically as a part of the city's wider ambitions. This integrative approach to events is embraced by the term 'eventful' city (Richards & Palmer, 2010).

Richards (2017) identifies three different strategies of eventfulness. All three strategies are focused on delivering certain benefits to a city, making it an attractive destination and a liveable place. Event-Centric Eventfulness focuses on the development of event policies, programmes, and overall management of events in a city. However, the narrow focus of this approach does not guarantee a balanced distribution of event-led benefits into other sectors of the local economy or city life in general. A Sector-Centric Eventfulness is based on the understanding that events can generate more positive outcomes beyond the immediate direct impacts. This strategy values events as a platform for particular economic or socio-cultural activities in a city; it helps to unite stakeholders and consolidate sectoral resources. Finally, a Network-Centric Eventfulness provides an opportunity for a city to join an international network and to make the city a hub for different activities related or non-related to events. For example, by linking

tourism, international events, and creative industries, a city can overcome its limitations, reach new markets, and use international networks to leverage added value.

Overall, the successful eventful city puts the “cultural ecology of a city” first (Richards & Palmer, 2010, p. 415). Events should be embedded in the city context, reflect its culture, diversity, and identity, and be more concerned with the quality of events, rather than their quantity. This vision can be achieved by implementing diverse portfolio strategies.

The effective realisation of a balanced and well-planned event portfolio can bring significant attention to a destination. A series of events included into a portfolio can enhance particular features or competitive advantages of a destination, and hence develop its attractiveness. As a policy tool, an event portfolio can play a role of a catalyst for urban development, consolidating and stimulating different stakeholders, sustainably using available soft and hard resources and building confidence in the community. The literature suggests different approaches to event portfolio programming (e.g., Antchak, 2017; Antchak & Pernecky, 2017; Dragin-Jensen, Schnittka, & Arkil, 2016; Getz, 2013). The common argument is that an event portfolio should contain an array of different genres and types of events of local, national, and international significance. Destinations can bid for events, create events, or invest into already existing local events. To diversify the content of an event portfolio, some destinations apply creativity and include in their portfolios not only sporting competitions and large-scale festivals, but such cultural projects as touring exhibitions, which are footloose events and usually do not happen in the same place twice (Getz, 2013).

### **Introducing Touring Exhibitions**

Exhibitions designed to be exhibited in several venues for limited duration are described as ‘touring’ or ‘travelling’ (Belcher, 1991). Some major touring exhibitions often include original art works and artefacts, rarely seen together, while others present high-quality replicas. Such

exhibitions are one-off occurrences and may be organised by museums, art galleries, fashion houses, film studios, or private companies, and therefore the origin and nature of the exhibits vary significantly. The large financial and time resources involved make it important for these exhibitions to be shown in different museums and destinations, that is, to travel (Bradburne, 2001). These cultural projects are usually widely advertised in the media, generating a sensational attention to the event and its host destination (Sepulveda dos Santos, 2001).

Touring exhibitions can arguably be considered as part of the creative tourism phenomenon, place-making, and strategic storytelling. Previous research (Carmichael, 2002; Mihalik & Wing-Vogelbacher, 1993) demonstrates that touring exhibitions are capable of attracting tourists, generating income for local business, and facilitating cities' competitiveness and profile alongside other large-scale city events. Such events have a major power to draw visitors (Getz, 2013) and deliver once-in-a-lifetime, memorable experiences for the audience (Axelsen, 2006a; Kotler, Kotler, & Kotler, 2008). A 'true blockbuster' may attract an audience comprised of 50% of out-of-town visitors (Lord & Piacente, 2014).

The potential of major international cultural exhibitions in destination marketing remains a relatively neglected area in tourism and events studies. Only a few researchers have explored it so far: visitors' motivations were investigated by Axelsen and Arcodia (2004) and Axelsen (2006a, 2006b, 2007); exhibitions' potential for the tourism sector of a city were analysed by Mihalik and Wing-Vogelbacher (1993), Carmichael (2002), and, recently, by Calinao and Lin (2016); while Arnaud, Soldo, and Keramidas (2012) focused on the effects of such cultural events on territorial governance and stakeholder management.

There is a clear demand to explore the phenomenon of major touring exhibitions further and understand the ways such events can be employed by destinations to build an international profile and capitalise on the financial and socio-cultural benefits from such events.

## **Research Context: Melbourne, Australia**

Melbourne is located in southeast Australia and is the capital of the state of Victoria. In 2018, the population of the city reached 5 million people (Population Australia, n.d.), and it is currently the fastest growing city in Australia. Melbourne may become the largest Australian city by 2028 (Longbottom & Knight, 2018, October 16).

The Victorian Major Events Company (VMEC) was established in 1991 with the aim of securing major events for Melbourne. Since 2016, the responsibilities of VMEC and Tourism Victoria, the state's previous tourism body, were brought together under a single entity of Visit Victoria, the state of Victoria's destination marketing organisation – "one body, one clear plan", as it was announced (Premier of Victoria, n.d.). Therefore, at the time of writing this chapter, Visit Victoria was an organisation whose remit covered both attracting major events to the city and developing tourism in the region. In Melbourne itself, there also exists a Greater Melbourne tourism organisation, Destination Melbourne, that markets the city within the state of Victoria and helps to develop the visitor industry.

In Melbourne, there are more than 100 art galleries, museums, and other spaces operating in the cultural and creative industries. The National Gallery of Victoria is the oldest and – located across two galleries – one of the biggest in Australia. The Australian Centre for the Moving Image is a unique institution – it is Australia's only national museum of the moving image in all its forms – film, television, games, and digital culture. The Melbourne Museum is a natural and cultural history museum that showcases the country's social history, indigenous cultures, as well as science and natural environment. The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Heide Museum of Modern Art, and a number of independent galleries and artist-run spaces are located in Melbourne.

A research study by the Boston Consulting Group (2015) suggests that Melbourne has a compelling and diverse creative and cultural offer. In 2015, the city attracted more than 10 million national and international visitors. In total 69% of the international visitors who participated in the research agreed that Melbourne is a creative city that offers many attractions, events, and experiences. However, Melbourne's position as a leading cultural and creative destination in Australia has been challenged as other cities in the country are investing heavily in cultural infrastructure. In such a competitive environment, the strategic priority for Melbourne is to make culture a key part of the city proposition, optimise and expand the current offer, develop and communicate clear creative messages, protect current and invest in new cultural infrastructure, and enhance overall governance and collaboration.

## **Methodology**

This chapter is based on a qualitative case study conducted in 2015-2016 as part of a larger research project (Gorchakova, 2017) that investigated the role of touring 'blockbuster' exhibitions in the marketing of cities in Australia and New Zealand. The data were collected in a form of semi-structured interviews with destination managers, event planners, representatives of museums, and other cultural institutions. The city and state policies, strategies, and regulations in tourism, events, and culture were sourced and analysed, along with statistical data, exhibition reports, and publications in mass media. In total, six interviews and 15 documents were thematically analysed applying both manual coding and the qualitative analysis software, NVivo 12. Several quotes from the interviews are used in this chapter to support the main thesis.

Thematic analysis revealed an interplay of three key constructs that affect the realisation of the city's place-making and marketing strategies and also provide an innovative way to utilise events as key storytelling agents. These are 'Creativity and major events', 'Collaboration', and

‘Place representation through events’. The following sections of this chapter will explore each of the constructs in detail.

### **Creativity and Major Events in Melbourne**

Melbourne is a city that cannot be associated with one particular world-famous, well-recognised location or a landmark; therefore, the city has chosen to focus on something that it can control and what can significantly contribute to its competitive advantage – special events. Arguably, many cities around the world have used special events as tourism drivers, but their focus has overwhelmingly been on sport events (e.g., Antchak, 2017). Melbourne was no exception prior to the early 2000s. Around that time, VMEC began to think creatively in the events realm. In particular, it was recognised that in the cultural, lifestyle, and creative space, there were possible opportunities that could also prove hugely popular with tourists. Thus, cultural exhibitions emerged on the radar of VMEC and they continue to be regarded as major city events today.

As a result of this new strategic direction, a special annual series of international ‘blockbuster’ exhibitions, Melbourne Winter Masterpieces (MWM), has been organised in the city since 2004 to promote tourism and the city brand image. The exhibitions are deliberately scheduled for the winter season to mitigate the overall downtime in the city’s visitor economy sector. Because these events take place indoors, they are not dependent upon the weather, as many sport events are. Therefore, an annual exhibition programme is able to fill the gap in the events calendar – and it delivers. *The Impressionists: Masterpieces from the Musée d’Orsay* was organised in June – September 2004. Its brand and content were strong enough to attract some 380,000 visitors – a record attendance for any art exhibition held in Australia before that time (Council of Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria, 2005).

Under this programme, the National Gallery of Victoria has presented some of the most remarkable exhibitions ever hosted in Australia, featuring the works of Degas, Picasso, Dali,

Van Gogh, and masterpieces from the world’s largest museums, such as the Hermitage, the Prado Museum, the Musée d’Orsay, and the Museum of Modern Art. The Australian Centre for the Moving Image has also hosted a number of major exhibitions. Among the most well-known are *David Bowie Is*, *Tim Burton: The Exhibition*, and *Pixar: 20 Years of Animation*. The ‘blockbusters’ at the Melbourne Museum include *Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs* and *A Day in Pompeii*. Overall, the 25 exhibitions organised in Melbourne since 2004 as part of the MWM have attracted nearly 6.5 million visitors (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Melbourne Winter Masterpieces Series. Attendance (2004 – 2018).** Source: Creative Victoria (2019)

2018	Masterworks from Museum of Modern Art, New York	404,000
2018	Wonderland	179,000
2017	Wallace & Gromit and friends: The Magic of Aardman	110,000
2017	Van Gogh and the Seasons	462,000
2016	Degas: A New Vision	198,000
2015	Masterpieces from the Hermitage	172,000
2015	David Bowie is	199,000
2014	Italian Masterpieces	153,000
2014	DreamWorks Animation	220,000
2013	Monet's Garden	343,000
2013	Hollywood Costumes	204,000
2012	Game Masters	103,000
2012	Napoleon: Revolution to Empire	189,000

2011	Tutankhamun	796,000
2011	Vienna: Art and Design	172,000
2010	European Masters	200,000
2010	Tim Burton: The Exhibition	276,000
2009	A Day in Pompeii	333,000
2009	Salvador Dali: Liquid Desire	333,000
2008	Art Deco 1910-1939	241,000
2007	Guggenheim	180,000
2007	Pixar - 2007	147,000
2006	Picasso	224,000
2005	Dutch Masters	219,000
2004	The Impressionists	371,000
	Total	6,428,000

Melbourne, as a host city, was able to secure exclusive rights in Australia for all MWM exhibitions. Previously, major exhibitions, when coming to Australia, toured a number of cities; however, VMEC suggested that Melbourne should have exclusive rights, and later the requirement transcended to include not only Australia but also New Zealand. As innovative as it was, the rationale was also sensible and therefore was welcomed by the exhibitions' lenders – their exhibits would not be subject to venue changes and freight risks, the logistics would be easier to handle with only one host institution involved, and all the organisational and insurance costs would be reduced. As one of the museum managers in Melbourne mentioned: “So the idea that they could sit in one very highly regarded gallery, rather than being on the road, being

freighted around the country, was very appealing... it was a lightbulb moment.” At the same time, VMEC understood that they would need to attract more visitors to cover the costs; therefore, an exhibition would have to be strong and appealing enough to draw audiences from outside of Melbourne and the state of Victoria, and VMEC would have to be more creative in marketing in order to get higher national visibility to secure those audiences.

Special programming of a number of smaller events around a ‘blockbuster’ exhibition is part of this creative approach. Events include live music concerts, curatorial talks, and family events and activities, including the setting up of photo booths or spaces where children can become creative themselves. When marketing major exhibitions, a sense of occasion is communicated – that there is something special, a must-see in town, and it is here only for a limited period of time. Such a message relays a sense of urgency and uniqueness and inspires visitors to come.

On its initiation, this was a different type of event portfolio model to try. The goal was to create a distinctive cultural brand and re-shape perspectives of the cultural institutions and other partners – including the overseas ones – around the way exhibitions could be organised as major events and contribute to brand identity and city attractiveness. Adding high-profile exhibitions to the city’s events portfolio signified an ambitious and creative approach to events by the state’s decision-makers and tourism and event planners, who, along with the cultural institutions, demonstrated an “appetite for new projects” and willingness to take risks. As a result, Melbourne has arguably got one of the most ‘stellar’ arts event portfolios in Australasia. This may not have been achieved in the absence of productive stakeholder relationships.

### **Collaboration in Melbourne**

The level of collaboration and partnership is advanced in Melbourne. The stakeholders do not work in silos, but instead are able to work together to organise and deliver an event. Naturally, the more that people work with one another, the more experience they gain and the higher the

chances of success of the projects are. As one of the interviewees mentioned, obtaining initial experience was critical for the development of stakeholders' expertise, industry capacity, and the reputation "of being a city that does events and exhibitions really well... that we are capable of hosting excellent events".

The term "Team Melbourne" was used by another interviewee to describe the high level of collaboration between the stakeholders in the city. The first MWM exhibition was claimed to be a result of the "assiduous" work of the NGV, VMEC, and Art Exhibitions Australia, with indemnity support from the Federal Government, and the "vital role" of Tourism Victoria "in connecting Melbourne's interstate and international visitors with this important show" (Council of Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria, 2005, p. 15).

Bringing stakeholders together at an early stage of the project is one of the main objectives of VMEC – "a very broad range of people – often 20 or 30 people around a table getting briefed on the project and putting their contributions in around ... and so it kind of happens organically". Among those involved are the cultural institution that hosts an exhibition, the state and city authorities, tourism bodies, key sponsors, media partners, airlines, and hotels. Through the committee forums and meetings, the participants would share objectives and find opportunities to work together, including through in-kind or monetary sponsorships, joint competitions, tourism packages, or other activities. Collaborations create a conducive environment for joint work, events, and projects in the future. The credibility of stakeholders is critical when looking for new opportunities, evaluating the feasibility of large-scale projects, and bidding on major events.

Major cultural events are regarded as being 'repeat business' in terms of building on the relationships with national and international partners so that there is a continuous nurturing of the connections established in Melbourne and the state of Victoria. As one of the interviewees

acknowledged, “all of those relationships and all of those successful hostings do wonders for its opportunity to do the next deal, to make the next connection” – which reflects a forward-looking, proactive approach with a longer-term vision than reaping immediate financial gains.

Eventually, the track record of events organised in a city contributes to the development of industry capability and enhances its reputation as an events destination locally as well as worldwide. The high level of engagement and collaboration generates early awareness of what events are being planned, and when and where they will be organised. This knowledge allows the stakeholders to share the audiences, rather than splitting them, thus allowing them to work on the overall tourist experience together instead of creating and promoting different events separately. The Team Melbourne approach has proved to be one of the most significant factors in creating and enhancing the tourism and events industry in the city.

### **Place Representation and Events in Melbourne**

One of the main marketing objectives of destination marketers is to make Melbourne known as the world’s most ‘visitable’ city. ‘Visitability’ is a vision that builds on the concept of *liveability* – something that Melbourne is known for, having been recognised as the world’s most liveable city for seven years in a row between 2011-2017, according to The Economist Intelligence Unit’s (EIU) Liveability Index (The Economist, n.d.). *Visitability* implies the city possesses certain attributes and qualities that make it a desirable place to visit. Success in this area requires not only collaboration between various actors working in events, tourism, and hospitality, but also the integrated promotion of the city, that is when marketing communications go out from a similar platform. This includes the coordination of the message delivered to potential tourists and actual city visitors at all points of contact, ensuring that the story about the city is consistent and memorable, which is a prerequisite for a strong brand image.

The Melbourne story revolves around its lifestyle and the quality of experiences that need to be discovered and explored: “There’s intimacy to Melbourne... it’s a city of small experiences, between bars and cafes, to the laneways, to the small shopping districts, to the things that are tucked away”. The buzzing effect of events is appreciated by the tourism marketers – the city being ‘busy’ – with people and events – is something that contributes to the “endless possibilities” in Melbourne. In the absence of a single outstanding attraction that will draw tourists into ticking that box on their must-see lists, the tourism planners aspire to offer visitors a range of experiences that will allow them to explore Melbourne’s culture and subcultures, attend events, and see various places of interest, that, combined, tell the story of the city. However, to learn this story for themselves, tourists need to make a decision to come.

‘Blockbuster’ exhibitions, along with other major events, have been used effectively in Melbourne as pull drivers to motivate people to come. Major cultural exhibitions offer an opportunity to see something special, rare, and unique. To become part of the city’s story, the topic of an exhibition needs to be of interest to Melbournians and be in line with the city’s positioning and brand values. Other priorities include the quality of the exhibits, the exclusivity rights, and the exhibition’s brand, which needs to be strong enough to encourage domestic tourism. Over the years, MWM has gained a reputation of having a ‘stamp of quality’. Its brand equity has become such that “the Australian market people sort of know that in winter in Melbourne there’s a big show to go and see... it really works [now] as a tourism-driver”.

Melbourne is often described in terms that include “cultural”, “stylish”, “warm and welcoming”, “sophisticated”, and “creative”. The Winter Masterpieces series enhances the image of Melbourne as a “destination for cultural events”, which are conceived as an integral part of the city’s brand and positioning. A major exhibition, therefore, can be a potent instrument to foster the city’s *visitability*.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In Melbourne, eventfulness is seen as part of the city's DNA, an innate quality of the city, of "who we are". Arguably, the city has now gone through all three stages of eventfulness: event-, sector-, and network- centric (Richards, 2017). The comprehensive approach to events, along with pioneering and long-term thinking, and the collaboration across networks, has led to the re-conceptualisation of the city's event portfolio in a way that it now organically incorporates not only major international sporting events, but also major international cultural events. Event and tourism decision-makers have planned, organised, marketed, and delivered exhibitions as major city events – an innovative approach to what had long been considered as predominantly museum and art gallery territory. Stakeholders have managed to create a sense of immediacy that is intrinsic to a special event, along with a must-see status, which together have resulted in significant, beyond usual, attendance, and contributed to the visitor economy during the otherwise low and relatively uneventful tourism season of winter.

The first blockbuster exhibition within the MWM series at NGV demonstrated that the city got the pieces of its 'event puzzle' right, and the consecutive exhibitions proved just that. The quality and exclusivity of the exhibitions, the consistency of their organisation – the city hosting at least one every winter – and the associations with Melbourne, winter, and something extraordinary (Melbourne Winter Masterpieces), have generated a 'visiting habit' amongst tourists and enhanced the city's position as a cultural and creative capital. The level of momentum around the exhibition programme makes it possible for cultural agencies and tourism bodies to pursue international exhibitions as part of its wider events, tourism, and destination marketing agenda. Importantly, the interests of the local residents are taken care of, too – Melbournians, and Victorians, gain access to some of the most well-known and rare collections in the world, learn new things, socialise, and build rapport with the cultural institutions that host these exhibitions.

Major touring exhibitions have become embedded not only in the event portfolio but also in the rhythms of Melbourne, introducing new senses and meanings of the city and defining its “melodic uniqueness” (Antchak, 2018, p. 53). Melbourne Winter Masterpieces stands out as an example of an eventful city, whose ambition to create a unique event, the skill to co-brand it with the city, and the willingness to take risks and try new formats and ways of bringing major events, have made a genuine difference to the city’s image and in the tourism domain.

Overall, this research has revealed the important role of major touring exhibitions in designing an attractive and fascinating brand identity in Melbourne. The analysis and discussion of the results show that creativity in the form of new approaches to cultural events, available soft and hard infrastructure such as collaborative networks and venues, and authentic meanings produced through place branding and storytelling (Richards & Duif, 2019) have provided the city with a solid platform for reputation and image development. The positive impacts of major cultural exhibitions were found to be dependent upon the alignment of these exhibitions with the city’s context, objectives, and experiences, and hinge upon the collaborative planning and shared vision of stakeholders.

The planning and management of international touring exhibitions proves to be efficient once stakeholders from tourism, events, and cultural sectors work together and approach these events holistically. The strategic decision-making around scheduling may have significant effects on event tourism in a city as indoor cultural events help address the issue of seasonality and add variety to the overall event offer in a destination. The brand of a major exhibition can be used efficiently in strategic storytelling, combining elements of place identity with its ‘blockbuster’ status.

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