Take a dekko at our deco while you car

NAKED CITY

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She's not so pretty any more. The arguments in favour of getting "a little work done" are rather compelling. The black tiling has lost its gloss and, in some patches, the tiling has disappeared altogether. Its once-innovative glass bricks are cloudy. The deco curves are a little chipped, the lightning rod is showing rust, and the splendid curved glass frontage is obscured by a nasty security grille of the kind that close in two-dollar shops in Swanston Street.

You can picture the dandy architect who designed her, in high-waisted trousers and spats, standing amid the fumes of modern-day Spencer Street, shaking his head — what on earth has happened to you?

As *Age* readers would know, the shabby deco building of 420 Spencer Street has been saved from demolition and replacement by a Fender Katsalidis apartment tower. For some, this is another example of archaic planning regulations slowing inventive building; for others, it's a blessed respite from the relentless advance of indifferent and unmemorable glass and steel apartment towers.

It is surely a reminder to us that when it comes to art, we should just stay the hell out of the way.

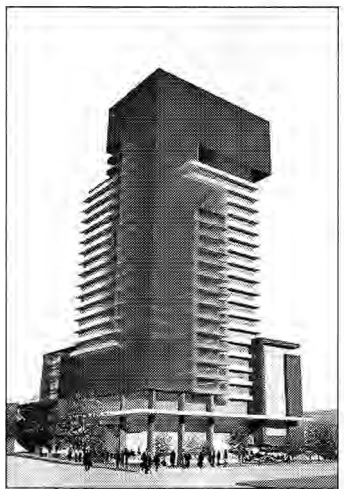
But this Spencer Street building's rise and slow demise charts a sober tale of inevitable mortality and obscurity that might have been penned by Thomas Hardy, and may give pause to the young Turks of this day.

The history of this building and its architects, Harry and Frank Tompkins, prompts a question that even the most celebrated and energetic practising architects have to ask themselves: could I be the Harry Tompkins of 2090? Will my buildings — in time unfashionable, neglected — my lifelong Melbourne practice of carefully constructed work, be dismissed and erased from the city that once respected me?

The Tompkins brothers' buildings sit scattered around Melbourne like a clutch of elderly wallflowers at a dinner dance — ignored but still dignified in their wilted gowns. Theirs was not the extravagant Art Deco of Miami or New York; this was a rather brutal, streamlined deco of symmetry and practicality, dictated by commercial purpose and their makers' appreciation of the boom-time American building, the modern department store.

According to Miles Lewis, professor of architecture at the University of Melbourne, the brothers Tompkins were considered in their hey-day — the very early 1900s — as "young, smart and American", even though they had actually emigrated from South Africa. But it was their attitude and style that declared their allegiances.

They were fans of the American Romanesque style, which can be best seen in one of their first Melbourne works, the building for which they won joint responsibility, the ornate Victorian Artists Society building in Albert Street. They won competitions for some of the key commercial buildings of their era — the Romanesque Commercial Travellers Associ



ation building in Flinders Street; then a series of red-brick warehouses in Flinders Lane (one is now Madisons at the corner of Flinders Lane and Russell Street); and then the Centreway Arcade.

The Myer Building was, however, their biggest fish Professor Lewis has written that it was the enterprising Harry Tompkins who persuaded Sidney Myer to build a new, steel-framed department store of substance in Bourke Street. And so he did.

420 Spencer Street was, the Victorian Art Deco Society says, a later and clearly lesser work, but one that reflected the energy of its times: imagine clients entering this glassworks showroom made of the same brilliant new glass they hoped to buy?

And then fashions and time change. But why do so few people have an eye to history in this town? It's been noted in this column before that the admirable engineering of Victorian Melbourne is being repeated in very little contemporary building Developers may want to tear down an almost 70-year-old deco showroom, but their wishes would have more strength if they could make similar claims for their own building's longevity.

As this goes to print, the State Government appears to have all but decided that the award-winning Eastern Freeway sound walls (lifespan: 100 years) will not be continued along the proposed extension; instead, plywood and steel buffers will be installed (lifespan: 30 years). Apart from the aesthetic insult of the plan, the false economy of the proposition is staggering. I guess Premier Bracks et al figure that they won't be in government when it comes time to rip down the splintering, buckling planks and replace them.

Without a historical eye, you can imagine the countless compelling arguments that must have been made to justify the replacement of, say, the cast-iron buildings of Soho in New York; the crumbling wrecks of Rome; the elaborate but outmoded deco glories of Mexico City.

Indeed, one argument was made for some revivification of sad old Rome and the result, the ghastly Vittorio Emmanuele monument, has been a matter of embarrassment and regret ever since.

This is not an argument about historical purity or exclusion. The brightness of a contemporary society depends on its artists being able to work freely and without hostility, and recent architecture in this town indicates that this happens. But I have never met one Melbourne architect who applauds the demolition of badly-aged office blocks.

The French philosopher and post-structuralist, Gilles Deleuze, once wrote that the artists who are easiest to stop from achieving their vision are filmmakers and architects, because they rely on so many other people for the means of production, and their creations are utterly subject to the financial and personal preferences of their many enablers. In this sense, it is a wonder that anything new and grand gets built at all and, when it finally does, it is surely a reminder to us all that, when it comes to art, we should just stay the hell out of the way.

But this respect runs the other way, too. We need to have enough faith in our architects to realise that, although their life-force is constant creation and re-creation, they will also have the same eye to history and place as their predecessors, who knew to leave well enough alone the cities and buildings they now admire.

Sometimes, the clash between the new and the old will come down to a chimerical argument about beauty and aesthetic worth, and who would want to choose between, say, a fine Bell Epoque apartment building and the glory of a new Frank Gehry creation?

In the case of 420 Spencer Street, it's perhaps a moot point: the extant building is not so lovely, but with apologies to Fender Katsalidis, neither was theirs. I'm sure there will always be some vacant inner-city plot for yet another indifferent apartment block, but if the footsteps of generations of our architectural forebears are not to be utterly erased, then some strange, unlovely buildings will just have to be left alone.

ABOVE: 420 Spencer Street in all its fading glory. LEFT: An artist's impression of the Fender Katsalidis building proposed for the site.