

# Metro

## A TOWER OF STRENGTH

Once dismissed as a “mad, wicked folly” by its namesake, the Queen Victoria Hospital operated for almost 100 years, writes **Helen Razer**.

**A**T 85, June Howqua is relishing the 10th year of her full retirement.

“In retirement, one can read the paper after breakfast. And enjoy a sherry before lunch,” she says, having recently taken a modest tittle.

The pleasures of print news and midday snifters aside for the moment, Dr Howqua recalls her career warmly. She lives in her former surgery, and the brass plaque bearing her name still shines like a medical beacon.

Dr Howqua's memories of her long term as a physician and board member at the Queen Victoria Hospital are equally polished. Not seeming the sort inclined to hyperbole, she nonetheless describes the vanished facility as, “quite extraordinary, I suppose”.

The origins of the Lonsdale Street hospital are similarly extraordinary. In 1896, Australia's first female doctor, Constance Stone, led a team of notable firebrands to found the first women's hospital in the colony. It was to be managed and staffed entirely by women.

As it happened, Queen Victoria was celebrating her diamond jubilee just as these local ladies had commenced their good works. The PR-savvy suffragettes began their fundraising effort and asked every woman in the state to donate one shilling, “to do honour to their Queen”.

Actually, Victoria abhorred the very notion of woman doctors, denouncing this as “the mad, wicked folly of women's rights”. Nonetheless, this Shilling Fund was an unqualified success, and the hospital was open for its

all-girl business with the royal misogynist's name attached. The monarch must have been appalled by the tribute.

Women across the colony of Victoria were, however, elated. In an era when many women would, quite literally, rather die than be examined by a man, this hospital was monumental news.

The mad, wicked folly acquired its credibility. Following World War II, the hospital admitted male patients, many of whom were returning soldiers, for the first time.

By the time Dr Howqua joined staff at the Queen Victoria Hospital, “it was no longer exclusively the by, for and of women principle that founded the place”. It remained, however, a locus for female patients and female medical personnel alike.

When the Melbourne University alumna who ranked “eighth or 10th, or something like that” in her graduating year sought work at a prominent hospital, she was rebuffed.

“I was told, ‘We already have a woman on staff.’” Presumably, Dr Howqua scoffs, two women doctors was well over quota.

“As it was, though, I'm now rather glad. Things ended up well there,” says the woman who went on to specialise in heart and lung medicine, and establish research projects at the Queen Victoria.

“I did manage to do some quite interesting work,” she says with the sort of verbal temperance that makes me suspect her of vascular genius.

The bold red-brick building that once commanded a city block ceased to do its interesting work in 1989. In the individual lives of former staffers such as Dr Howqua and within the broader feminist consciousness



of the city, the Queen Vic came to mean a great deal. When the hospital was amalgamated with Monash Medical Centre and its components began to dissolve, a new team of firebrands emerged to safeguard its legacy.

If you squint past the immense twinkle of the QV shopping centre, you'll see an improbably bijou Edwardian tower. Nestled in the middle of

named in honour of a disinterested sovereign, a small piece of history was reborn. Against the odds, the girls tacked up some motivational artwork and resumed a tradition of good works. The idea, then still taking shape, was to provide empowerment and support to the women of Victoria. It was a monumental job description for the charming, little tower.

**‘There's a wonderful story to be told about our past, but there's also a great one to be told about today.’**

HELEN HEWETT

this acreage is witness to the stubbornness of women. A part of the old Queen Vic is still standing and, incredibly, is staffed entirely by women once more.

Snack in the axis of a consumer city crush, this not-for-profit heritage shed is a contender for the world's most valuable community centre. This is some serious real estate.

The Queen Victoria Women's Centre was created by a 1994 parliamentary Act. Exactly 100 years after Constance Stone founded a hospital cunningly

has a mythic quality. “To have a centre on this site was a powerful idea that has an iconic layer to it,” she says. “What could be simpler and more attractive than making a historic and emotional connection between women and the Queen Vic hospital?”

The women's centre was to provide an explicit attachment to the past while giving hope for the future. It was, and remains, a potent and seductive idea.

In fact, the story of the building's renaissance and the centre's establishment was long, fraught and even more fatiguing than your average collective meeting. On the Lonsdale Street pavement, in State Parliament and in the high-gloss offices of property developers, the future of the building was debated and defended for more than a decade.

After years of effort, the centre was opened. According to Crooks, the centre remained in a sort of limbo in the years immediately following its inception. The translation from theory to business proved another kind of struggle entirely.

The story of the Queen Vic, she says, is of the battle to illuminate the space between idea and reality.

In 2000, Crooks was appointed to a ministerial advisory committee to consider the future of the centre. The committee determined that the centre was being under-utilised, and attempted to refocus its relevance.

“There's a wonderful story to be told about our past, but there's also a great one to be told about today,” says Helen Hewett, chairwoman of the centre's trust.

Last month, the centre received state budget funding for the first time to maintain its bricks and mortar — \$2 million

dollars will be afforded over four years to ensure the tower does not topple.

Each day, the centre assists women with all manner of concerns. Organisations such as the Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention & Legal Service and WIRE provide crucial support, referral and counselling to those who need it most.

There is remedial and emergency work done at the centre.

“However, many younger women are discovering that contact with the centre isn't always based on immediate need,” says Hewett. Opportunities for women to simply mingle and discuss anything from commerce to quilting are constantly developed.

For a building that manages many genuine crises, it maintains a vigorous feel. As I poke about, I see volunteers, employees and clients bustling about, acquiring knowledge. I can't be certain, but I think I see a lady of middle years using WIRE's internet service to find... a date.

This place doesn't have the sort of wounded pall one might expect from a centre that provides such critical services. Everybody seems to be doing something or getting a result. It's kind of like the anti-Centrelink.

A woman with a practical, sturdy name such as Constance Stone, I think, might approve.

Now a virtual information hub as well as a physical centre, the Queen Vic's story almost runs parallel to that of feminism: founded out of dire need, thwarted temporarily by abject idealism, now returning to its unfussy roots.

“Women's liberation was a very decent thing,” says Dr Howqua in her sitting room. “And it didn't come before time.”

**Above: Dr June Howqua recalls her days at the Queen Victoria, where she specialised in heart and lung medicine. Left: The original Queen Vic building.**

MAIN PICTURE:  
EDDIE JIM