



Will Deague: The high-flyer has rolled out three new hotels in Melbourne this year. (SHANNON MORRIS)

He walks the walk, talks the talk, rides the bike ... is definitely driven, but seemingly not in overdrive. He is still young at 32, with two toddlers at home, and a list of building projects and ideas as long as his arm.

Will Deague has rolled out three new boutique hotels in Melbourne in the past 10 months and has three more in his Art Series Hotels Group on the go over the next couple of years.

Meanwhile, the group has scooped up a rare chance to take its concept to that other great Australian cultural capital, Adelaide.

Deague's website brands his drivers as "success and expansion", bringing the right people together at the right time in the right place to make the most of Melbourne's growing national and international reputation as the best getaway destination, a culture vulture's delight and "the events and conventions capital" of the Asia-Pacific region.

Deague's "art attack" (or is it boutique branding?) will not stop here, though, nor Adelaide. Australia's east coast is on his radar, and the west looks pretty good, too.

And it is not really an art attack; every project tells a story; there are many stories behind each and they all weave into the brand.

The rollout so far

In November last year, The Cullen's opening signalled the start of Deague's \$500 million Arts Series Hotels rollout on Commercial Road, at the bohemian end of Prahran. It is named after Adam Cullen, the Blue Mountains' often controversial, described as grunge, artist best known as the 2000 Archibald Prize winner for his portrait of actor David Wenham. To quote *Wikipedia*: "He has painted such things as dead cats, 'bloodied' kangaroos, headless women and punk men, many of which represent what he calls 'Loserville'."

The Cullen's lobby features life-sized, custom-built fibreglass cows and the building includes original canvases exhibited in twists and turns through clever design that allows Cullen's story to be told. It was immediately listed in the *US Conde Nast Traveller's* 2010 hot list.

From Prahran, Deague moved to the other end of Melbourne's renowned Chapel Street fashion and arts precinct; the signature South Yarra corner of Chapel and Daly streets, where The Olsen will open in April.

John Olsen, now well into his 80s and recharged by his Lake Eyre experience, embraced the chance to work alongside Deague and his team – the architects and interior designers – to transform his rendition of Lake Eyre in flood, his dedication to Australian landscapes and his art, his art, into a building that tells his story.

A giant 5.5-metre Olsen painting, *Yellow Sun Over the Yarra*, hangs in the foyer of Deague's \$90 million "jewel in the crown", the company flagship so far.

Then on August 15, the \$800-million Blackman, inspired by Australia's most famous figurative artist, Charles Blackman, opened 16 floors and more than 200 hotel rooms behind Airlie Mansion, on the fringe of central Melbourne. Its design cues are taken from Blackman's famous *Alice in Wonderland* series.

The next is earmarked for another South Yarra site, for which Deague has been wooing the wife of former art genius Brett Whiteley for naming support, making sure they can do Whiteley's story justice.

"We took Wendy to the site and went over our concepts; she said that she likes what she has seen."

The fifth to be completed, hopefully within the next two years, is likely to be The Knight, named after sci-fi and fantasy-world artist Jasper Knight and tucked in behind the Hawthorn Town Hall, on the former police station site, near the corner of Glenferrie and Burwood roads.

The sixth? Watch this space; Brunswick looks good,



Above: Pooled resources ... luxury at the Olsen.

Far right: *Yellow Sun Over the Yarra* in the foyer. (SUPPLIED)

Right: John Olsen at the hotel's opening. (MARCEL AUCAR)



but why compete with Rydges, the redevelopment of the old PANCH hospital on Bell Street? Northcote? Maybe; there a lot of Melburnians on Deague's team and a lot of Melbourne yet to bring back to life.

Behind the youth

Deague, obviously, has backing; his father, David, still chairs the Asian Pacific Building Corporation he launched as a private family-based company in 1992. Will came on board as a director in 1997 and is now at the helm as CEO.

The APBC has a diverse development portfolio, including its headquarters at 1 Queens Road, Melbourne, part of its St Kilda Towers development, Kings Technology Park and the Exchange Tower, as well as some interesting inner-urban projects – The Makin in East Melbourne, Bell City in Preston, Quest Beaumont in Kew and others in Hawthorn.

Will cut his teeth on the old PANCH redevelopment, where Rydges now runs the first of his forays as "a publican", as one social media site described him – taking the funky perspective of his bent for art; new art and emerging art, art for art's sake really, so long as it speaks to him or at least to the world he wants to talk to, the people who want to visit Melbourne, and even stay.

The Deague family has a long history of philanthropic support for this nation's great legacy of artists.

Building the brand

So was it a symbolic generational handover when, in 2002, Deague senior set Will the challenge to find his niche in the family business?

The challenge took the whole family and 10 Australian artists, among them some "living greats", to witness one of the most extraordinary natural events in the great interior of this continent, all too commonly wrapped up into that one-word descriptor "desert"?

Lake Eyre was in flood; the first time in decades –

Will, his three siblings, his father and mother, Kristene, put a one-week, \$1 million-dollar camping trip together, which left the then 24-year-old "blown away".

What got him? Deague talks of the vastness he witnessed and the extraordinary spectacle, the miracle of bird life that emerges from what, most years, is the perfect dry saltpan suitable for land-speed record attempts by car-cum-aeroplane buffs, the flying bug being one of Will's own.

And he talks of the ensuing year he spent working with these 10 artists on the projects, inspired by this trip, and from then has been at the drawing board, translating art into architecture to put down some history of his own.

"Here I stand, if I am Australian; let me reveal this without being self-conscious about it; let me uncover the dormant sources; let's feel what it is to be an Australian, arrive at a new object which is, in the end, just that, something which is us."

John Olsen speaking of the late Laurie Thomas

A dream machine

Will Deague cites his time spent with Olsen as "inspirational", and the opening of The Olsen, on the corner of Chapel Street and Toorak Road in April, as the hallmark of 2010 for him so far, an event the younger man and the elder celebrated together with the team built up and around this dream machine.

The APBC-Art Series Hotels website is brilliant; it is basically a powerful booking engine that takes browsers quickly and graphically around myriad accommodation options and services available, short and longer-term options and rates, as well as linking booking dates to what's on then in Melbourne. The Art Series Hotels are new sponsors of the Melbourne Fringe Festival, have forged close working partnerships within this city's tightly run, well-oiled tourism and events-planning

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Will Deague's Art Series hotels represent a new direction for Melbourne tourism, writes HELEN GRIMAUX.

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REVIEW ART HOTELS

» machine and are keen participants in Tourism Victoria's and Tourism Australia's strategic plans and campaigns.

Talking to Deague, trying to pinpoint what motivates his passion for transforming signature buildings of old Melbourne into new-millennium architectural statements, conversation turns to "the winning formula", the company's business concept and an enormous passion for his family's home town.

"Look at what's happened here," he says. "Melbourne! It's much more cosmopolitan, it's clean, people can move around here. Think what St Kilda was like 10 or 15 years ago; look at Brunswick now."

Try doing business in cities, such as Shanghai and New York, where, he says, it's almost impossible to move around from one business district to another.

The winning formula

Deague's view of Melbourne's renaissance aligns closely with the Victorian Government's Melbourne 2030 vision, to distribute commercial construction activity and increase residential densities throughout inner and middle-city activity precincts.

We talk about how Melbourne's 'burbs, its old streetscapes and strip shopping centres were not long ago seen as almost "daggy" but are now cherished as part of Melbourne – a celebration of diversity and a cultural mix that is rebranding what it means to be Melburnian, to be Australian, in this new millennium.

Business precinct policy

When APBC was launched by Deague senior in Malvern, Coles Myer had just become the first

central-city corporate giant to build new headquarters outside Melbourne's CBD, atop the landmark Toorak Road-Tooronga Road hill at Hawthorn.

In that era of sheer-wall, mirrored-glass street-fronts and then ultramodern new-built forms, the mix with the double or three-storey maximums of most suburban strip shopping centres threatened many. Planners and developers often battled over what was the intrinsic beauty of Melbourne.

Melburnians wanted to keep their landmarks and create opportunities to reuse historic former manufacturing, industrial and civic buildings that have become available to the development marketplace over the 30 years or so since the demolition derby of the 1970s and the 1980s property bust.

The art of recycling has made its mark; people like the old-world and the ultramodern juxtaposition, so long as there are modern amenities, good services and attention to what matters in life and, for the Art Series Hotels, people are booking in.

Occupancy rates have been going well despite Melbourne's wet, cold winter.

"We're way ahead of budget," Deague says. "We are getting lots of country visitors, as well as people from interstate. Even suburbanites are booking in for weekends away."

The Cullen has already been put among the top 100 boutique hotels in the world, one of only two Australian venues to be listed. The other is an Emirates hotel in the Hunter Valley. Deague recently signed up to the internationally renowned Mr and Mrs Smith boutique hotel booking agency.

And it's not even spring! \ helengrimaux@bigpond.com



Melbourne's jigsaw finally falls into place

Marvelous Melbourne – the jewel in the crown of Tourism Victoria Jigsaw marketing campaign – was described as "the rust bucket" of Australia in the early 1990s.

"Now Melbourne is top of the table in the tourism stakes," Australian Hotels Association's Victorian spokesman Darryl Washington said this week.

He described the city's reversal of fortunes in the tourism stakes as a rags-to-riches story that was bringing wealth back to the whole state.

Washington attributed the reversal of Victoria's infamous 1990s exodus of sun-seeking southerners to almost two decades of hard work by the state's tourism, entertainment and accommodation industries since Tourism Victoria's Jigsaw campaign kicked off.

"The Jigsaw campaign, underpinned by the work done by Bob Annells as (then) CEO, brought together all parties, the AHA, the conventions and events people, big attractions organisers, who got working together," Washington said.

"Victorian operators now have a co-operative spirit that they don't have in the other states and Melbourne is a major destination, both at home and internationally."

Washington said Melbourne had become a favourite short-term destination, outperforming the rest of Australia and with a strong demand from Victorians themselves to enjoy their capital city's major attractions.

"Melbourne's the shopping capital, the bar and bistro capital, it's the events capital; there're sports, theatre –

there are lots of things for Melbourne to lay claim to," he said.

Washington said while the overall tourism and visitor market shrank considerably during last year's global financial crisis, occupancy rates are on the rise again. But he also warned now was not the time to "take our foot off the accelerator".

"One of our most important visitor areas is the business and convention sector. If we take our foot off the accelerator in Melbourne now, our market could drop very quickly, just as it did in Japan," he said.

China is an emerging strong target market; the Asian region is growing from Malaysia, Singapore and New Zealand, along with Britain and Europe generally, are mainstays, he said.

Is there too much room? Washington starts listing the events already underpinning Melbourne's annual calendar.

"Melbourne starts the season with the tennis, then it just goes on from there ... the grand prix, the comedy festival, the Melbourne Arts Festival, the Masters' Series, live theatre, ballet, the footy finals, the spring racing carnival, the golf, the fashion shows ..."

One look at the Melbourne Convention and Visitor Centre's website should be enough to convince any culture vulture they could take to the streets of Melbourne every day for a year and still not see all this city has on offer. \

Footnote: The AHA represents more than 8500 pub-style and three, four and five-star accommodation hotels around Australia.

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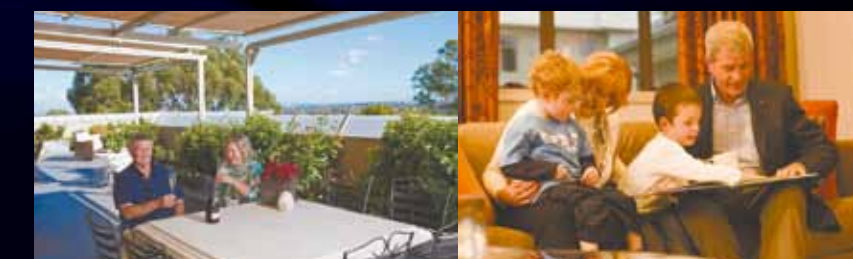
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