

Mix of old and new in demand

They once housed beer kegs and printing presses. Now they are luring buyers, writes **Mark Phillips**.

Where most developers would see a headache, Andrew Rettig saw dollar signs. The managing director of R Corporation has no regrets about taking on the conversion of a massive former Victoria Brewery in East Melbourne into the Tribeca residential and retail village.

He says preserving the building's heritage has turned into an asset rather than a burden.

Now, with 95 per cent of the 431 apartments in the \$240 million complex sold, its history has been opened to the public through a museum in the original building where Foster's Lager and Victoria Bitter were once brewed.

In an oversaturated apartment market, Melbourne developers are looking for a point of difference — and heritage aspects are one way of branding a building as unique.

Tribeca and Australian Super Development's \$200 million Herald Living project — a mixed commercial and residential re-use of the Herald and Weekly Times building on Flinders Street in the CBD — are standout recent examples where developers have traded on a building's history.

On the retail side, Pan Urban won plaudits for its \$100 million revamp of the General Post Office at the corner of Bourke and Elizabeth streets.

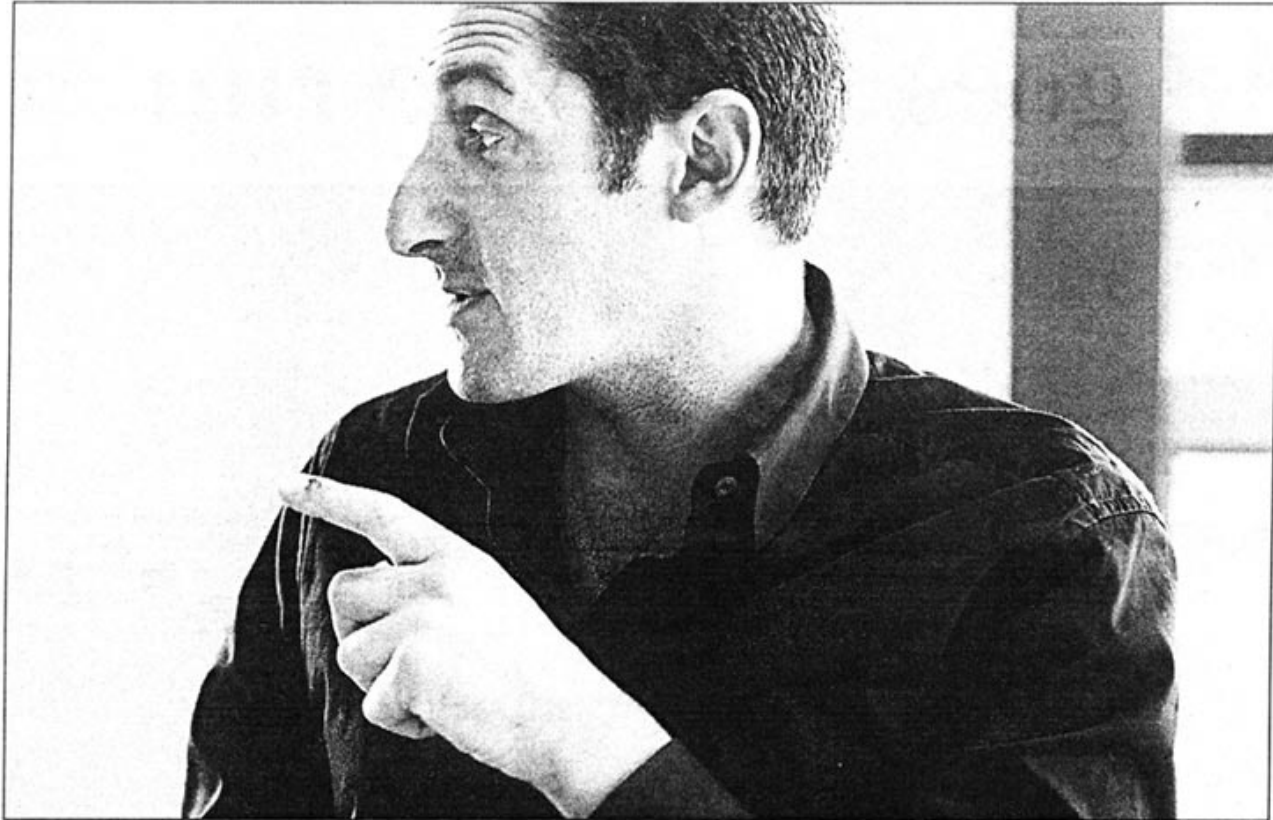
Tribeca — a joint venture of R Corporation, Babcock & Brown and Red C — was a developer's nightmare.

First built on in 1882, the 8400 square metre site had fallen to pieces since the last keg of beer rolled out in 1983, and the temptation would have been great to bulldoze the lot and start all over.

That could never have happened because of the building's heritage status, so creative thinking was required.

The buildings' architectural significance derives from their distinctive red brick walls topped with white castellated parapets. They also have technical significance for their role in the development of Australian brewing.

Three architects and five interior designers, including Philippe Starck, took part in the project, and heritage



Andrew Rettig has found that heritage value is highly sought after by apartment buyers.

Photo: GABRIELE CHAROTTE

consultant Lovell Chen was involved every step along the way.

So was Heritage Victoria, which had to approve each stage of the development.

Heritage Victoria assistant director Ray Osborne said the brewery's buildings had been abandoned for so long that in most cases all that was left were the wall facades.

"Our approach was to retain as much as was left and to weave it into the new development," he said.

"We had a remnant and needed to safeguard what was there and as best as possible combine it with the new development.

"Often we get a building when all that stuff has been removed and often the opportunity isn't there.

"But if important fabric and items remain, we would attempt to work with that if possible."

The result is a mixture of old and new architecture in eight buildings over a large block with three street frontages and gross building area of 55,000 square metres.

Heritage requirements included restoring the brew tower and retaining 290 metres of the original facade.

The No 1 brew tower contains the largest collection of brewing equipment in Victoria. It has been converted into the museum, which is spread over three levels.

CUB master brewer Peter Manders,

who worked in the brewery in its heyday, was brought in as a consultant to help with the presentation of the beer making process.

Mr Rettig said incorporating original elements of the brewery had created a point of difference that had increased the sales value of the apartments for the developers.

"There was a lot of fussing around but the benefit commercially was we've seen those apartments behind the facade increase price-

"I think people are looking for something that's different."

wise, and it's brought a whole new flavour to the project," he said.

Apartment prices have ranged from \$335,000 to \$1.7 million for a split-level Philippe Starck design in The Wharton building.

The developers are also making a dollar out of the brew tower by leasing part of its ground and first floors to a commercial tenant.

Completed in 1928, the Herald and Weekly Times building was in a much better condition than the Victoria Brewery, but its heritage requirements were also stringent because of its place in Melbourne's cultural history.

ASD development manager Chris Kakoufas said the requirements had included retention and repair of the facade, window frames and fittings, clock, poster cases, radio mast and 4.8 metre ceilings.

All of the printing machinery had been removed by the time ASD took over the site, but the glass poster cases will eventually be filled with famous front pages from *The Herald* and *The Sun News-Pictorial*.

The building's heritage has been heavily promoted in its marketing.

"Certainly the heritage and the iconic nature of the building was something that was featured to help us sell space," Mr Kakoufas said.

"I think people are looking for something that's different.

"The purchasers had looked at what was available and there were a number at Docklands that were relatively similar and we were more unique in Melbourne."

Mr Osborne said both Tribeca and Herald Living showed how heritage could be retained hand-in-hand with development.

"Our starting point is to get an understanding with the owner of what is significant and where our interest lies, but also to recognise that they have an interest to undertake development and work through those issues to get a balanced outcome," he said.