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FRAGILE ORIENTATIONS

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WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LANDS ON WHICH THIS PROJECT WAS DEVELOPED, THE WURUNDJERI WOI-WURRUNG PEOPLES OF THE EASTERN KULIN NATION. WE PAY OUR RESPECTS TO THEIR ELDERS PAST AND PRESENT AND TO ALL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES. WE ALSO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT SOVEREIGNTY WAS NEVER CEDED AND THAT THESE LANDS REMAIN UNCEDED ABORIGINAL LAND.

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00 INTRODUCTION

The Grimwade Collection features a prominence of architecture, technology and infrastructure, which repeatedly surface in its paintings, photographs, and objects.These works do more than simply document the built environment; they reveal how Russel and Mab assembled a body of cultural artefacts that speak to a particular vision of progress and authority.[1] The culmination of this material reflects a broader paradigm of empire-building, where ambition is celebrated not as a neutral achievement but as part of a cultural project.[2] In doing so, the collection contributes to the construction of an ideology of Western exceptionalism, one that positions technological advancement and monumental architecture as symbols of superiority, while often obscuring the presence of other histories, cultures, and ways of knowing that existed alongside or before these narratives took shape.

The Williamstown Timeball Tower Painting is a prime example of this (fig. 1), bequeathed to the collection in 1973. Its history provided fertile ground for a rich architectural inquiry, revealing much broader systems that operate across expanding scales.

Presenting itself as a depiction of Australian seafaring, the painting draws attention to the figurative, giant red ball atop the brute tower—an uncanny combination of infrastructure. Situated against the backdrop of Port Phillip Bay, the tower and exaggerated timeball is the prominent focus of its surrounding landscape, with steam ships in the distance highlighting the power of industrialisation and the tower as their guiding force.

1. Alisa Bunbury, Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection (Melbourne University Publishing, 2020), 47.
2. Graeme Davison, The Use and Abuse of Australian History St (Allen & Unwin, 2000), 6.

Fig.1. Untitled [Timeball, Williamstown], Unknown artist, c. 1846—1926, oil on canvas board, The University of Melbourne Art Collection, The Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequests, 1973

This painting is more than a one-to-one depiction of the tower's reality; it is a layered translation and an artefact in its own right, offering a clue to how the structure may have been perceived at the time from a colonial perspective. Further research reveals that the ball's function was to signal precise time for incoming ships. Its place in the collection therefore carries heavily loaded connotations of the role of technology as a civilising tool. As becomes clear through broader investigations, the tower, along with other instruments of timekeeping and navigation often assumed to be objective measures, are in reality never neutral agents.[3]

3. Simulaa, Deep Time Real Time, exh. cat. (RMIT Design Hub Gallery, 2025), 2.

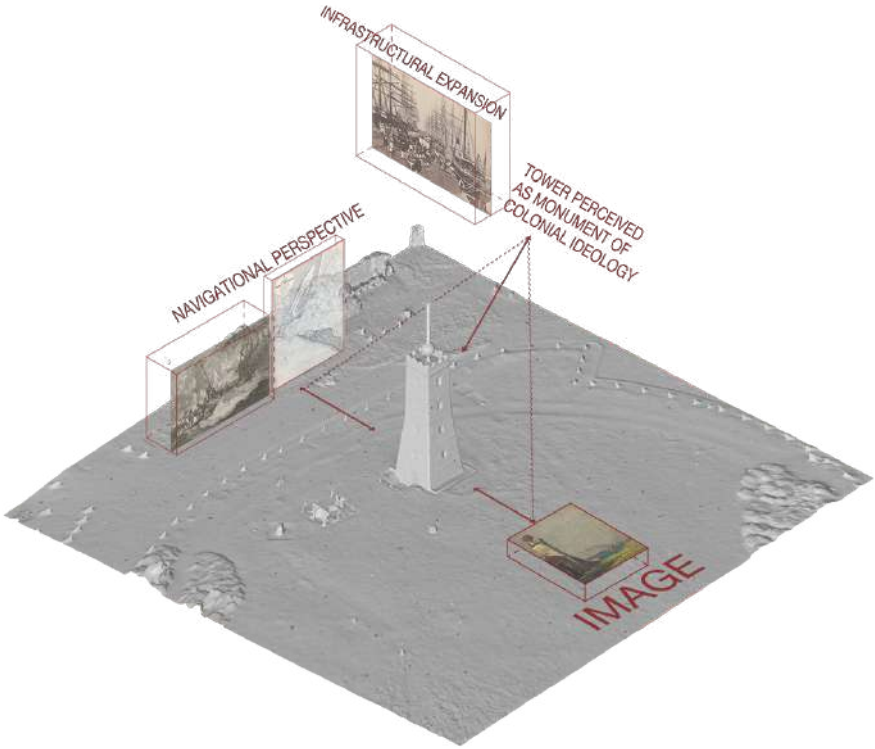


Fig.2. Painting as Image, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

01 NAVIGATION

The Williamstown site, with the tower still standing today, has undergone many transformations over its life-time. Prior to colonial invasion in 1835, this part of Williamstown was mainly used for fishing and seasonal gathering by the Boon Wurrung Community, the traditional custodians of the land.[4] Boon Wurrung elder Carolyn Briggs highlights the significance of the waters of Port Phillip Bay as a temporal orienter, where seasonal movements of eels, the availability of shellfish, and tidal cycles provide guidance.[5] These environmental rhythms shaped understandings of time and navigation thousands of years before the imposition of clock time and mechanical instruments. However, after permanent colonial settlement was established, Point Gellibrand—which is set on the eastern most end of Hobsons Bay in Williamstown—, quickly became a key frontier, guarding the entrance to the Yarra River and the city of Melbourne.[6] In 1840 a timber lighthouse was constructed at this site in Williamstown and was most likely the first navigational aid in this area.[7] This structure served as a lighthouse for 9 years, after being replaced with the bluestone tower that remains today. The bluestone rendition of the structure then went on to serve as a lighthouse another 10 years prior to the timeball mechanism being added. Such successive adaptations in the bay reflect the transformation from a landscape guided by Indigenous knowledge, to a strategically engineered network of colonial outposts, designed to gain control across the shoreline.

These navigational aides were essential for ships arriving in Port Phillip Bay, ensuring safe and effective navigation.The construction of these outposts was particularly important in light of the bay's narrow entrance and dense reefs that produced strong currents and hazardous conditions (fig. 4).[8] Yet this same narrow entrance afforded the colony a mechanism to monitor and regulate maritime traffic, consolidating control and surveillance over incoming vessels. With a flagpole positioned next to the lighthouse (fig. 5), a direct line of communication was established with the signal station at Flagstaff Hill, allowing the city centre to be alerted to incoming vessels. These systems of control operated not only along the coast but also at the scale of the city, facilitating the growth and entrenchment of the colony. It is telling then, that another infrastructural instrument, the signal station, also surfaces within the collection (fig. 6). It serves as a reminder that these methods of 'order' always operate as a network rather than in isolation. In such a network, anticipating the systems of the present, we witness the haunting fragilities of connectedness.

4. Williamstown Historical Society, "Indigenous Heritage," Williamstown Historical Society, accessed September 21, 2025, https://www.williamstownhistsoc.org.au/our-collections/indigeneous
5. Carolyn Briggs, "Boon Wurrung: The Filling of the Bay – The Time of Chaos," Creative Victoria, 2014, accessed September 21, 2025, 1-3.
6. Heritage Council Victoria, "Place – 1222," Victorian Heritage Database, accessed September 21, 2025, https://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/1222.
7. John Dunmore Lang, Port-Phillip or the Colony of Victoria (Printed for the author at the Examiner Office, 1853), 31.
8. Judy Scurfield, "Journey's End: the Port Phillip Heads", Jun 16, 2015, Victorian Collections, https://youtu.be/-Zt7lzQQl4U?feature=shared

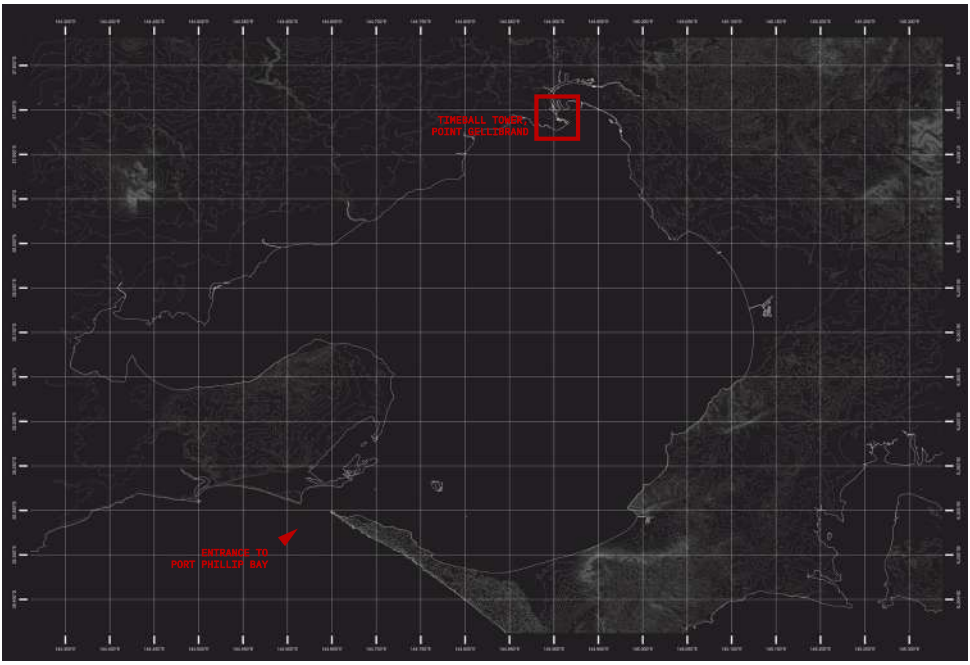


Fig.3. Port Phillip Bay, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

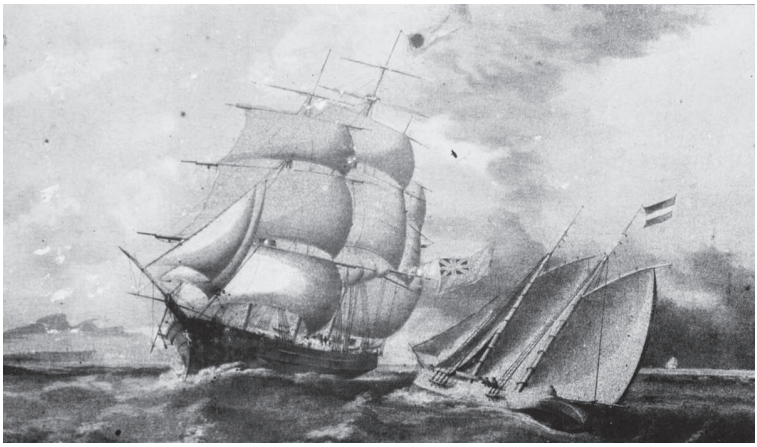
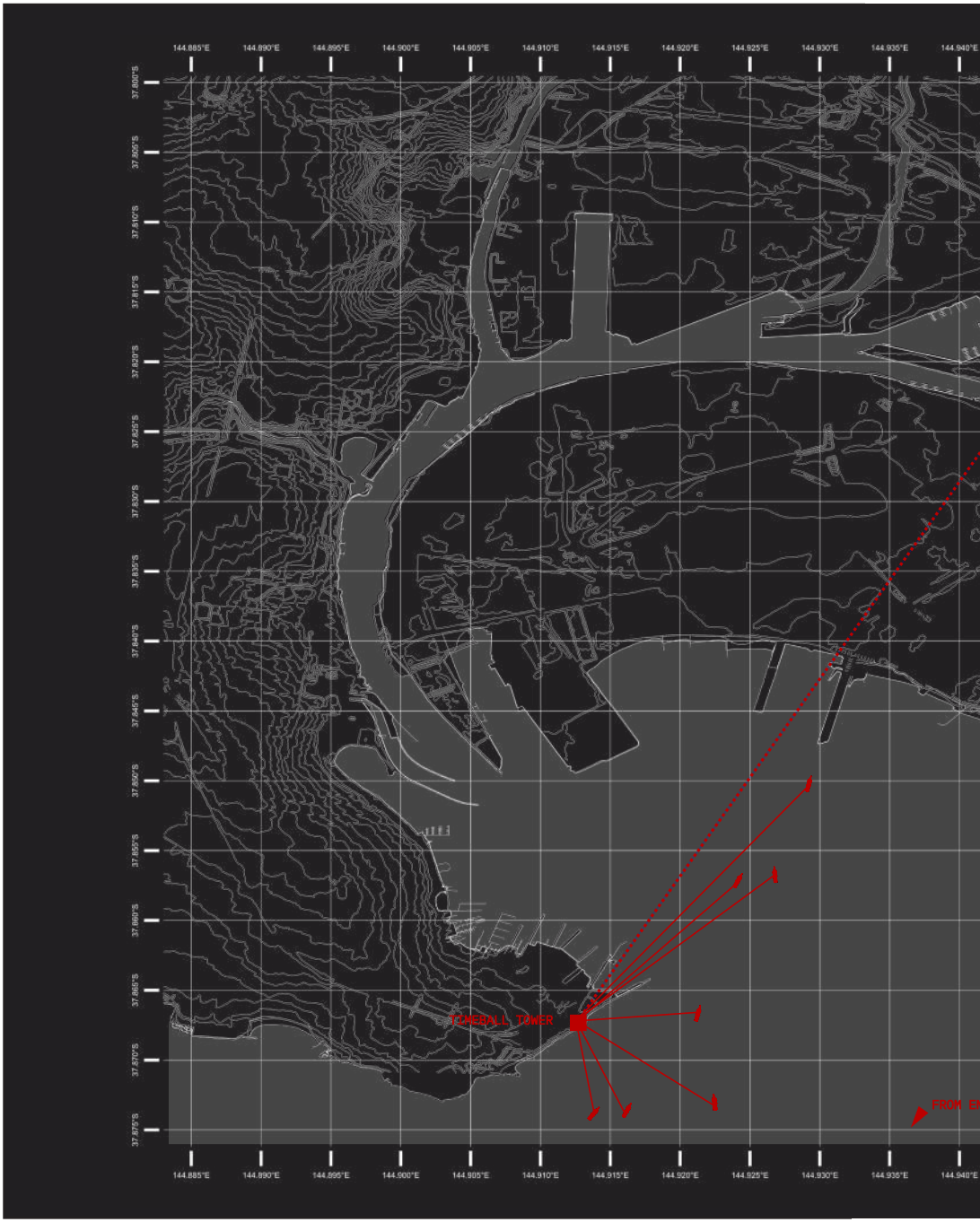


Fig.4. Port Phillip Heads, Clipper Ship Lightning & Pilot vessel, 1854, Photograph, La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Fig.5. William's Town lighthouse, Hobson's Bay, 1853, Edmund Thomas, Lithograph and Watercolour, The University of Melbourne Art Collection, The Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequests, 1973

Fig.6. Flagstaff Hill Telegraph Station Melbourne, c. 1853, Henry Gilbert Jones, Thomas Ham, Print, Lithograph, The University of Melbourne Art Collection, The Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequests, 1973



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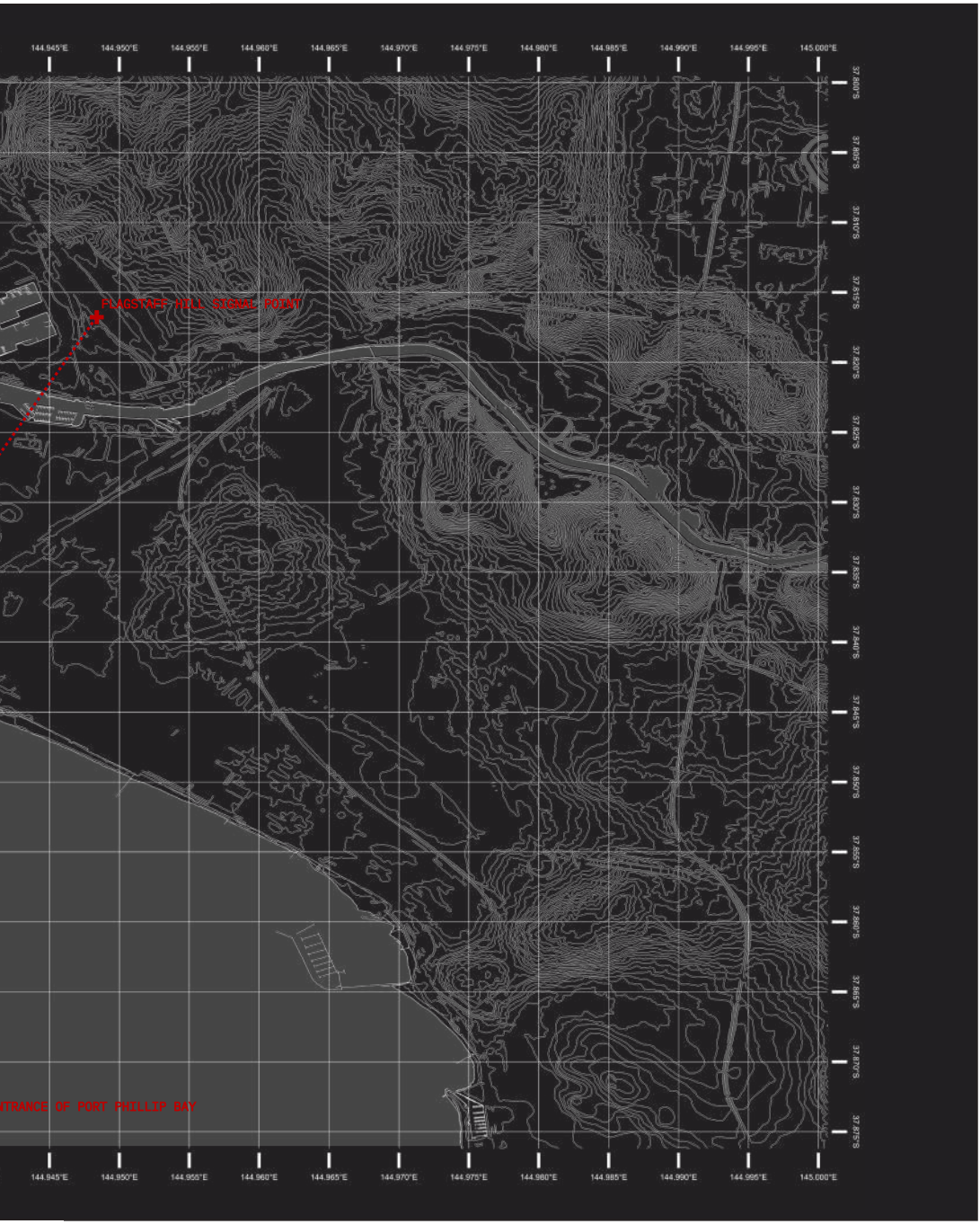

Fig.7. Control across the City, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

These infrastructures of navigation provide a rationale for land management and spatial occupation. Beyond this, the very concept of navigation produces a colonial paradigm in which land use and territorial knowledges are framed through systems of measurement and possession. Theorist Patricia Reed writes about these power dynamics at play with something such as navigation.[9] She describes navigation as being reliant on mental maps of space, continually cross-referenced by physical markers of orientation. In this sense, the politics of navigation are inseparable from the processes of establishing these reference points and making them comprehensible, intelligible, and shareable. Moreover, navigation presupposes the existence of something to be navigated, raising the question: for whom or what is navigation actually optimized?[10]

We can see this kind of logic manifesting in this drawing (fig. 9) found in Russell's book collection, which speaks to the Australian coastline as this navigable entity.[11] Drawn by Isaac Gilseman on the voyage of the Abal Tasman, an extractive perspective was emerging, as navigational practices began to transform coastlines into something to be possessed. Through this, it is clear that navigation is conceived and optimised for the colonial agenda above all.

9. Patricia Reed, "Orientation in a Big World: On the Necessity of Horizonless Perspectives," e-flux Journal 101 (June 2019), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/101/273343/orientation-in-a-big-world-on-the-necessity-of-horizonless-perspectives.
10. Reed, "Orientation in a Big World."
11. Bunbury, Pride of Place, 35.

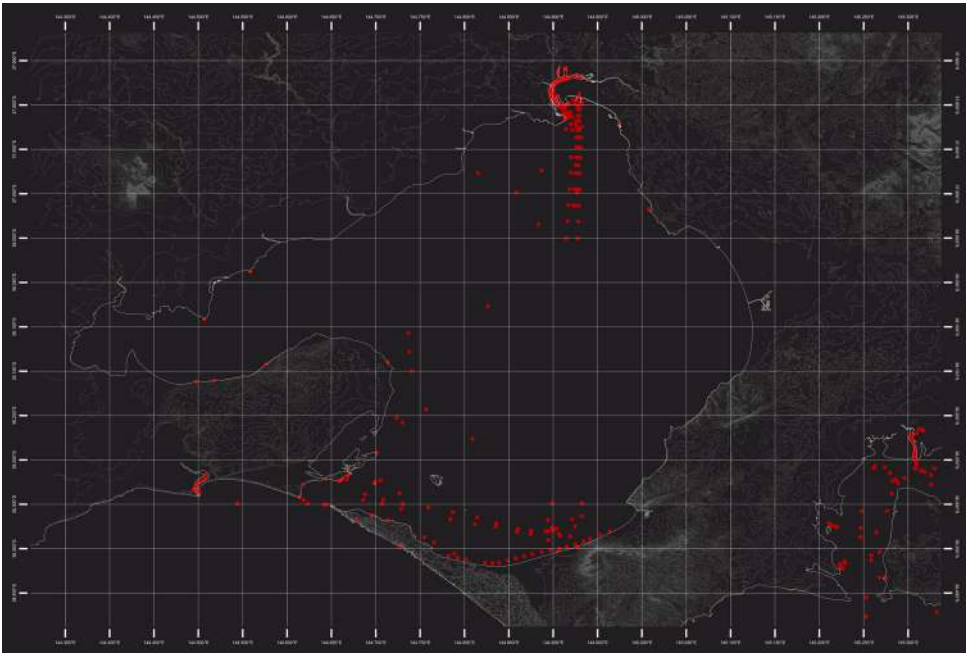

Fig.8. Networks of Navigation, Buoys & Beacons in Port Phillip Bay,Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

Fig.9. Coastal Profiles of Van Diemen's Land, Isaac Gilsemans, 1642, Pen and Ink, Baillieu Library

02 NAVIGATION AS IMAGE

It is no surprise, then, that the bluestone rendition of the tower embodies a defensive monumentalism, thinly veiled as a benign marker of orientation. Its heavy bluestone masonry recalls Melbourne's earliest public buildings, the first cathedral and the Old Melbourne Gaol, which cemented the material's association with civic identity.[12] By the 1850s, coinciding with the tower's construction amidst the gold rush, bluestone had become the choice material for Melbourne's streets and buildings, symbolising prosperity during this time of urban ambition and sprawl.[13] Yet unlike these other institutions, the tower features a staunchly defensive Castellated parapet - its undulating crown at the top. Not surprisingly, this design element originated from ancient military architecture, providing both protection and a means to attack invaders in Ancient forts.[14] While purely ornamental on the tower, its associations still signal the structure's defensive presence along the coastline. The section of the building, documented in 1986 by Draftsman Glen Rogers (fig. 10), highlights the shear thickness of its masonry construction. The narrowness and height add to its commanding sense of vision and exclusivity, projecting authority across the landscape. So if navigation embodies this continuum between mental representations and the material reference points that anchor them, we can begin to see how understandings of Melbourne's identity were being constructed through a particular architectural language. The placement of towers and other navigational aides along the coast, the selection of their materials like bluestone, and their formal expressions of defensive monumentalism, all operate as a vocabulary through which the city's image and its colonial ambitions are reinforced.

12. Philip Goad, Melbourne Architecture, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: The Watermark Press, 2009), 115.

13. Stephanie Trigg, "From molten lava to cobbled laneways: how bluestone shaped Melbourne's identity," Find an Expert, University of Melbourne, June 26, 2019, https://findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/news/2895-from-molten-lava-to-cobbled-laneways--how-bluestone-shaped-melbourne%E2%80%99s-identity.

14. Ronny Reich and Hannah Katzenstein, "Glossary of Archaeological Terms," in The Architecture of Ancient Israel, ed. Aharon Kempinski and Ronny Reich (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1992), 312.

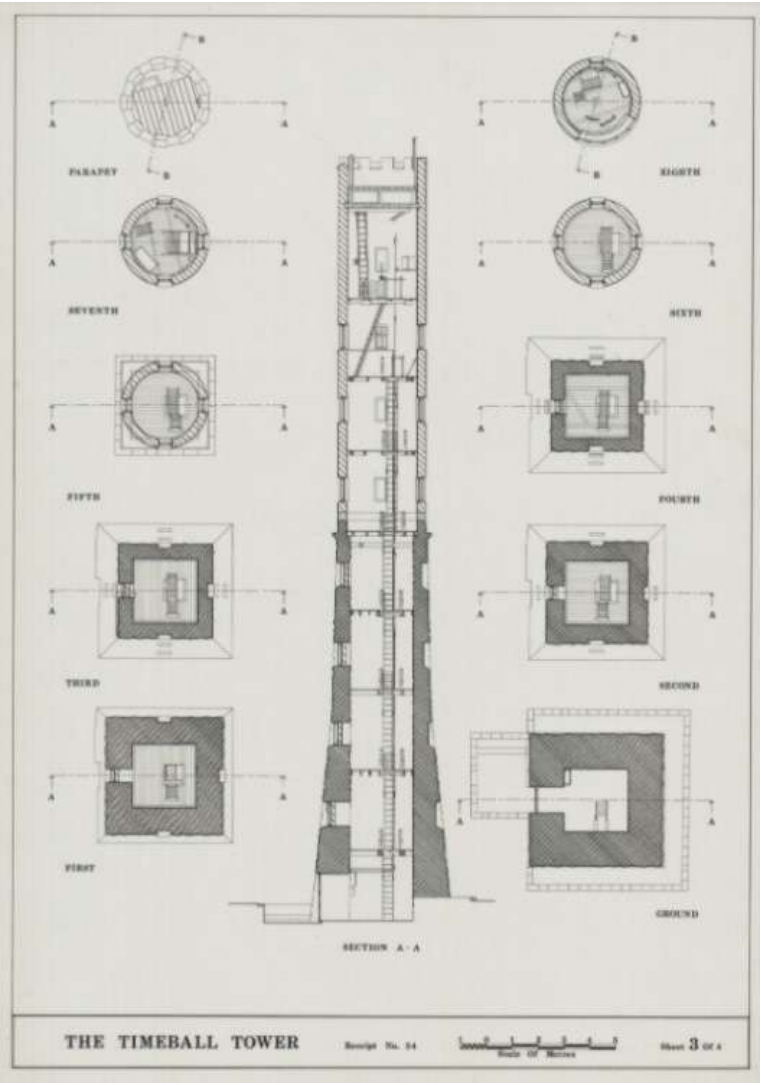

Fig.10. The Timeball Tower, Glen Rodgers, Draftsperson,1986, State Library of Victoria

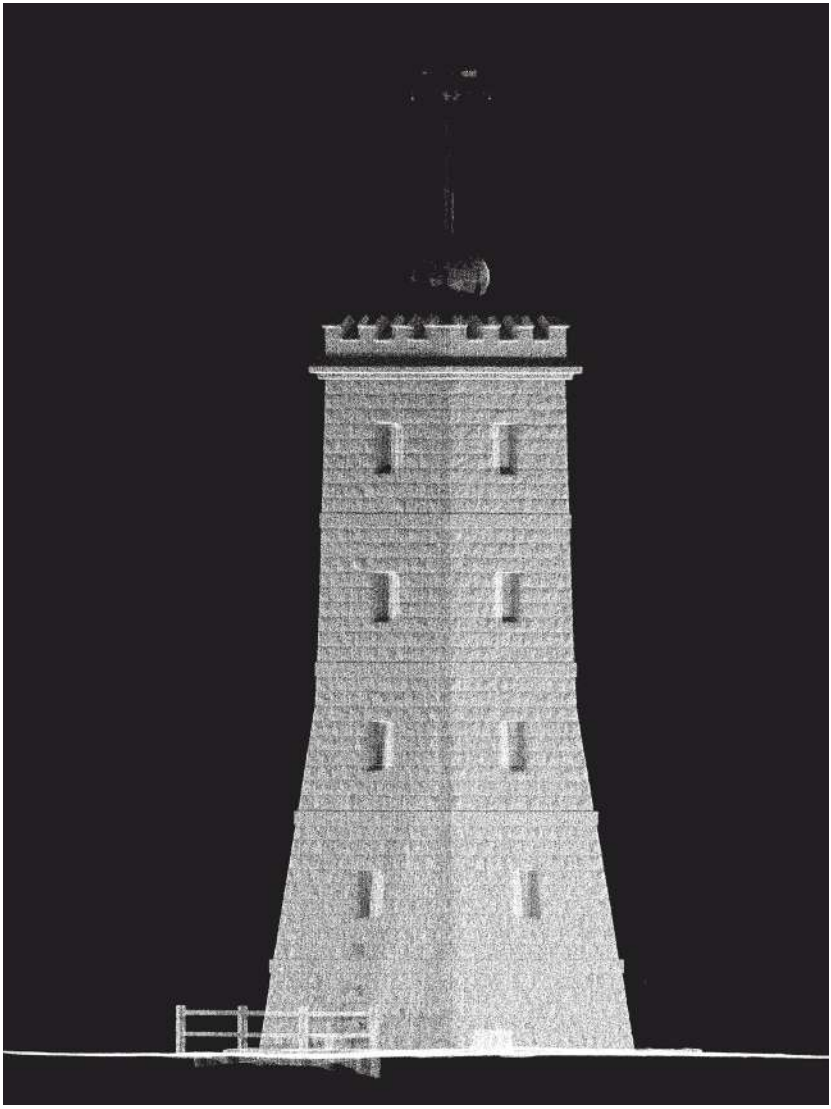

Fig.11. Tower as Image, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

Fig.12. Castellated Parapet, Photograph, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

03 TIME

In 1861, the timeball mechanism was added to the top of the Williamstown Tower. Each day at 1 pm, the ball was hoisted to the masthead and then quickly In 1861, the timeball mechanism was added to the top of the Williamstown Tower. Each day at 1 pm, the ball was hoisted to the masthead and then quickly dropped, providing a precise visual signal to ships in the distance.[15] Accurate timekeeping was essential for vessels arriving in Melbourne, as sailors compared local time with established reference times, such as Greenwich Mean Time, to calibrate marine chronometers and determine longitude. At the site scale, this precision was maintained by the timeball keeper, Richard Vaughan, who lived in the adjacent keeper's quarters and operated the mechanism daily until his death in 1926, after which the timeball function ceased. The system's accuracy also extended to the scale of the city, reinforced by an electrical telegraph signal from the Melbourne Observatory, built in the same year.[16] The Observatory framed astronomy as a tool of authority and imperial modernity, demonstrating how seemingly neutral scientific practices were intertwined with broader structures of power.

Time-keeping, like navigation, relies on these physical markers to measure, orient, and communicate temporal understanding, here explicitly from a Western perspective. These seemingly neutral practices of measuring and sharing time, however, were quickly subsumed into the imperial project, when in 1884, the International Meridian Conference established the prime meridian at Greenwich.[17] From then, Greenwich Mean Time was adopted as the world's standard, establishing it as the axis around which the rest of the world would be measured and ordered.

15. Williamstown Historical Society, "Williamstown Timeball Tower," Williamstown Historical Society, January 16, 2024, accessed September 22, 2025, https://www.williamstownhistsoc.org.au/williamstown-timeball-tower. williamstownhistsoc.org.au

16. Heritage Council Victoria, "Place – 1222."

17. International Conference Held at Washington for the Purpose of Fixing a Prime Meridian and a Universal Day. October, 1884. Protocols of the Proceedings, (Project Gutenberg, 1884), 209, accessed November 30, 2012, https://www.gutenberg.org/.

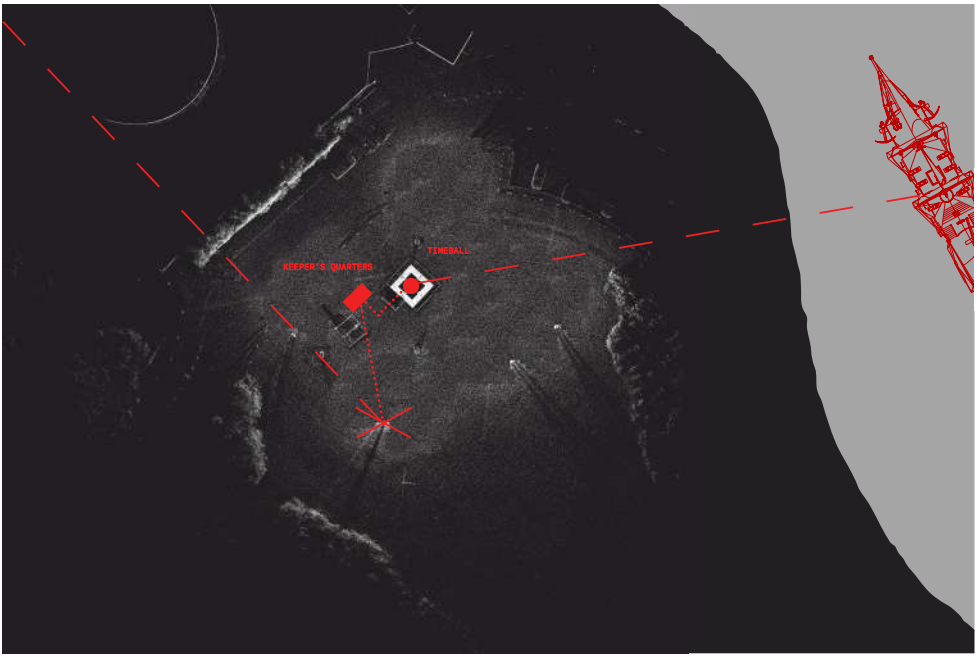

Fig.13. Site-scale Time Operations, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

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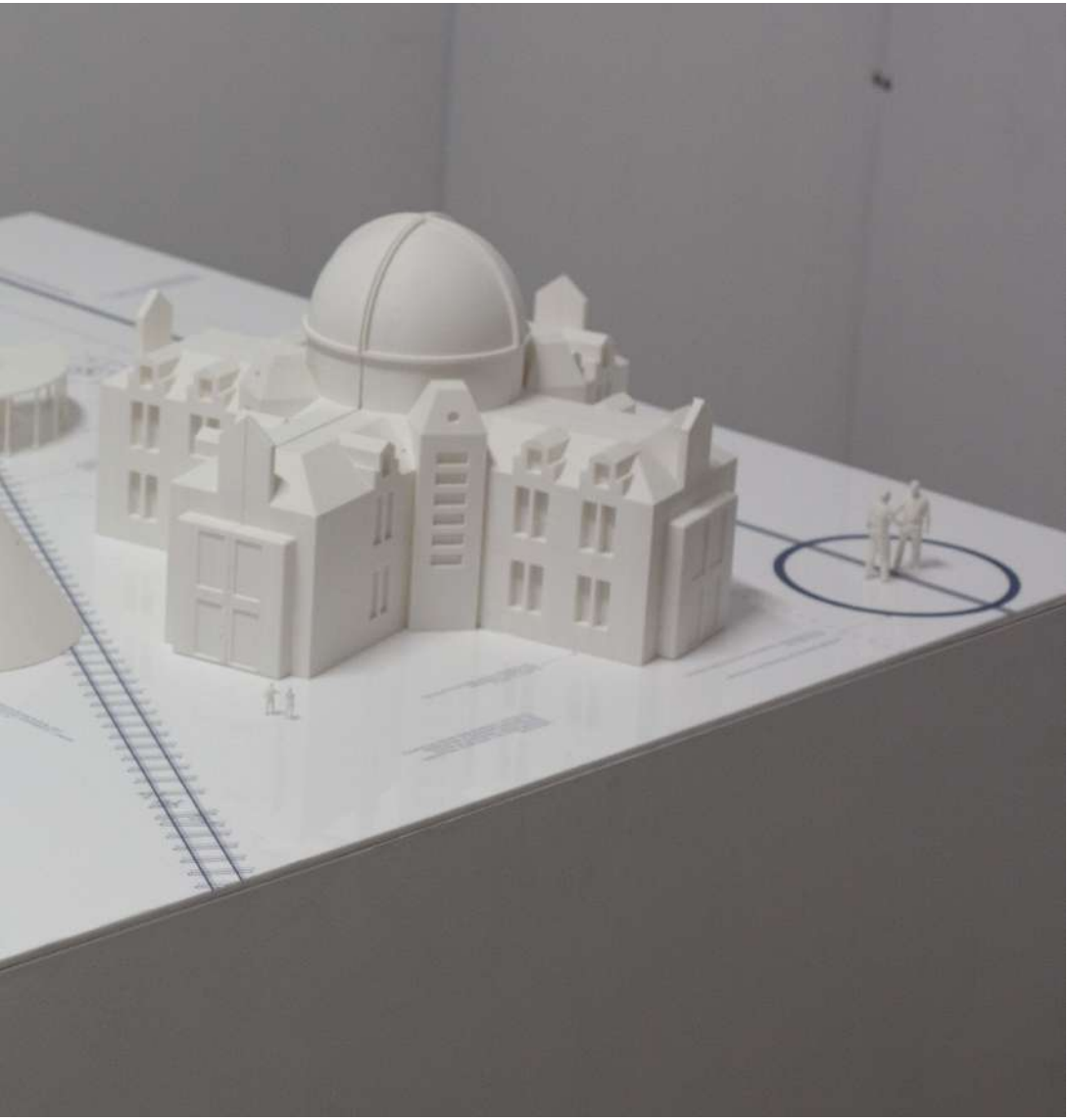

Fig.14. London to Melbourne, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

04 TIME AS IMAGE

While initial focus may be on the tower itself, this research highlights the wider network of infrastructure necessary to sustain colonial systems of timekeeping and navigation. Visualising these physical markers as catalogue of cultural artifacts, and then as a conglomerated map from Greenwich to Melbourne, reveals not only the colonial typology of these orientation lineages but the formal gestures through which hierarchies are reinforced.

The Melbourne Observatory was built in 1870 to house the Great Melbourne Telescope.[1] The very architecture of columns, a gabled roof, and ornamented windows gives the impression of a familiar domestic setting rather than a highly technical instrument. Situated within the Royal Botanic Gardens, astronomical research positions itself at the forefront of so-called high society.

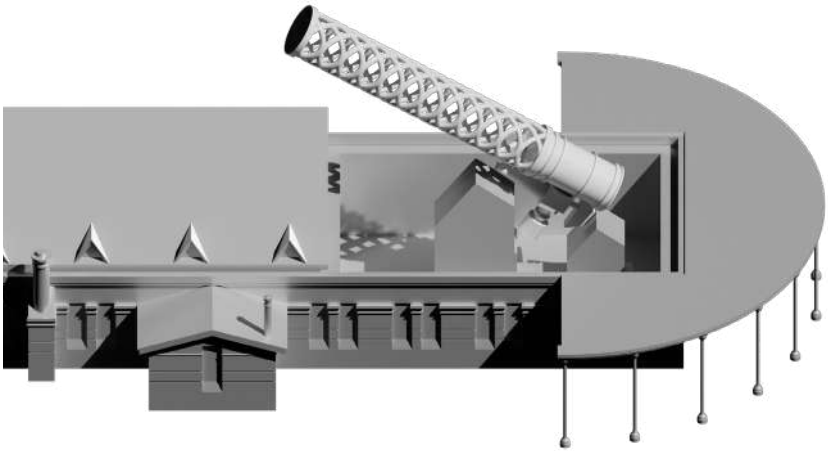

Fig.15. The Great Melbourne Telescope, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

1. Museums Victoria, "Great Melbourne Telescope Restoration," Scienceworks, accessed September 22, 2025, https://museumsvictoria.com.au/scienceworks/whats-on/great-melbourne-telescope-restoration/.

Built in 1891, the cruciform South Building at the Royal Observatory Greenwich stands as imposed order. Its cross-shaped plan is no accident: it echoes the Christian cross and the Cartesian grid, its arms extending outwards, claiming all directions.

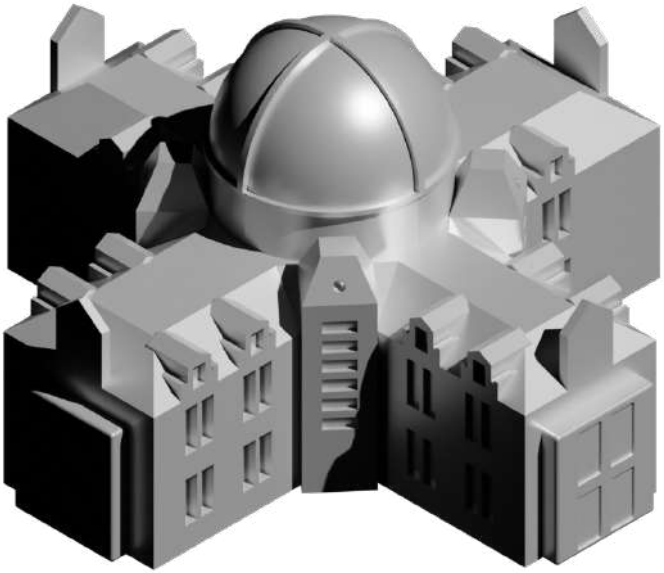

Fig.16. The Royal Observatory South Building, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

The Peter Harrison Planetarium at the Royal Observatory Greenwich does not employ its conical lid as a skylight, but as aa digital screen. Its pointed cylindrical shape extending to the sky stages a faux experience of celestial observation, functioning less as a scientific instrument than as a purely monumental gesture of scientific excellence. In a contemporary context, these experiences of Western Exceptionalism are again fabricated through Architecture.

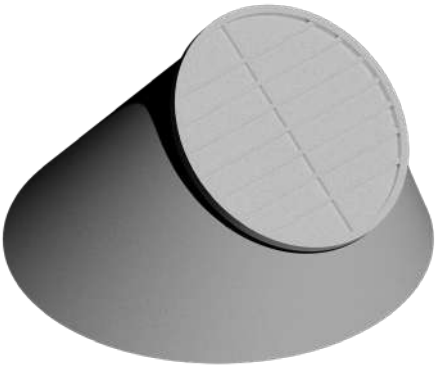

Fig.17. The Planetarium Cone, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

In 1851, the timekeeper's quarters was built alongside the Williamstown Tower. Its modest wooden structure, almost negligible compared to the imposing tower, aligns with the Australian vernacular. It exists primarily as a functional afterthought, supporting the operation of the timekeeping mechanisms. This contrast highlights the differing priorities from the more ornamented structures, in which grandeur and display were paramount.

Fig.18. Time-Keepers Quarters, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

05 EVENT // FRAGILITY

When mapped together, the fragility of these seemingly benign and objective measures becomes apparent. They are imagined as events, illustrating how such systems have the potential to malfunction and act against the very order they were intended to enforce.

Fig.19. Failures of Time-keeping, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

If a ships marine chronometer is misaligned by seconds… These systems of navigation begin to fall apart…

Fig.20. International Meridian Conference 1884, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

Or when visualized, the moment that fixed Greenwich as this absolute Prime Meridian was, in fact, entirely arbitrary...

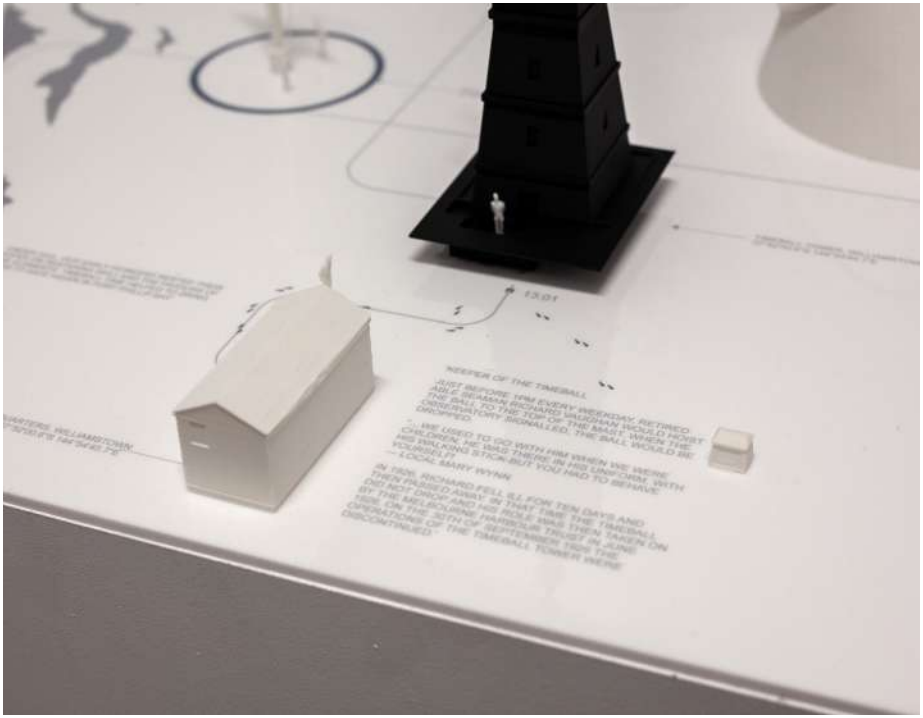

Fig.21. Time-keeper's Slip in Time, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

Or the human error of the time keeper, who worked the timeball for 37 years. A minor slip, the accuracy of the ball dropping, could unsettle precision across the bay….

06 CONCLUSION

These systems of operation across different scales work as heavily loaded cultural apparatus, rather than simply benign instruments . While the imperial project sought to collapse differences through time, these disruptions are uncontrollable, and reveal the fragility in such a system.

In this sense, the Grimwade Collection does more than archive a history of architecture and technology. It also stages the conditions under which we might re-examine them. What appears politely as a celebration of progress in Melbourne becomes, under scrutiny, a reminder of the limits of any such claim. The acts of navigation and timekeeping point us back to their own precarity, inviting us to imagine alternative modes of orientation.

Fig.22. Exhibition Set-up, Elena Stefanos & Diego Satkofsky, 2025

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