



Back to my roots

by Cr Serge Thomann

Hello from my home town in France! As many of you know, I come from the beautiful French region of Alsace in the North East of France, next to Germany and Switzerland. It is a region full of history and passion. My paternal grandfather was born in 1890 when Alsace was German; he became French in 1918 at the end of the WWI, to become German again in 1939, and back to French in 1945.

I do go back to my roots every year or two to catch up with family, my mum and dad, my sister and her kids, and my friends. To paraphrase one of our famous Alsatians, the artist Tomi Ungerer, my roots are from Alsace but my leaves are from Australia.

As the delegate of the International Union of Alsatians (UIA) - the most active group of French people from a specific French region - I attended their annual conference a few days ago. It was interesting to meet other Alsatians living in other parts of the world, from Shanghai to Montreal and Macedonia, via Monaco - Prince Albert's hairdresser was born in Alsace. I also met the Premier of the Region and some of his key ministers (photo).

It is a very interesting time to be part of this conference as the French President François Hollande has put in place a new system of big regions with Alsace merging with Lorraine, Champagne and Ardennes. The big regions were not part of Hollande's election promises and there is a lot of strong dissatisfaction in France on all sides of politics about these new arrangements. People in the Alsace region in particular are very upset with the tiny region potentially losing its identity and specificity. A very eminent Professor of the University of Strasbourg talked at the conference about the illegitimacy of the new law. The President of the Region made a very political and emotional plea for Alsace - you would expect this from him as his job has been made redundant...

Having listened to all over two days, the fight for the Alsatian identity and right to exist reminded me in a way of the Indigenous people in Australia and their own struggle here. Who would have thought that this would happen in France? France is a puzzle of great regions and I cannot see what there is to gain by amalgamating them into bigger entities. I am much more in favour of decentralisation and with an administration at a human size instead of this big conglomerate that means nothing. And why push ahead at any cost knowing that it will most probably fail?

Alsace has been home to many notable "celebrities." They include Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, the sculptor famed for the Statue of Liberty, the great mime

Marcel Marceau, Gutenberg who printed the first book, pastry maker Pierre Hermé who reinvented the macarons, and Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer. I admire what Dr Schweitzer did in his lifetime, taking care of very sick people in Africa and risking his own life. One of his numerous sayings that I like is: "Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success. If you love what you are doing, you will be successful." If you have a chance to visit Alsace, do it. You will have a wonderful experience as it is a beautiful part of the world and you will eat - and drink - well! I am happy to give you some tips!

Talking to things back in St Kilda, it was really interesting to witness the workshops that Council conducted as part of our co-design process. More than 120 people contributed to the thinking and I am pleased that we made progress. Ten key themes became apparent, including the community supporting the creation of a high quality, urban public realm protected from wind and variable weather, framed by built form; exploring through built form a pedestrian bridge over Jacka Boulevard; respect for the Palais Theatre and the need to maintain its architectural prominence within a landscape; the desire for a combination of cultural, educational, community and commercial uses, and acceptance of commercial uses such as a boutique hotel, and high quality architectural outcomes.

I also heard that just to have a park there would be a lost opportunity, and some participants were open to continuing to explore changing the slopes.

And as you may have read, there is a possibility of the NGV locating a third gallery there or a smaller cultural institution. Thank you to all the participants from St Kilda but also from a broader Port Phillip and Melbourne. Go on our website: www.stkildatriangle.com to find out more. I am often been asked why is it taken so long to come up with a solution for the site but I believe we are making progress and there is strong community support for our approach to make sure that we will all be proud of whatever is going to be built on the site.

See you in a few days when I am back in St Kilda, just in time for the Acland Street Project Festival from September 11, supported by the City of Port Phillip through a Cultural Development Grant.
Cr Serge Thomann