



Eddie Kutner says ‘great societies are defined through their art, science and knowledge’. The *Shearwater* sculpture, above.

MAIN PICTURE: KYLIE ELSE

## Mr Southbank swoops in to save art classic



### DAMON KITNEY

He’s been dubbed “Mr Southbank” — the man who in the early 1990s kickstarted the development of one of Melbourne’s most famed inner-city apartment and tourism precincts.

Today Central Equity Group, with more than \$3 billion of work in hand, is one of Melbourne’s most prolific private developers and its biggest inner-city apartment builder.

But the reclusive and wealthy Eddie Kutner has also long held a passion for art. Or more specifically, how art and science can intersect to “drive knowledge”.

“It is about seeing art and science as a communicator,” the chartered accountant and developer tells *The Weekend Australian*.

In 2014 he created the not-for-profit Wonderment Walk, open-air galleries scattered along Melbourne’s architectural, historical and cultural walking routes. The first was at the Yarra Gallery in Federation Square.

Since 2016 he’s been on the advisory board of Questacon, the National Science and Technology Centre. More recently he married his two passions, forging an unlikely alliance with global oil giant ExxonMobil, a top corporate lawyer and a Melbourne city council-

lor who was once prime minister Julia Gillard’s most senior strategist to save one of the city’s most renowned sculptures.

The 8m tall sculpture known as *Shearwater* has gazed across the Yarra River from outside ExxonMobil’s Australian headquarters at Southbank for almost a quarter of a century.

The distinctive blue, black and red bird is one of a number of high-profile artworks created by Melbourne sculptor Inge King. It was commissioned by Esso Australia and installed outside its Southbank building in 1995.

But in September, after the oil giant had sold its Southbank offices and offloaded much of its art collection, it looked like *Shearwater* would be lost to the city as the sculpture was listed for sale through Menzies Art Brands for about \$350,000.

One of city’s top M&A lawyers, Thomson Geer’s Melbourne office boss Adam Brooks — a mad art collector, came across the listing and alerted his friend, City of Melbourne councillor Nicholas Reece.

“I was alerted that *Shearwater* was on the auctioneers block by a prominent and somewhat distressed Melbourne legal eagle and art collector — we both knew Melbourne could not lose such a significant artwork by a legendary local artist,” says Reece, who also once held senior positions in the offices of Victorian premiers John Brumby and Steve Bracks.

“Inge King’s sculptures are part of the fabric of Melbourne — she is the queen of sculpture in this town.

There were lots of phone calls encouraging ExxonMobil to donate the iconic work to the city before the auction date, as well as the matter of the auction withdrawal fees, which were around \$79,000.”

ExxonMobil Australia chairman Richard Owen stepped in with just days to spare before the auction to ensure *Shearwater* was withdrawn from sale by Menzies Art Brands and donated to the city.

**‘Fortunately I have the ability to now be able to stop and look back and see what this city has contributed to me.’**

EDDIE KUTNER

“The *Shearwater* is an important piece of art so we are pleased it will remain in the public domain,” Owen says.

“It is also important to ExxonMobil, which is why we have a model version at our new office.”

But the auction withdrawal costs had to be paid, as did the cost of repositioning the sculpture in Southbank. Enter Kutner, himself a post-war immigrant from Germany just like King.

Reece asked the Central Equity chairman if he would help. He reckons it was one of the easiest calls he has ever made.

“He said, ‘I’ll do whatever it takes to help,’” Reece recalls.

Kutner quickly agreed to meet the costs of the auction withdrawal

and the sculpture’s subsequent relocation, which was estimated to be up to \$100,000. “It is an iconic work in Southbank and it is the premier arts district of Melbourne so it seemed right that it ought to remain here,” Kutner says.

It also fitted into his vision for the Wonderment Walk.

“It qualifies in that it is a major artwork and could be a discussion point. The vision of the Wonderment Walk is that great societies are defined through their art, science and knowledge,” he says.

“It is about having this concept of open-air galleries where people bump into each other.

“It is a bit corny to say it is a light-bulb moment for people but you walk down the street, when you see a work like *Shearwater* that is curious, you begin to think about it and perhaps have a discussion about it.”

Kutner says Central Equity has put no conditions on the funding to save the sculpture, which will be repositioned to a nearby location within Southbank Promenade.

“We have put a lot into Southbank and would like the finer grain to be built back into the precinct. There is a lot happening on the river promenade and maybe it’s better put in a less active area. I would like to see it in a more serene location where it dominates a bit more,” he says.

Reece says the story highlights the willingness of Melbourne corporations to collaborate to fund things that otherwise would be out of the reach of the public purse.

“It’s a great story about how

Melbourne works — how networks old and new collaborate to get good things done,” he says.

And Kutner will continue to ply his passion for art.

He says Perth-born artist Ian Strange, whose works sit in private and public collections at a number of major galleries around the country including the National Gallery of Victoria, is designing an installation to be called *Waterlines*, which is being funded by the Wonderment Walk.

“Port Phillip and Southbank have always had to deal with inundation issues and flooding, so his work speaks to that,” Kutner says.

In another project, Central Equity has joined with joint venture partner Brookfield Multiplex and RMIT University to pick construction hoardings around Melbourne that can be decorated with art.

One called Rain has just been completed at Healeys Lane, between King and William streets.

Kutner says another seven works are being commissioned for what he calls the “Healeys Lane 7 for 7 project” — one work will be unveiled on each day of a week in the month of February.

He says his passion for the city he has called his home for decades and its art extends back to his childhood: “Melbourne has been fantastic to me. We came here in the 1950s and my parents didn’t know the language. Neither did I. I went to state school and high school, all for free. Fortunately I have the ability to now be able to stop and look back and see what this city has contributed to me.”