

SAM NEWBERG

# Melbourne reborn

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA'S CITY center has undergone a major regeneration over the past two decades. Driven by visionary leaders dedicated to improving the city's public spaces, the city center has come to life, burgeoning with new housing, cafés, and public improvements. This resurgence has paid other dividends as well: the improvements to central Melbourne have made it not only more livable, but also more sustainable.

Starting with a series of plans and public improvements that began in 1985, the renaissance of Melbourne took off in the 1990s. From 1994 to 2004, changes to central Melbourne included:

- ▷ a tenfold population increase to 10,000;
- ▷ an increase in college and university enrollment from 50,000 to 82,000;

**Melbourne, Australia's city center has come to life over the past 20 years and is now burgeoning with new public parks, squares, and art; improved streetscapes; and more downtown housing.**

- ▷ an increase in the number of restaurants, cafés, and bars—especially those with outdoor seating;
- ▷ growing employment, with more than 200,000 jobs in existence since 2000;
- ▷ new or improved public spaces such as squares and promenades; and
- ▷ an increase in “stationary activity”—such as standing, sitting, leaning, listening, and playing—in public places, reflecting the comfort and value of these spaces for people.

As the capital of Victoria, a state on the southern edge of the continent, Melbourne is a metropolitan area

**Federation Square, the new heart of downtown Melbourne, is a major public realm; it encompasses 176,937 square feet (16,438 sq m) and includes an amphitheater, the National Gallery of Victoria, the National Design Centre, and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, plus numerous restaurants, cafés, bars, and shops.**



with nearly 4 million residents. Central Melbourne, laid out on a grid of streets along the northern bank of the Yarra River, has always been the commercial center of the city. But like many other city cores around the world, and despite retaining its efficient streetcar/tram system, Melbourne saw its city center decline in the face of rising automobile dominance and suburbanization in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1983, local and state politicians were elected on the platform of reviving central Melbourne, and in 1985, the city adopted a strategy plan to move that goal toward reality—the first step in a long line of public and private investment in the city center.

The 1985 City of Melbourne Strategy Plan focused on two main tenets, explains Rob Adams, the city’s director of design and urban development, who has been with the city through the



CITY OF MELBOURNE



CITY OF MELBOURNE



CITY OF MELBOURNE

**Melbourne is a much greener city than it was a couple of decades ago. Some 3,000 new trees have been planted along its major streets and a new 20.5-acre (8.3-ha) park has been added. Streetscape improvements have been made to Melbourne’s major north–south retail avenue, Swanston Street, including wider sidewalks and the addition of pavers and benches to help improve its function as a public space (left). Birrarung Marr, the city’s new park on the Yarra River, has canals, paths, bridges, and plentiful open spaces (above).**

entire revitalization process. “The central city should transform from a central business district to a central activities district, and this change should be undertaken in such a way that the character of Melbourne is enhanced rather than diminished,” he says.

The five main principles of the 1985 plan were to add mixed-use development, increase density, create better connections between city and adjacent areas,

build on existing local character, and improve the overall public realm. The 1985 plan provided a framework for this to occur and laid out priorities for implementation. Major projects that have been achieved since then include encouraging and adding significant amounts of housing; improving streetscapes



**The burgeoning Docklands area to the west of Melbourne's city center is seeing development of housing—including Victoria Tower, a 42-story residential high rise—and is expected to accommodate 20,000 people in 8,000 units in the next 15 years. Four office buildings, totaling 924,300 square feet (85,870 sq m), have also been developed recently.**

along major streets; adding parks and squares; encouraging higher student enrollment, more public art, and a higher overall number of attractions; and improving bicycle and transit access.

The city managed to track major changes through the hiring of an urban consultant. On two occasions, the city worked with Jan Gehl, founder of Copenhagen, Denmark-based Gehl Architects, to analyze progress made on its plan. The intent of the first study, conducted in 1994, was for Gehl and his staff to conduct a survey of public spaces and public life, to assess changes since the 1985 plan, and provide recommendations for the next steps. The 1994 study also provided analysis and a basis for findings in a corresponding study ten years later in 2004, also completed by Gehl.

The fact that Gehl repeated his research at a ten-year interval “means we have a comprehensive record of all the improvements that have been made to the city,” says Adams. “Many of these are incremental and would have been lost over time, but this recording process has proved to be invaluable.” Adams says he recommends that other cities conduct similar long-term surveys.

Notable specific changes in Melbourne include streetscape improvements such as those on Swanston Street, the major north-south retail street, which underwent sidewalk widening and storefront improvements, as well as the addition of pavers, street trees, and benches—all of which greatly improved its livability, particularly as a public space.

Southern Cross (Spencer Street) Station, a major rail station development on central Melbourne's western edge completed in 2005, improves rail access to and from the city, plus provides better access to the burgeoning Docklands area to the west, which is beginning to attract development after container shipping made the docks obsolete in recent decades. (See page 71.)

Melbourne is a much greener city than it was in the 1980s. Some 3,000 trees have been planted along its major streets and a park has been added. Major streets now have a growing continuous canopy of trees, and narrower streets and lanes have species that are of appropriate size at maturity. Birrarung Marr, the city's new 20.5-acre (8.3-ha) park along the Yarra River, has canals, paths, bridges, and places for public events.



CITY OF MELBOURNE



CITY OF MELBOURNE

**City Square, a 30,139-square-foot (2,800-sq-m) public space and pedestrian plaza in central Melbourne, offers many places to sit and is a venue for small public events.**

Federation Square, the new heart of the downtown built above an operating rail yard, is considered the most significant improvement to central Melbourne. Seen as a testament to the city's commitment to the public realm, it encompasses 176,937 square feet (16,438 sq m) and contains a broad public space, as well as an open-air amphitheater; the Ian Potter Centre: NGV (National Gallery of Victoria) Australia, a gallery dedicated exclusively to Australian art; the National Design Centre; the Australian Centre for the Moving Image; plus numerous restaurants, cafés, bars, and shops. Perhaps even more important, Federation Square links the city to the Yarra River by covering the rail line that once blocked that connection.

In addition to Federation Square, City Square, a flexible and comfortable 30,139-square-foot (2,800-sq-m) public space that offers many places to sit or hold small public events, has been renovated and is now better able to accommodate special events and encourage informal interaction.



Public art projects, found throughout the city, are part of Melbourne's effort to work with local artists and schools to create permanent and temporary installations. Among these are *Architectural Fragment*, reminiscent of a Greek temple emerging from underground (left).

Among the more intriguing changes to the city is the transformation of alleys into "Little" streets lined with restaurants, micro-retailers such as flower and fruit stands, newsstands to encourage sidewalk activity, and additional informal places to sit, such as lawns, retaining walls, and stairs. Many of the city's restaurants are concentrated along these narrow, traffic-free streets/alleys, which provide a much more intimate scale for dining, particularly for clusters of sidewalk seating. The Little streets (i.e., Little Bourke, Little Collins, Little Lonsdale, Little Flinders—also known as Flinders Lane) are popular gathering places and provide additional pedestrian options and connections.

Bringing about the greatest change, Adams says, was probably the 1992 project Postcode 3000, a city-created program designed to add 3,000 residential units to the central city in the 1990s; it included financial incentives for developers and streetscape improvements to bring back residential development. The residential population of central Melbourne, which grew significantly between 1985 and 1994 to top 1,000, had jumped to 10,000 by 2004. This increase has resulted in the presence of significantly higher numbers of pedestrians around central Melbourne at all hours, helping it become a 24-hour city.

Major improvements tracked in Gehl's research include increases in population, pedestrian traffic, public art, greenery, and sidewalk seating. In 1983, central Melbourne had only two outdoor cafés; by 1994, there were 95, and in 2004, there were 356 with more than 5,000 seats. Overall pedestrian counts increased at all times of the week in nearly all central Melbourne, including a near doubling during weekday evenings, largely attributed to the jump in downtown population. Pedestrian traffic along Bourke and Swanston streets, both major shopping areas in central Melbourne, puts them on par with Regent Street in London and Stroget, the main street in Copenhagen.



Numerous alleys throughout Melbourne have been transformed into "Little" streets, such as Little Bourke and Little Collins—narrow, traffic-free venues with clusters of sidewalk seating for cafés and restaurants.

Major streets in Melbourne now have a continuous canopy of trees, and public green spaces have been added.



CITY OF MELBOURNE

Public art is a major aspect of central Melbourne today, with art found throughout the city. Melbourne works with local artists and schools to create permanent and temporary installations. Among the 150 pieces of permanent outdoor art are *Architectural Fragment*, which looks like a Greek temple that has fallen over and been mostly buried underground, and *Public Purse*, an oversized handbag made of

red granite that is lying on its side and large enough to serve as a bench.

“All of the policies and projects we have pursued over the last 24 years not only have made the city more livable, but have made the city more sustainable,” notes Adams. Improved walkability, transit service, trees, and additional central city residents have enabled the city to be greener in many respects, but

## Recent Projects in Melbourne Center City

- ▷ Council House 2 (CH2), a municipal office building.
- ▷ Birrarung Marr, a city park.
- ▷ City Square renovation.
- ▷ Federation Square, a public square.
- ▷ Melbourne Museum.
- ▷ Southern Cross Station renovation.
- ▷ Docklands, an area west of central Melbourne developing substantial housing, expected to accommodate 20,000 people in 8,000 units in the next 15 years.
- ▷ Victoria Tower, a 447-unit, 42-story residential tower in the Docklands.
- ▷ Four office buildings at Docklands totaling 924,300 square feet (85,870 sq m).
- ▷ Eureka Tower, a 92-story, 560-unit residential tower in the Southbank district.
- ▷ Freshwater Place, a mixed-use project in Southbank with a 62-story residential tower and a 36-story PricewaterhouseCoopers office tower.
- ▷ Bourke Street Mall, a major retail street with upgraded streetscape, lighting, and pedestrian improvements.
- ▷ Verve 501, a 306-unit residential building.
- ▷ Home @ Flinders, a 293-unit residential building.
- ▷ Milano Apartments, a 280-unit residential building.

Melbourne also is pursuing an aggressive strategy to develop greener buildings.

One notable green building is Council House 2 (CH2), an office building for city staff that opened in 2006. It was awarded six stars, the most available under the Australian Green Building Council rating system and similar to a Platinum rating under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program of the U.S. Green Building Council. The 134,936-square-foot (12,536-sq m), ten-story building includes a chilled-water cooling system, solar hot-water collectors, light-harvesting devices to reduce the need for artificial lighting, shower facilities for cyclists, and a natural gas-fired cogeneration plant to meet 40 percent of the building's electricity needs. Although construction costs for the CH2 building were higher than those for a conventional build-

ing, it is believed that in ten years these sustainable features will pay for themselves. (See "Council House 2," *Urban Land Green*, Spring 2007, page 92.)

Also notable is the city's Zero Net Emissions by 2020 program to make Melbourne carbon neutral by 2020. Most reductions will come in existing buildings through renovations and retrofits in commercial and residential buildings, but new office buildings after 2012 will have to have a five-star rating under the Australian Green Building Council rating system. Other efforts will be related to transportation, such as a congestion charge for the central city and enhanced bicycle infrastructure, as well as involve reducing the carbon content of the energy supply.

"Melbourne has taken huge strides," notes Gehl, describing Melbourne's resurgence. In his 2004 report, Gehl noted that the city has done "almost everything" to improve its livability and environment. To build on that success, Gehl recommends that the city improve its bicycle network with additional on-street bike lanes, and, where possible, bike lanes placed between on-street parking and pedestrian sidewalks. He also suggests improving the streetscape and pedestrian environment along streets that connect to adjacent neighborhoods like the Docklands to the west and Southbank, located across the Yarra River.

Looking ahead, Melbourne appears well-positioned to improve on its newfound livability and sustainability. The city plan, updated in 2005, reflects emerging trends and recent developments in Australia's second-largest city. Besides the Zero Net Emissions by 2020 program, the plan for 2010 identifies locations for future housing development in and near central Melbourne, particularly in the Docklands area.

Central Melbourne has managed to turn around its fortunes in the past 25 years. Progress has been slow but steady, says Adams. "To change cities will always be a slow process and cannot be achieved overnight through silver-bullet solutions of grand architecture," he notes. "It is more about the slow incremental improvement of the most important piece of public space in the city—namely, our streets." **UL**

**SAM NEWBERG** is an urbanist, writer, consultant, and founder of Joe Urban, Inc., based in Minneapolis, Minnesota.