

THE CONVERSION OF MELBOURNE

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Abstract. In 1950 Melbourne, Australia was physically a nineteenth century city and socially and economically clinging to its past glories as the largest and richest city in the country.

By the 1970s it realised that it needed to reassert its position over its rival, Sydney. After a short flirtation with American modernism and attempting to turn itself into an antipodean version of Los Angeles it struck out in a new direction which built on its prodigious architectural and social heritage.

The paper will describe this journey, but in particular highlight the role that heritage conservation played in establishing Melbourne as an attractive, vibrant, economically dynamic and cultural city. How Melbourne moved from seeing its history and heritage as an economic impediment to embracing it as a valuable asset.

It will point to several lessons, including:

1. the role of the past in determining the future of a place,
2. the need to search for new social and economic opportunities,
3. maintaining a broad view of what is important about a place and the limitations of simply preserving monuments, and
4. the importance of activism in establishing a political agenda.

The paper will not be a hard edged economic paper, but rather a descriptive piece focussed on the adoption of different planning strategies and their impact in terms of population, economic activity and social outcomes.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT

In 1950 Melbourne, Australia was physically a nineteenth century city and socially and economically clinging to its past glories as the largest and richest city in the country.

The land on which Melbourne is located was occupied by the Wurrundjeri, an Australian Aboriginal people for 50,000 years prior to the arrival of white settlers in 1835.

For the initial years of settlement it was a convenient port and service town for the pastoral industry that had quickly occupied the surrounding lands. During these years the centre of Melbourne was surveyed and laid out and the first land sales took place. Melbourne suffered an economic recession in 1842 and according to Lewis it was during this time that the economic functions of the central area crystallised. This led to mercantile and warehousing activity near the Yarra River, banking and commercial activities in central Collins Street, retailing between Swanston and Elizabeth Streets and a medical precinct at the eastern end of Collins Street. This pattern of land use remained largely intact through the twentieth century.

Melbourne's country town character was to change dramatically during the 1850s when gold was discovered in areas around Melbourne.

— that the population began to multiply inordinately, that the economy came to depend more upon gold than upon pastoralism, and that new ideas and political stirrings were released. To a population of 77,000 was added more than 270,000 immigrants by the end of 1854, and by the end of the decade the population reached half a million.¹

With the increase in population came an increase in the demand for goods and services, which until that time were largely supplied through imports. As the gold industry developed there also grew a great demand for engineering services and equipment (pumps, boilers, crushers, etc.). It was this demand that saw the beginnings of Melbourne's status as the manufacturing and industrial capital of Australia. Along with this came a rapid increase in the need for finance and professional and commercial services. Equally there was plenty of money in the pockets of many miners, both individuals and newly founded corporations which were able to sustain this new found commerciality.

In 1861 Melbourne's population was 126,000, five times what it had been in 1851. 37,000 of these were living in the city and its immediate residential suburbs.² Over the next thirty years Melbourne's population further quadrupled and resulted in great suburban expansion.

It was in September, 1852 that the real revolution began

¹ Lewis 1995.

In his book **Victorian Cities** the well known British historian Asa Briggs described Melbourne in the following terms:

*The rateable value of Melbourne in 1891 was surpassed in the Empire only by London and, only just ahead, by Glasgow. During the great urban boom of the 1880's, Melbourne was described by a distinguished visitor, G. A. Sala, as 'marvellous Melbourne'. Other people called it 'the Paris of the Antipodes' or 'the Chicago of the South'.*³

He pointed out that Melbourne in 1850 had 23,000 people and was essentially a service town for the surrounding pastoral and agricultural lands. By 1902 it had more than 500,000 people.

Briggs quoted the British economist who had noted that by 1858 Melbourne had acquired a 'metropolitan' character.

*"it was a commercial centre with 'two or more primary productive operations',The city centre included well-stocked and well-lit shops, 'equal to the best in London', bank buildings described in 1856 as 'of considerable architectural pretensions'; a Theatre Royal, built in 1842, where you could see 'Italian opera in a style worthy of the English metropolis itself'; and a new Melbourne Club opened in 1858, which 'though it has not the Corinthian pillars and fine architectural proportions of the Conservative at home would not at all disgrace St Jame's Street'."*⁴

*"the origins of the boom were complex. Gold-mining, which had accounted for the great boom of the 1850s, had lost its importance in the 1870s. By that time, however, Melbourne had become the greatest centre of trade and finance. A huge International Exhibition, which was held in 1880 and 188, put Melbourne 'on the map'."*⁵

The 1880s, in particular were a period of boom for Melbourne. In 1850 it had 68 factories, by 1900 there were 3,097.⁶ Between 1861 and 1891 Melbourne's population quadrupled. It had quickly become an industrial metropolis with all of the associated commerce that made for a truly Marvellous Melbourne.

Melbourne sustained its role as the dominant Australian city through the early years of the twentieth century. With the federation of the colonies, creating a Commonwealth Government in 1901, Melbourne became the home of the new federal Parliament and retained that role until 1927 when it was moved to the relatively new capital, Canberra. By that time Sydney had started to usurp Melbourne as the largest and most economically important city in the country. Despite this Melbourne retained the largest port in the country and continued as the centre of Australia's manufacturing industry. The political authority provided by the presence of the federal Parliament waned with its departure for Canberra. After all Sydney was much closer



Botanic Gardens, Melbourne (c. 1876-1880s). Artist: Nicholas CAIRE. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

² Lewis, 1995, p59

³ Briggs, 1968, p278.

⁴ Briggs, 1968 p280

⁵ Briggs, 1968 p287.



Collins Street (1880s). Artist's name UNKNOWN. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



Collins Street, Melbourne, 1930s, collection of the State Library of Victoria

to Canberra than Melbourne in an era when transport was by road or rail

The gradual growth of international air travel also did nothing for Melbourne's economic role. It may have maintained Australia's largest shipping port, but it was Sydney that became the centre of air transport. So by the time the Second World War came around and, particularly with the war in the Pacific it was Sydney that provided the best airport and naval repair and maintenance facilities.

Throughout the Second World War Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne became bases for US servicemen and they introduced a totally different cultural construct to the city. The US was well known to Australians before the war. Professionals such as architects and town planners had been visiting the brave new cities of New York and Chicago throughout the twentieth century and the general populace had been entranced by American movies and film stars since the 1920s. However, it was the presence of these servicemen, their money and different approach to life that brought this new world home to Melburnians

Melbourne had a sound nineteenth century base to its built fabric. It had also protected the form of its city with building regulations, the most notable of which was a height limit of 132 feet. Throughout the early years of the twentieth century Melbourne's architects and buildings embraced the new technologies of steel framing and lifts, so that this limit was able to be easily reached. However,

the architectural form of the city remained relatively conservative, the pattern of streets and lanes remained intact, the retail arcades stayed, the theatres were retained and continued to be used, many of the old hotels were retained and the old mix of uses was sustained and of course the grand public institutions such as the Public Library, National Gallery and Science and Natural History Museums were central features of the city. It was these features that were to become one of Melbourne's greatest strengths in the later years of the twentieth century.

Aside from the presence of American servicemen in the 1940s there were two other big events which made Melburnians rethink their position in the world during the 50s. In 1954 the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth of the then British Empire visited Australia. She was the first ruling monarch to find their way to Melbourne. In 1956 Melbourne hosted the Olympic Games. The first of these events resulted in a massive wave of British patriotism. However, this was not a monarch in the nineteenth century mould of her great grandmother, Queen Victoria, after whom the State had been named. Queen Elizabeth was a young and modern monarch and Melbourne set out to impress her as a modern British city in the south, in part by painting its buildings white. The Olympics certainly provided an opportunity to parade Melbourne on the world stage and it did so with aplomb and along with the Olympics came the introduction of television –perhaps the most significant driver of change in social attitudes. By the 1950s the commercial centre of Australia had not only statistically moved to Sydney, but this was generally



Collins St, 5p.m. 1955
Artist's name John BRACK
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

⁶ Lewis, 1995, p63

accepted throughout the country and of course the political capital was Canberra. Melbourne found this disturbing and realised that it needed to reassert its position over its rival to the north. The immediate response was to promote the demolition of the old nineteenth century buildings and replace them with modern steel, concrete and glass edifices. It was American modernism a la Los Angeles that was going to set the new direction for Melbourne

The first of this wave was the Imperial Chemical Industries new offices at the top of the city. It was able to break through the 132 foot height limit and set a pattern for further development

In the city centre itself. These new developments not only lead to the destruction of many of the grand nineteenth century buildings, but undermined the traditional use patterns of the central city. It was destined to become a

centre of commerce, with the population, now living in the suburbs, commuting to and from by a new network of roads. There was even an ordinance which optimistically set out to destroy the traditional pattern of streets so that cars could move around the city to new multi-level car parks with greater ease.

The **1969 Melbourne Transportation Plan** was a road and rail transport plan for Melbourne. It outlined most prominently an extensive freeway network recommending 510 kilometres of freeway for metropolitan Melbourne, as well as extensive rail works, including the city underground loop and two new lines to Doncaster and Monash University (now Clayton Campus)[1] which were however - never built. Despite the majority of the printed material being devoted to non-car transport, 86 per cent of the projected budget was devoted to roads and parking, with only 14 per cent to other forms of transport.⁷

This meant that much of Melbourne's nineteenth century inner suburbs would be destroyed. Necessary if Melbourne was to become the southern hemisphere's equivalent of Los Angeles. What parts that were left would be demolished to make way for multi-storey blocks of public housing.

The mass of nineteenth century housing in inner Melbourne was seen to be un-healthy and slum like. The ultimate result was to emulate the great public housing estates of south central LA and Chicago. Melbourne converted the old Commonwealth Tank (military) factory into a prefabricated concrete housing factory to make the production of this housing efficient and economic. In turn this lead to Melbourne having the world's tallest prefabricated concrete housing block, thirty floors in South Melbourne. Just like the American authorities Melbourne's leaders, planners and engineers didn't consider the social problems that would arise through the housing of already disadvantaged people in these concrete towers.,

Ironically the waves of post war migrants from Europe quickly became attached to the old inner suburbs and their nineteenth century housing. After all this was the sort of housing that they were familiar with in Europe and in Melbourne its reputation as constituting slums had made it an inexpensive form of housing. The old Australians were pursuing their housing dreams in new outer suburbs. Places that could only be accessed by the motor car.

Not surprisingly these actions did not lead to Melbourne usurping Sydney as the commercial capital of Australia



ICI Building, Melbourne, Heritage Victoria collection

⁷ Wikipedia; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1969_Melbourne_Transportation_Plan



Former BHP House, 140 William St., Melbourne
Heritage Victoria collection

By the mid 1970s there was considerable community disquiet about the destruction of the city that its residents were so familiar with. It was also becoming apparent that this new direction was not likely to return Melbourne to its position as Australia's pre-eminent commercial and political centre.

Unfortunately much had been destroyed, but the reversal of development policy came swiftly and within 10 years Melbourne was capitalising on its prodigious architectural and social heritage, making it the cultural capital of Australia. This change of direction not only saw the preservation and re-use of commercial buildings in the central city, but saw the truncation of grand plans by the roads and public housing authorities to replace the vast areas of nineteenth and early twentieth century suburban housing stock with freeways and multi-story public housing.

A key to this change was the adoption of a strong urban design program. This was launched as a formal policy and program as part of the **City of Melbourne Strategy Plan** in 1985.

The vision of this program is to retain the city's most authentic characteristics and simultaneously enhance its capacity to function as an integrated social, cultural and economic entity, and meet the demands of economic growth.⁸

One of its four objectives was:

To preserve the physical characteristics that are distinctive to Melbourne, building on the strengths that reflect its local character and retaining a desirable quality of lifestyle.⁹

This strategy was supported by a document **Grids and Greenery**, which laid down generic urban design principles, and defined elements and relationships that characterise central Melbourne.

It showed how streets and boulevards, waterways, parks, transport infrastructure, the city centre and heritage built form interact to create familiar yet distinctive city features.¹⁰

The City of Melbourne has been subject to a number of boundary and administrative changes since the 1970s. In 1994 it underwent significant boundary changes and its resident population was reduced to 33,000. In the intervening years it has grown the population to almost 90,000. This has been achieved by making the central city a desirable place to live and encouraging the development of new residential apartment blocks and significantly the conversion of many older office and warehouse buildings into residential units. The occupants of these new residential units have in turn sought to ensure that the environment in which they live retains its historic character and offers cultural and entertainment facilities which make it a pleasant place to live.

This has not led to a fall in the number of people travelling to the central city for employment on a daily basis. The broader municipality attracts around 770,000 visitors per day.¹¹ This includes workers for city offices, tourists, shoppers, diners and students. The central city alone attracts 550,000 of these visitors.

The pressure for improved cultural heritage conservation was a key factor in establishing Melbourne as an attractive, vibrant, economically dynamic and cultural city. Melbourne more than any other Australian city moved quickly and decisively from seeing its history and heritage as an economic impediment to embracing it as a valuable asset which should be capitalised on. Consequences of this are that Sydney remains envious of the new found cultural capital of the south and it is projected that greater Melbourne's population

⁸ City of Melbourne, 2010, p39

⁹ City of Melbourne, 2010, p39

will usurp Sydney's in the not too distant future

KEY FACTORS IN ACHIEVING CHANGE

1. The role of the past in determining the future of a place

Melbourne was not only a city built on the wealth of the gold rushes, with substantial and significant nineteenth century buildings, but had also established itself as an important cultural centre in the southern hemisphere. It still has the largest public art gallery in Australia; it has a grand public library which is claimed to have collected every book published in the world in the last half of the nineteenth century. It has a museum with 3 campuses, one of which includes the World Heritage listed Royal Exhibition Building which has been accommodating exhibitions since its construction for the Great Exhibition of 1880. Melbourne also has grand nineteenth and early twentieth century theatres which have maintained a tradition of live theatre over more than 100 years.

The central city was laid out on a classic grid with large, wide thoroughfares interspersed with intermediate smaller service streets. These in turn were serviced by laneways which provided access to businesses and allowed free pedestrian movement through the city. Equally a network of arcades supplemented this street pattern and enabled pedestrians

to move across the city, under cover and protected from Melbourne's changeable weather patterns. These arcades and laneways are a distinctive feature of the city and have become sought after locations for retail and food businesses. New developments have moved to introduce new arcades and walkways. In fact it would be difficult to envisage Melbourne's coffee culture surviving without these spaces and locations.

2. The need to search for new social and economic opportunities

The period 1945 to 1975 saw Melbourne competing for the largest slice of Australia's economic fortunes. Whilst it had been the manufacturing capital of the country and supported the largest port (it still does) it was clear that manufacturing in Australia was in decline and this could not be relied upon as the basis for the city's prosperity. No longer did international visitors arrive by sea and Sydney had captured the international business market, in part because it offered a better international air terminal. Melbourne's new terminal did not open until 1970 and the national airline Qantas was well established in Sydney. Gradually as the banks rationalised themselves Melbourne lost its dominant role as the centre of banking in the country. By 1980 it hosted the headquarters of two of



Degraes Street, Melbourne

¹⁰ City of Melbourne, 2010, p39

¹¹ City of Melbourne, 2010, p27

the four major banks.

But what were its strengths? Well it had an accessible city centre, a good network of trains and trams, a set of cultural institutions, second to none in the country and one of the largest collections of late nineteenth and early twentieth century housing in the world.

It also had a sound basis for a vibrant education industry with internationally recognised tertiary institutions and a strong trade training sector.

The development of a strong tourism industry was to be a challenge, since Melbourne lacked the dramatic harbour landscape and beaches of its northern sister and the dramatic natural attractions of Queensland and the Northern Territory. It also had a variable climate and was well known for presenting four seasons in one day. Ultimately it was to be the coffee culture, bars and nightlife that became attractive for young international travellers, it was the cultural institutions and vibrant theatre and festival life that attracted local and international tourists. Equally Melbourne's strong sporting tradition and the development of world class sporting facilities close to the inner city that became a great attraction and it was the development of the city and its surrounding older suburbs as a shopping mecca that attracted visitors from across the country.

A key part of the City's urban design program was to promote the development of the city as a residential location. The immediate post war period had seen the outer suburbs become the preferred residential locations of the greater metropolitan area. The City of Melbourne's Postcode 3000 program was designed to pursue new opportunities. It did so, in part by providing local tax incentives to building owners to convert their former commercial buildings into residential apartment blocks. In 1992 the central city had 736 residential units. By 2002 it had 9,721 units. These units, in turn placed demands on the city to provide supporting retail and cultural opportunities.

The City also saw the opportunities to provide for an increased overseas student population.

Students make a strong contribution to the city's vitality and cultural diversity, engaging overtly with the street scene. This growth in the student population has been fuelled by the development of student accommodation in former office buildings in the city.¹²

Melbourne's urban design strategies were in many ways modest, and achievable. However it has demonstrated that a 'grand plan' could be achieved without 'grand gestures' and that by utilising existing assets vast changes can be made to the economic fortunes of the city.

3. Maintaining a broad view of what is important about a place and the limitations of simply preserving monuments.

In the 1950s and 60s Melbourne's nascent heritage preservation movement adopted a European approach to its objectives. It assumed that preservation should be limited to grand pieces of architecture and preferably of places in public ownership.

As the 1980s dawned it had become apparent that such an approach was not only impractical, but economically impossible. It was also not the reality of European heritage preservation. No government in Australia or for that matter any non government organisation was ever going to be able to own and conserve everything that was seen to be important.

Hence the move was made to acknowledge the importance of whole neighbourhoods and precincts and to adopt a philosophy that historic buildings should be adapted to new uses and be able to play a useful role in the community. Underpinning this philosophy was the view that individuals and corporations had a responsibility to care for the important historic infrastructure of the city. This required a change of attitude from the city fathers and the support of the State Government. In 1982 Victorians elected a reforming Labor government, after 27 years of conservative rule. This new government not only arrived with strong heritage conservation policies but with a broad urban development agenda. The new Minister responsible for these policies was an architect from a prominent Melbourne firm. Evan Walker (formerly of Jackson Walker) was to prove one of the most imaginative and successful politicians in the country. Part of the policy was to support local government in its heritage conservation efforts. One of the first things that Walker did was to designate a series of neighbourhoods, precincts and boulevards as urban conservation areas and require development approvals to be obtained for demolition and redevelopment of sites in those locations.

These moves coincided with the election of a new and reforming Melbourne City Council, which in turn moved to adopt the City of Melbourne Strategy Plan¹³ with its strong emphasis on the development of the city's existing assets. So the public policies surrounding heritage conservation moved from the single building or monument approach inherent in the old heritage legislation to broad conservation objectives outlined in the town planning statutes.

4. The importance of activism in establishing a political agenda.

The earliest heritage preservation organisation Melbourne was the National Trust (established in 1956). It looked to its UK equivalent for inspiration and adopted the model of ownership, restoration and the establishment of house museums. This worked for some time, but ultimately created

¹² City of Melbourne, 2010, p45.

discontent when the Trust was unable to successfully defend the preservation of a much greater range of places than the grand houses and public edifices that they either owned or could convince the government that it needed to keep. This approach was also financially and politically dependent on an ongoing strong interest by the broader public in experiencing static house museums

The formation of new advocacy groups became important in promoting a new political agenda and when the new government was elected in 1982 it took office with a far more broad ranging preservation agenda. An agenda in part written by young activist architects, planners and historians. A new group the Collins Street Defence Movement was established as a reaction to the continued destruction of remaining older buildings in Melbourne's iconic commercial street. This group attracted many of the young activists who had developed their views under the tutelage of a few far sighted academics. This group also provided a platform for Evan Walker and future Melbourne City councillors to test and spruik their views and policies.

Equally the engagement with the broader community was important in giving individuals with a view, the opportunity to express that view in a formal way and not have to rely on opposing the institutions of government and decision making.

From around 1975 the City of Melbourne adopted its **Future Melbourne Community Plan** and as a result focussed on a bottom-up, community based planning approach. This meant that Council officers were expected to engage in wide ranging consultation with resident action groups, other community organisations and partnerships covering precincts, businesses and other interests.¹⁴ In turn this led to the development of strong resident action groups in the inner residential areas. These groups have developed as very effective voices in the urban development of not only their neighbourhoods, but the broader city area. They have learnt how to access the media and be strong participants in planning forums and judicial proceedings.

MELBOURNE IN 2011

The Melbourne of 2011 is a far more vibrant and active place than it was in 1980. Not only does it have a significant resident population, but they have brought with them all the support services they require. There are now supermarkets in the central area, there has been a demand to create parks and green spaces, public transport around the city (primarily trams) is well used and there is a far greater emphasis on making the city pedestrian and bicycle friendly. Melbourne has developed along a

European city model.

The City of Melbourne maintains its key strategic role in guiding development and using its regulatory and influential capacity to sustain an urbane city with a strong international reputation as liveable, sustainable and dynamic. The current strategic directions document **Future Melbourne**¹⁵ sets six high level goals;

1. To build a city for people
2. to build a creative city
3. to build a prosperous city
4. to build a knowledge city
5. to build an eco-city
6. to build a connected city

Whilst such goals can seem to be glib these ones are supported by 155 underpinning and specific goals which will see the City move toward 2020.

Its vision is that the City of Melbourne, in 2020 will still be amongst the world's top ten most liveable and sustainable cities. One of its six primary initiatives will be to sustain urban conservation controls. These controls and associated guidelines have been developed to ensure that the cultural significance of buildings and streetscapes are understood.

*This ensured the design and scale of new or refurbished developments complement the built context and streetscape as well as preserving heritage assets and patterns.*¹⁶

CONCLUSION

To many, particularly those from Europe would not see this as an exceptional outcome. As indicated above Melbourne now has more of the characteristics of an urbane European city than those of its earlier mentors in the US. Melbourne was probably lucky in that its 'stars aligned' at the right time and that it saw its economic future as dependent on its important existing characteristics and form. It was also, following a brief flirtation with grand new visions of the modern city, able to retrieve enough of its past to establish its current strong economic position.

It has been graced with some visionary politicians and persistent and clever administrators, but most importantly it has a population which has embraced its current success and is vigilant about the importance of heritage conservation as a key element of the economic fortunes of the city.

¹³ City of Melbourne, 1985.

¹⁴ City of Melbourne, 2010.

¹⁵ City of Melbourne, 2008

¹⁶ City of Melbourne, 2010, p41

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¹⁶ City of Melbourne, 2010, p41