BETWEEN THE STREET AND THE SKY

CITY OF MELBOURNE

Rob Adams

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To succeed in the 21st-century economy our cities need to be liveable, accessible and productive. Great cities attract, retain and develop increasingly mobile talent and organisations, encouraging them to innovate, create jobs and support growth. DEPARTMENT OF PRIME MINISTER AND CABINET, 2016

Melbourne's attractiveness to business, residents and visitors is in large part derived from the design of its buildings, streets and open spaces, which entice people and investment, and subsequently deliver economic prosperity. The high quality of public and private spaces is paramount to the city's attractiveness, vitality and renowned liveability.

When 80 per cent of the public space in a city is made up of streets, it follows that the quality of a city will be judged by the quality of its streets. As we navigate our cities, we instantly analyse our streets. At a glance we can determine whether streets feel safe, provide shelter and are interesting, busy or deserted, all of which determine our choice of paths to travel and periods of stay. Our streets are the places we start and finish every journey. Cities that are memorable are usually those where our experience of walking, stopping, resting and exploring has been a good experience. Street quality is a combination of physical attributes and the activities the streets support. The physical attributes may include things such as generous footpaths, artworks, seats, shelter, trees, local materials and building frontages, while the activities could be active shop and business frontages, sidewalk cafes, street trading, street events and people moving through the city via different modes. These combine to produce a distinctive nature for each area, which can be defined as local character in the context of the public realm. All this seems obvious, but increasingly, in our recently developed and emerging urban areas, these qualities are often sadly lacking, or else are compromised by new development. As demonstrated by Leanne Hodyl's 2014 Churchill Fellowship report, *Social outcomes in hyper-dense high-rise residential environments*, we are building with higher density than ever before, and individual buildings are reaching plot ratios that would not be possible in Hong Kong. While the investment has reinvigorated the city, the impact on our public realm – mainly our streets – is yet to be fully understood.

This exhibition focuses on the dynamic, in our modern city, between the street and the sky, a relationship between the increasingly vertical shape of our city and the quality of public life that plays out at street level. It uses data, 3D models and video footage to look behind the changes taking place in Melbourne to better understand the competing factors that mould our city and its public life.

MELBOURNE 2020+

SO, WHAT ARE THE FORCES AT PLAY TODAY BETWEEN THE STREET AND THE SKY? As the world becomes increasingly urban there is pressure on existing cities to accommodate rapid population growth. Home to 4.5 million people today, Melbourne is predicted to reach a population of 10 million by 2050, which means more than doubling its current population and urban capacity in just 33 years. Cleary, this cannot happen under a business-as-usual model, as there is neither the time nor the money to replicate our existing infrastructure, which has taken more than 180 years to construct. Our primary challenge in the next few decades will be to build within existing infrastructure to achieve greater efficiency. This will inevitably require increased density in existing areas, as this is a known factor in improving the efficiency of cities. The way it is achieved will be crucial to the future liveability of our city.

54,254
NEW APARTMENTS
HAVE BEEN BUILT IN
THE CITY SINCE 2002

39,054
FURTHER APARTMENTS
HAVE BEEN GRANTED
PLANNING PERMISSION

46 LARGE-SCALE
RESIDENTIALS COMPRISING
10,229
APARTMENTS WERE
COMPLETED IN THE CITY
OF MELBOURNE LAST YEAR

13,512
APARTMENTS ARE
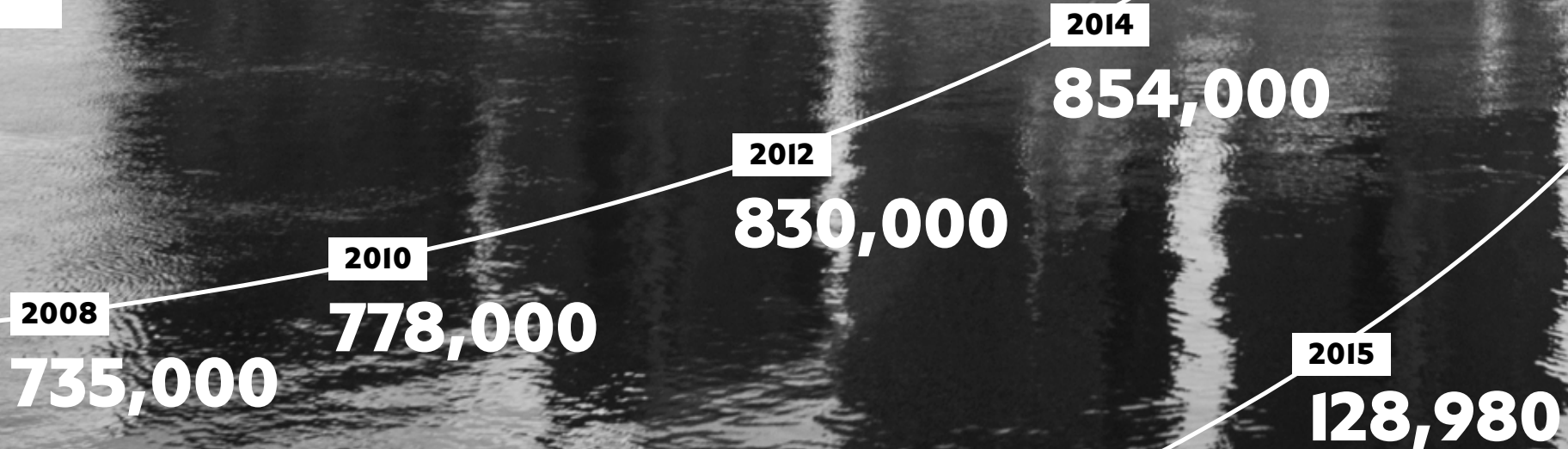CURRENTLY IN
CONSTRUCTION

CITY OF MELBOURNE

DAILY POPULATION

2008
735,000

2010
778,000

2012
830,000

2014
854,000

POPULATION GROWTH

2006
80,154

2010
97,623

2012
105,418

2015
128,980

POPULATION

151,050

DWELLINGS

68,800

POPULATION

268,300

DWELLINGS

167,700

CITY OF MELBOURNE

ECONOMY GROWTH ($BILLION)

2002
54.3

2006
65.1

2010
75.4

2015
90.6

BUSINESS GROWTH

2002
319,729

2009
415,498

2012
435,832

2015
450,336

RMIT 1979 | **2017**

SOUTHBANK 1983 | **2017**

TOP
Aerial view of the RMIT campus, with Victoria Street in the foreground

LEFT
Photographer:
Wolfgang Sievers, 1979

RIGHT
Photographer:
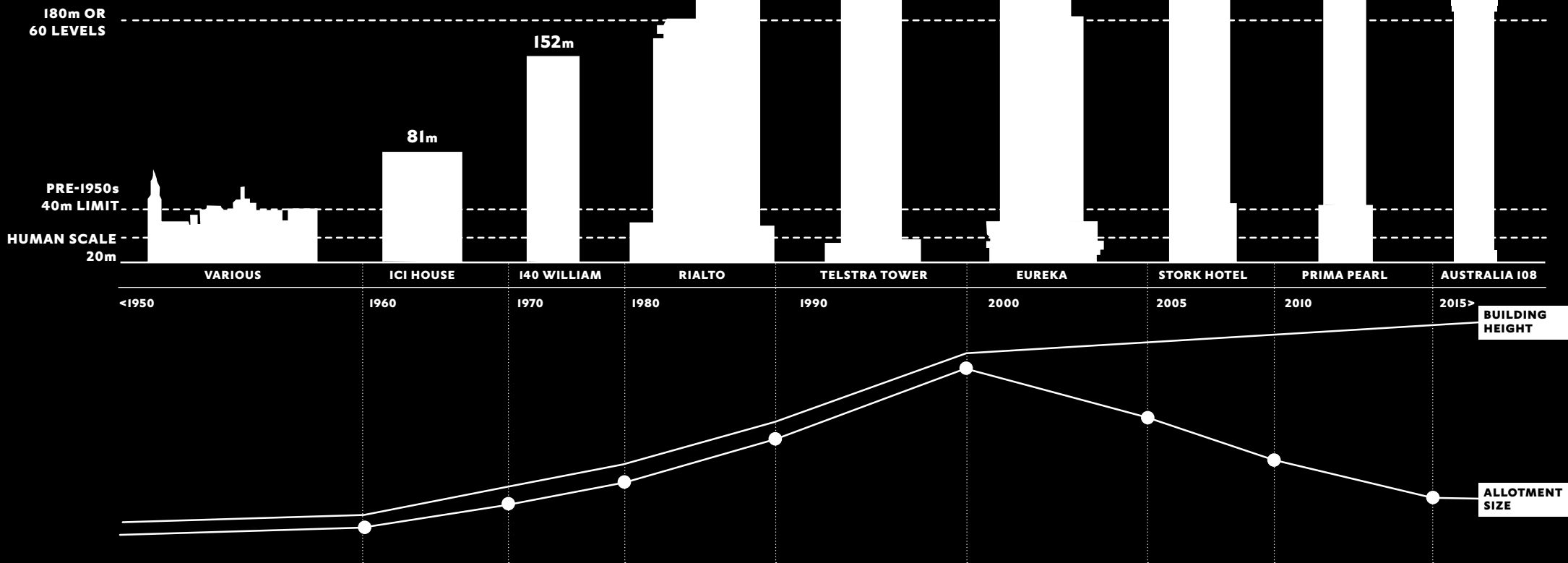Andrew Curtis, 2017

BOTTOM
Aerial view of Southbank

LEFT
Photographer:
Thomas Laurie, 1983

RIGHT
Photographer:
Andrew Curtis, 2017

ALLOTMENT SIZE AND BUILDING TYPE

320m

297m

251m

244m

226m

218m

180m OR
60 LEVELS

152m

81m

PRE-1950s
40m LIMIT

HUMAN SCALE
20m

| VARIOUS | ICI HOUSE | 140 WILLIAM | RIALTO | TELSTRA TOWER | EUREKA | STORK HOTEL | PRIMA PEARL | AUSTRALIA 108 |

| <1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 | 2015> |

BUILDING
HEIGHT

ALLOTMENT
SIZE

BOURKE STREET 1960   2017

PREVIOUS PAGES

LEFT

Bourke and Elizabeth
Street intersection in 1970,
looking west towards
St Patrick's Cathedral

Photograph: National
Archives of Australia, 1970

RIGHT

Bourke and Elizabeth
Street intersection in 2017,
looking west towards
St Patrick's Cathedral

Photographer:
David Hannah

SO, HOW IS MELBOURNE CURRENTLY DEALING WITH DENSITY?

In the central city, much recent residential development has been in high-rise towers built to site densities greater than those of most other cities in the world. While in the 1990s Melbourne looked to mid-rise cities such as Barcelona, Prague and Vienna to inspire thinking about the benefits of density, we are increasingly growing into our own distinctive form – more akin to Hong Kong than European examples. In Elizabeth Street north, cheek-by-jowl stand two-storey buildings from the 1930s with 60-storey towers built over recent years. With the completion of Australia 108 in the near future, Melbourne will host two out of the 15 'supertall' buildings in the world; that is, buildings taller than 300 metres. Between 2013 and 2017, some 70 towers were commenced or completed in the central city and Southbank alone. Now the world is looking at us to see how we will balance the imperatives of a growing city with the demands of a high-quality public environment.

This intense development has been triggered by the success of the 1990s' program Postcode 3000, designed to repopulate the central city. Through this, the City of Melbourne became the facilitator for more efficient use of existing buildings, which had a dramatic impact on the activity and vibrancy of the downtown. All the normal measures of success – such as visitor, resident, business, retail and employment numbers – are up dramatically on those taken back in the 1980s. In Swanston Street alone, pedestrian numbers have more than quadrupled since the street's closure to traffic in 1992. There is also increasing evidence that dense inner cities may have other advantages over the suburban hinterlands. They are more efficient, sustainable and healthy, and less prone to family violence and obesity. It is also increasingly apparent that they are more affordable and productive when the total costs of living are taken into consideration.

There is, however, increasing concern that while the first half of the vision put forward in the 1985 strategy plan for 'A twenty-four hour city that looks and feels like Melbourne' has been achieved, this may well be at the expense of the second: the look and feel of the city. An increasingly polarised city character is emerging between the human-scale environment of the retail core and the development beyond, including at Southbank.

Was it ever going to be possible to reconcile the desire for an increasingly dense central city with maintaining the essential look and feel of Melbourne? In the early stages of Postcode 3000 this seemed achievable, as much of the residential aspect was accommodated by adaptive reuse of warehouses in Flinders Lane, such as Bible House. This first phase was followed by the conversion of second-grade commercial office buildings, such as the Hero development in Little Collins Street, and a handful of new buildings of a modest European-style height, such as Nonda Katsalidis's acclaimed Melbourne Terrace in Franklin Street. Most of these developments improved the look and feel of the city by adding balconies, rooftop amenities and street-level activity. They also attracted a new population that helped reinforce the bars, cafes and retail prospects of the central city. Most of these developments were within the traditional core of the city, which was closely regulated by built-form controls, such as the requirement to set back at a designated height above the street to mitigate down drafts and to allow sunlight into the streets.

This measured approach to residential development changed in nature once it crossed the Yarra River to Southbank. Here built-form controls were more relaxed, allowing developments to rise directly from the street frontage, and when poor soil conditions enabled car parking in the podium above street level the combination of these aspects

saw the look and feel of these areas rapidly change. No longer was each development incrementally improving the street; rather, the limited setbacks from front or side boundaries produced tall, blank walls, adding wind to the pedestrian environment and reducing sunlight in the streets. Where once the City of Melbourne had been a proactive facilitator, encouraging residents to live in the city, now the development appetite for high-rise apartments has surged, buoyed by renewed public interest in apartment living and the attractiveness of our inner-city universities to international students. The very planning reforms that reduced regulation to stimulate Melbourne's resurgence in the 1990s have become the source of the challenge as the economy has clicked into overdrive.

The early built evidence of how not to build our future city should have helped reset planning controls; however, the reverse has been the case. Rather than strengthen controls, successive governments have, in the pursuit of jobs, relaxed the requirements. Setbacks at podium level have been compromised and heritage expectations relaxed. Where once small sites in the city had been protected against development as a result of setbacks, the relaxation of this regulation has made every site in town potentially a development site, posing the single biggest threat to the look and feel of the city. This opening up of the smaller sites to high-density development has not only seen the loss of low-scale, low-rent building stock and the mixed use that results from these buildings. It has also seen the gradual sterilisation of our streets, as excessive development has required increased service areas at street level, such as substations, fire hydrants, rubbish storage and car-parking entrances, which leave very little room on small sites for active frontages, one of the prime qualities of good streets. This creates a competition for space between the infrastructure required to service our new residents in

the sky and the quality of our public streets. Not until the introduction of new built-form controls in November 2016 did we acknowledge and begin to address these challenges. But this represents a stepping stone. There is much more work to be done on urban design controls and heritage.

A known factor in increasing the efficiency and vibrancy of a city is mixed use. Most traditional cities are made up of a combination of uses, all of which provide easy access to daily requirements within walking distance and share the infrastructure over different times of the day. A good example of a mixed-use city is Prague, which uses vertical stacking: retail at ground level, commercial above and residential in the final few floors. Indeed, our own retail core provides exemplars of this vertical mix of uses, including buildings such as Curtain House, Nicholas House and countless other mid-rise examples that extend the life of the street up into the building. But our recent high-rise construction has returned to a single-use paradigm, with hundreds of residential apartments supported only by parking and a handful of retail stores on the ground floor.

Since 1985, more than 45 per cent of downtown Melbourne has been rebuilt, and in areas such as Southbank and Docklands the number of uses is significantly lower than in the central city, which is evident in the activity at street level. At the same time, these developments have provided spectacular views for some of their occupants and they have placed residents in close proximity to the central city. As a result, residents are predominantly pedestrians, with more than 90 per cent of the journeys in Docklands being made on foot. In the 2016 census, just 10.2 per cent of residents in central Melbourne travelled to work by car, with 36.2 per cent on foot and 39.1 per cent catching public transport. In Southbank, 20.6 per cent of residents travelled to work by car, with 32.7 per cent on foot and 29.8 per cent travelling by public

transport. The advantages of this vertical living are in contrast to those of medium-rise European cities, where views are generally confined to the street and access is in many cases by walk-up. The advantages in those cities would appear to be that residents are less vulnerable in extreme circumstances, such as fire and systems failure, than residents in higher towers. The reduced height also places residents in closer contact with the life on the streets, allows greater sunlight penetration and ameliorates wind impacts when built to a common height that allows wind flow evenly over the top of the city.

Another key ingredient for cities to function successfully is ease of access for all. There appears to be a strong correlation between walkable cities with good public transport and the health of their communities. There is increasing evidence to suggest one is more likely to suffer from heart disease if living in suburbia than downtown. This is attributable to the amount of exercise likely to be taken each day. Car commuters on average walk for only seven minutes during their commute, while those using public transport average 40 minutes. These findings should also be considered in relation to obesity, which in Australia is estimated to cost the country $130 billion per annum. It is noticeable that in countries where the traditional high-density pedestrian city has survived, there is a lower obesity rate, as most trips take place on foot and public transport. This would lead to the conclusion that streets and the walking experience are of prime importance to well-functioning cities.

This leads to the next ingredient for good cities, namely a high-quality public realm. As mentioned earlier, 80 per cent of a city's public space is made up of streets, so design a good street and you design a good city. But what are the ingredients of a good street? Many of our traditional cities point to the secrets of a high-quality public realm; built before the dominance of the car, they are more socially orientated and have a better balance between people and vehicles. The streets are lined by activity, be it retail or simply the entrances to businesses or residences. Footpaths are generous and, depending on climate, may be lined by trees or protected by awnings. They often have comfortable micro-climates, with places to sit, eat, have coffee and legitimately loiter.

Melbourne has, since the early 1980s, understood these assets and put in place a program to incrementally increase the quality of its streets through widened footpaths, excellent paving, tree plantings, distinctive street furniture and sidewalk cafes, which has gone a long way to improving street life and increasing pride in our public environment. These street-level activities were supported by built-form controls that protected against wind, allowed sunlight into the streets and provided active frontages at street level. All these measures have helped mitigate some of the negative aspects of development over the last decade as controls have been relaxed. The fact that in many cases high-rise development has only occurred in pockets or on one side of major streets, such as in Elizabeth Street, has further cushioned the impact of new development. Our wide streets, and the sky vistas this allows, have been very forgiving, despite sheer tower forms clambering at their edges. As many of the existing approved developments come to fruition, the impact on the streets of Melbourne will be significant and not in keeping with the vision of a city that looks and feels like Melbourne.

SO, WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

If we are to share the benefits of high-density development built alongside existing infrastructure then we need to reset the rules by which future development must play. We need to provide greater protection to our heritage buildings, strengthen built-form controls (particularly the setbacks from the street at podium level to mitigate the wind effects from towers and to allow adequate solar access) and ensure service access and utilities do not dominate our street frontages. In addition, we need to preserve, wherever possible, the fine grain of property parcels of the city, which, along with the heritage buildings, provide the potential for greater mixed use and a varied rental structure. Finally, if we are to retain equity in the inner city we need new policy settings that provide for affordable housing and developer contributions to ensure equity and social infrastructure of the future city. While the 2016 overhaul of our planning controls was a good start, it represents only the first step of setting a robust vision for a liveable Melbourne into the future.

This exhibition, focused on central Melbourne, hopefully provides a small lens onto the battle between the street and the sky, a battle being played out in many rapidly growing cities around the world. This is not a question of 'either/or'; it is one of better understanding the need for ensuring the quality of our street environments – the public-theatre spaces that make or break our cities. But what are the opportunities for the wider city?

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A provocation for Melbourne

8 March to 28 April 2018

City Gallery
Melbourne Town Hall

melbourne.vic.gov.au/ citygallery

AUTHOR

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He co-edited the recently published *Urban Choreography, Central Melbourne 1985– (MUP, 2018)* and was the curator of the 2014 City Gallery exhibition *Postcode 3000, a city transformed?*

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Design a good street and you design a good city. But what if the regulatory framework fails at street level?