POST CODE 3000

A CITY TRANS*FORMED*?

CITY OF MELBOURNE

EFFECTIVE city planning has been almost unknown in Melbourne for at least 30 or 40 years.

For the ordinary Melburnian that means our city has been progressively destroyed. It no longer contains the attraction and charm it once had.

To the city retailer — ever ready to adapt to new circumstances — it means expensive expansion into the suburbs to chase the customers who no longer visit the city.

The tourist is left with the half-truth — well, quarter-truth — of a "Paris end" to Collins Street, and the reality of just another little Chicago. And that could be unfair, because Chicago is a relatively attractive city.

Property developers and investors, who are mainly the large insurance groups and banks, have simply fulfilled their obligations to their shareholders to make bigger and better profits.

As a result, the city has reaped

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Mr. Robertson spoke of bonuses for incorporating shopping blocks, theatres and apartment housing into new office developments.

New projects, he said, are enmeshed into the city fabric through an insistence on connecting tunnels, shopping plazas and under-street arcades to link buildings, streets and metro stations.

There are planning bonuses in New York to encourage retention of historical buildings.

New buildings include mixed functions of arcades, shops, cinemas, offices and top-floor apartments, all in the city centre.

New York has had success with the creation of malls and redirection of traffic. Compare that with the dismal bitumen in Bourke Street.

Melbourne's heritage of north-south lanes and arcades — for example, the Block and the new City Square arcade — should set the pattern of future development.

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In 1978, architectural commentator Norman Day described Melbourne as 'an empty useless city centre'. Writing for the *Age*, he criticised the City of Melbourne for its 'laissez-faire' approach to planning, and he looked to New York for comparison. More than 30 years later, in 2013, Daniel Ziffer writes in the *Age* that 'developers' tall tales are all pie in the sky. Lofty comparisons with New York don't measure up.'

When Norman Day was writing, the once-grand city centre of 'Marvellous Melbourne' was possibly at its lowest ebb since the heights of the late 19th century. Slowly drained of its energy by the retreat of its population to the suburbs, the central city was aptly referred to as the 'CBD' – central *business* district – for this was almost all that remained. Its residential population was pitifully small; retail was in decline, having retreated to the suburban shopping centres; once-vibrant theatres were closed; and city heritage was slowly eroded, replaced by the pared-back aesthetic of modernism, which the Gas and Fuel Building exemplified.

Weekends saw the central city all but deserted, leading, not surprisingly, to Melbourne becoming the post-apocalyptic setting for the 1959 movie *On the Beach*. It is part of Melbourne folklore – apparently a rumour started by Sydney in payback for Melbourne winning the Olympic Games – that the film's star, Ava Gardner, described the city as 'the perfect place for a film about the end of the world'. A little more than 50 years later, this grim image of the city seems hardly plausible, as Melbourne continues to win accolades, most recently in *Monocle* magazine, which prides itself on picking the 'coolest' cities; it ranks Melbourne as the world's second most liveable city. *The Economist* has previously, on several occasions, rated Melbourne number one.

So what brought about such transformation?

Clearly, not one single factor brought about such significant change, but the catalyst seems to have been public concern about the loss of our city's character. State and local government politicians were encouraged at the ballot box to win back the city's marvellous past, aspects of which were often conveyed in expressions such as 'the Paris end of Collins Street'. Parts of early Melbourne had much in common with cities such as Paris, a European feel arising from Melbourne's quality building stock, a product, in part, of the height limits of the day, set by the maximum height of a fireman's ladder – 40 metres – a control that was to inform many of Melbourne's iconic buildings, such as the Manchester Unity Building. This height limit stood until the late 1950s, when it was broken by one of Melbourne's first modernist office towers, the ICI Building. On election, these politicians started to put in place a new vision for the city, which at a local level was most clearly seen in the 1985 'strategy plan' adopted by the City of Melbourne. It outlined a desire for the city to return to a mixed-use 'central *activities* district', but one that looked and felt like Melbourne. The brief was verbalised by one councillor thus: 'We want a twenty-four-hour city that doesn't look like Dallas' – no doubt a reference to the then popular TV program *Dallas*, the titular city having a glass-towered centre. A key tenet of the strategy

plan was to reintroduce a residential population into Melbourne's downtown. It set what felt like an improbable target of 8000 new central-city residential units by the year 2000. While the intention was clear, the implementation strategy was wanting. The breakthrough to implementation, perhaps ironically, arrived on the back of the property market crash of the late 1980s, the result of constructing too many commercial office buildings. When the market crashed, tenants moved from older stock to the under-priced new commercial spaces, creating the opportunity that became 'Postcode 3000', launched in 1992.

Assisted by state government, the City of Melbourne created a specialist team to look at how residential development could be encouraged in the central city. The team started with pilot projects but quickly progressed to a program that endeavoured, through a suite of initiatives, to entice developers to convert disused commercial buildings into residential spaces. The program quickly gained momentum, and by the year 2000 residential units had exceeded the now-modest target of 8000.

Central Melbourne's new residential population was enjoying the fruits of 1980s political foresight and strategies. The city was vibrant. Bars, cafes, supermarkets, arts and cultural events, and an active public art program created a radically improved urban amenity. The dead city of the early 1980s was just that – dead and buried. While not all change was as a result of the new inner-city residential living, it had contributed significantly to the dramatic turnaround. Historic buildings, such as the Majorca Building in Flinders Lane, had been saved and converted to residential use, old commercial buildings had been made-over, with balconies created and, in some cases, new floors added to roofs to give the city visual interest by replacing plant rooms and lift overruns with exciting architectural roof lines. New residential buildings such as Melbourne Terrace, completed 1994, produced high-density, low-rise living that worked with the older converted buildings to define and frame the city's gracious streets, while simultaneously attracting a new walking, talking, coffee-drinking urban community to central Melbourne.

Residential development was further encouraged by the introduction of multiple ownership through new strata-title laws, which gave many advantages through tax and stamp duties, ensuring a large number of small low-grade commercial buildings were given a new lease on life, with many and varied owners. These buildings helped preserve and protect the fine grain of the city, and they ensured a rich street experience. For example, the laneways and their commercial and cultural renaissance encouraged endless fascination and exploration. Everyone became a flâneur. This new living environment gave rise to an urban generation made up of singles, empty nesters and a large number of students. Marvellous Melbourne was back.

The euphoria was contagious. Unlike the early 1990s, when the chairman of the National Australia Bank reportedly said central-city living would not catch on and that it would not lend money for it, the floodgates were opening. Melbourne had grabbed back some of the earlier qualities of its Parisian period, but was soon to move rapidly to its Manhattan phase.

Where once banks and developers had been cautious, by the late 1990s the 'new gold' was residential, and areas such as Southbank were opened up, originally with tentative commercial development. These areas were re-imagined as prime development areas close to but outside of the historic centre, and free from the constraints of the traditional centre. The response was to build a large number of residential towers, but whereas in the older city care was taken to provide adequate space between buildings and to set them back from the site boundaries, creating a podium to protect the scale and qualities of the street, the new proposals challenged these requirements and received approval, in some cases, to build right up to the street frontage and to heights unheard of – even in New York. As Ziffer points out, 'In Manhattan only 5% of residential properties have more than 100 units – in reality, more than half the housing stock in NY City is small to medium developments, often "walk-ups" without lifts.'

At the same time, plot ratios were challenged. Whereas in the 1980s the central city had worked to as-of-right plot ratios of 1:6 – the floor space allowed being equivalent to six times the area of the site – with higher ratios of up to 1:12 achievable by bonuses for providing improvements to the public areas, modifications saw plot ratios of 1:12 now applied to each city block rather than to individual sites. This change not only did away with bonuses towards public benefit, but it also allowed the approval of plot ratios on single sites of as high as 1:53. This, combined with a loss of street scale through the reduction or loss of setbacks on buildings, in contrast to earlier developments such as 101 Collins Street (and similarly the Empire State Building in New York), which stepped back from the street to allow in sun and to ameliorate downward wind gusts, saw the emergence of a new approach to development in Melbourne. Early on this approach was most noticeable in Southbank, and until 2000 the central city had preserved the small scale and the grain of the traditional city. However, with residential buildings becoming the dominant form of new development, and unlike commercial developments, which require larger floor plates for viability, residential development proved viable on smaller and smaller sites, particularly where setbacks were minimal or no longer required. The central city with its greater amenity became increasingly in demand. This new approach, particularly to setbacks and building spacing, saw a new built form emerge – no longer reminiscent of New York but more like Hong Kong.

The runaway success of Postcode 3000 progressed to the extreme development of many sites to a new residential monoculture of predominantly small, one- or two-bedroom apartments, in part a result of the dominance of the student market. A high proportion of new residential buildings were built cheek-by-jowl with neighbouring buildings, and they had an increasing number of apartments with bedrooms with no direct access to fresh air or daylight. At ground level, the quality of the pedestrian experience – one of Melbourne's strengths – was starting to change, due to the closely packed apartment towers
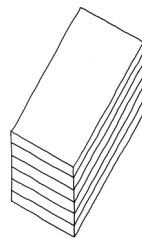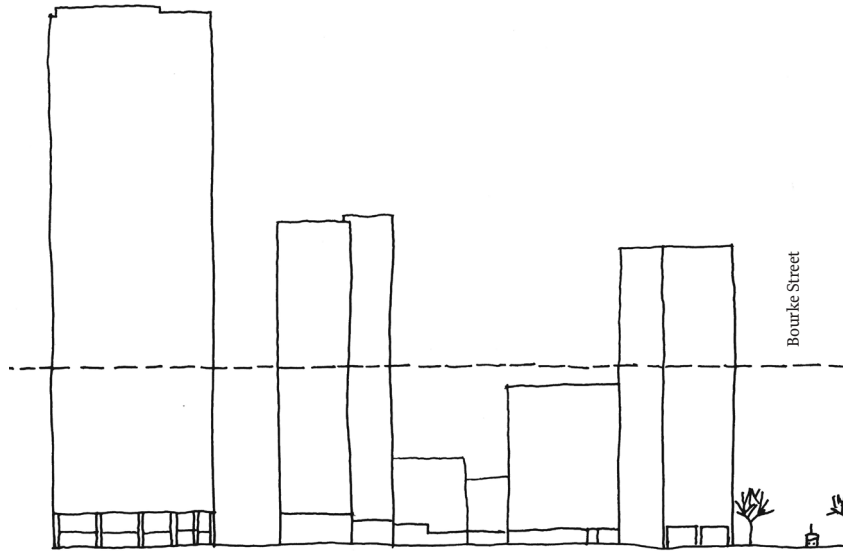
PLOT RATIO
1:6
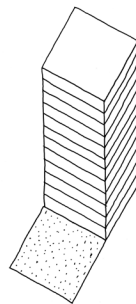
PLOT RATIO
1:6 over half site

Bourke Street

Little Collins Street

40m
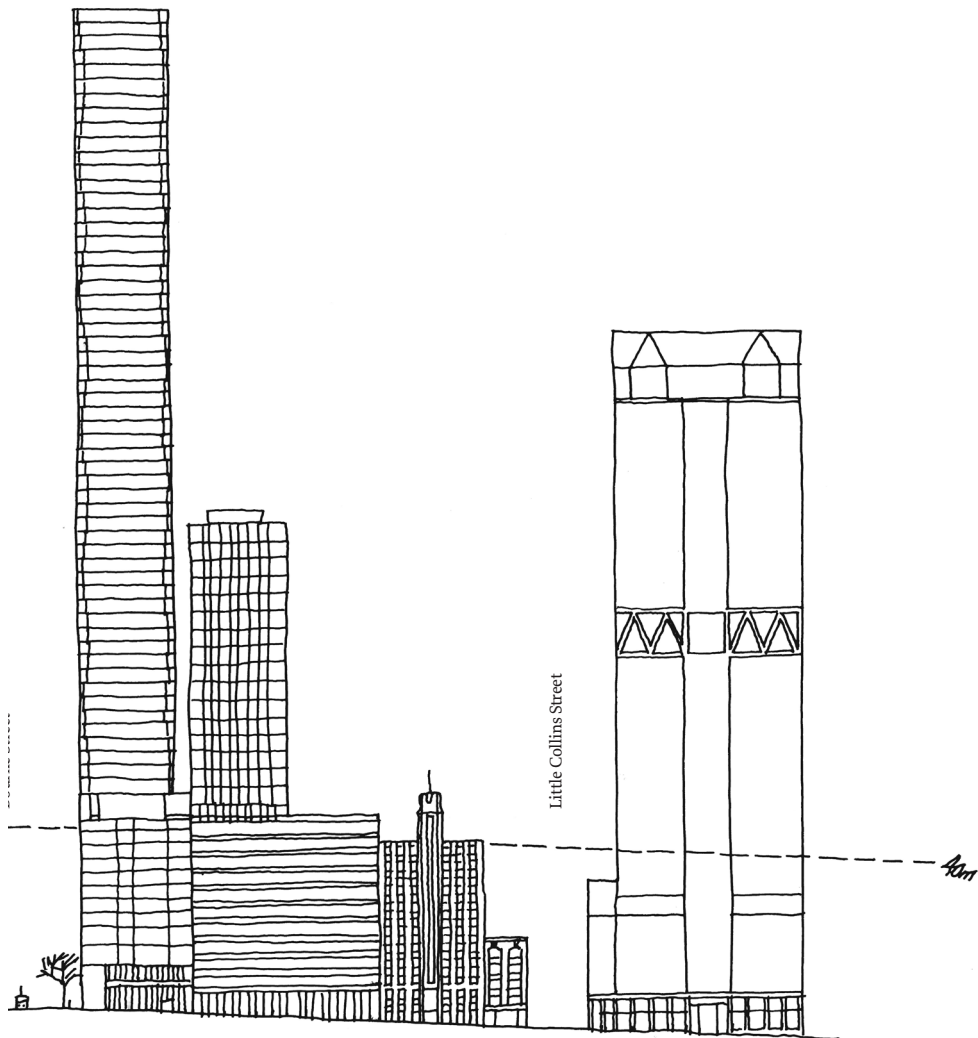
150 Queen Street *210m* | 140 Queen Street *109m*

blocking out the sun and generating increased wind and sending street trees into decline.

Streets make up 80% of a city's public realm, so design good streets and you design a good city. Over several decades we have come to understand the ingredients of a good street: its scale, mix of uses, active frontages, paving, dappled sunlight through the tree canopy, street furniture, sidewalk cafes and abundant street life. Increasingly we are seeing not only a change in the city's built form but in its all-important streets.

In the 1980s we had very little residential downtown; in 2013 – 21 years after the implementation of Postcode 3000 in 1992 – we are reaching a new phase of residential development. What started as a return of residents to downtown Melbourne has turned into an unprecedented number of residential developments that go far beyond the expectations of Postcode 3000 to produce a transformed downtown. How will history view the program that helped revitalise the dying city of the 1980s? Will Postcode 3000 be seen as a plan that went too far and saw the conversion of the world's most liveable city into one with a degraded public realm sandwiched between towering apartment buildings – Hong Kong, but without the spectacular setting? Or will Melbourne be seen to have followed a logical progression from simplistic comparisons with Paris in the 19th century to New York in the 20th century and to Hong Kong in the 21st century? Or is Melbourne doing what Melbourne has always done, responding to the commercial forces of the time and pushing these to the limits before being reined back in by a financial crash or a change in built-form controls?

Postcode 3000: a city transformed is an exhibition that looks beyond the architectural beauty pageant and towards the built reality of what our city may be in 2023. It asks whether we are happy with the current trajectory of our city's built form or whether it is time to reset the planning controls to preserve a balance between continuity and change that will ensure that Melbourne remains one of the world's most liveable cities?

Prof. Rob Adams AM Director City Design

Postcode 3000:
A city transformed?

Curated by
Prof. Rob Adams AM

From 21 August
to 21 December 2013

City Gallery
Melbourne Town Hall

melbourne.vic.gov.au/
citygallery

Thanks to
Catherine Copley | *Project Manager/Assistant Curator*
Stephen Banham | *2D Design*
Dr. Michael Spooner | *3D Model Design*
David Simmonds | *Photography*
Daniel Hargrove | *Videography*
Ros Rymer | *Research*
Nathan Alexander | *Research*
Yvonne Meng | *Graphics/Construction Designer*
Ian Dryden | *Lighting Design*
Ian James | *Clerk of Works*
Arts and Culture Branch, City of Melbourne
Ron Butters and Kaye Owens, Residents 3000

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