

For a number of years it has been held that improvements to the pedestrian environment will result in a more lively and attractive city: where more people would like to walk and spend time.

Evidence from various traditional European cities such as Barcelona, Lyon, Strasbourg, Freiburg and Copenhagen has been plentiful. Copenhagen has been the first city in the world to produce solid documentation showing the impressive growth in public life following substantial improvements to the public realm over several decades.

Melbourne now adds a new dimension to this story. A grid city, with wide streets and no squares included in its original design, containing uncoordinated high-rise development from the 1960s and 1970s, it was considered to be a mono-functional, 'empty and useless city centre' by 1980: a 'doughnut' with nothing in the centre. Many cities across the 'New World' fit this description. And in most of these, the car continues to be the king and the 'doughnut-syndrome' is still prevailing.

This is definitely no longer the case in Melbourne. A carefully planned and executed process for turning the city into a people-oriented city has been orchestrated and gradually implemented since 1985, but particularly during the past decade.

Of all the things a city can do to improve its environment, Melbourne has done almost everything: more residents and students, more people streets, squares, lanes and parks, wider sidewalks, quality materials, active shop frontages, fine furnishings, new street trees and public art programs. Many opportunities provide the invitation to walk and to linger. Meeting sustainability objectives such as greening the city and upgrading the public transport systems and bicycle infrastructure have been systematically addressed.

Most of this has been accomplished over a short span of time, and the outcome of this effort comes out strongly in this report. Public life in Melbourne has changed dramatically. Many more people are walking the streets: on weekdays some 40 per cent more, and in the evenings twice as many as in 1993. And many more people come to town to promenade and to spend time enjoying the city, the surroundings – and especially the number one city attraction: other people. An estimated two to three times more people are using the squares, parks, street benches and cafes as compared to 1993.

In summary, the underutilised and inhospitable city centre of the early 1980s has in 20 years been turned around into a vibrant, charming 24-hour place that is livelier, more attractive and safer than most other city centres found worldwide: an almost European atmosphere - yet Down Under!

The 'Melbourne miracle' that is documented in this report gives hope and incentive for cities in all parts of the world struggling with the 'doughnut-syndrome'. While many improvements have been substantial, even the most incremental changes to public spaces of the city can make vast changes to its economy, attractiveness and public life.

Melbourne, August 2005
Jan Gehl - Professor, Dr.Litt



2003 "Funky Town" - "Melbourne's CBD ... is hitting new heights"

"After taking a beating for 100 years, Melbourne's central business district is fighting back."

"New census figures ... paint a picture of a city few would have imagined 30 or even 10 years ago."

"The key is a fine-grained understanding of the CBD's streets and spaces."

"... CBD retailers employ more people and occupy more floor space than they did 20 years ago ... since 2000, job growth in the CBD has outstripped growth in the city as a whole."

"An increasing proportion of the growth in business is taken up by new restaurants and bars. That means a new central city: more residential, more lifestyle, less office and dramatically less manufacturing."

"... the grid, with its wide main streets and network of lanes, is such a powerful town planning statement that it will always reassert itself."

"The council prides itself on its efforts to support small creative businesses, to nurture the growth of the city economy and to care for laneways."

Quote from "The Age", 4 June 2003
Article by Royce Millar