

A timeline of the city since the first land sales

Melbourne CBD began as a grid of 32 identical plots of land separated by streets. Each plot was subdivided into 20 equal allotments which were roughly the size of a quarter acre block.

Approximately one fifth of the land was withheld for government, church and municipal use and the remaining 517 allotments were put to public auction. The first sales were held in Melbourne, the second in Sydney, reportedly to allow northern investors to stake a claim in the limited supply of land.

By 1851, the magnitude of investment in city land began to be realised. The original blocks yielded to a flow of division and exchange; previously withheld land was released to the market; church reserves contracted in size. Subdivision, at times minute, paid handsome dividends and the net result on the city's surface was a complex, almost random matrix of laneways and allotments.

Speculative pressure to subdivide land was relieved by the introduction of passenger lifts in 1885. Any one allotment, no matter how small, might be multiplied vertically up to nine times the size of the original plot.

By the time of the 1893 crash, buildings were elevated confidently to the street and would remain so until the introduction of height controls in 1916. The 132 foot height limit (approximately 40m) only encouraged breakout elements of greater height to assert the presence of individual buildings on street corners.

In 1957, the replacement plot ratio controls only encouraged single structures to gather the largest possible footprint in order to make the land pay. Against this horizon, controls were introduced to widen the laneways, remove street verandas, provide open plazas, street setbacks and multi-level podiums. Later, bonuses were offered to incorporate arcades, acquire land, retain historic facades and recycle buildings for residential use.

Money - building - interference provides a timeline of the city's progress through intervention starting with the first land sales in 1837 and ending with a speculative planning document, Melbourne 2030. It evolves from a simple proposition:

Since all town planning acts to alter the value of land, there is no such thing as a free market.

First Buyers of Melbourne Land at Auctions Held 1837-1839
Source: Historical Records of Victoria. Volume Three. The Early Development of Melbourne. (Public Records Office, Victoria: 1984)

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The town survey of 1837 reserved approximately 20% of the original 32 blocks of land for public and municipal use. The remaining allotments, which were roughly the size of a quarter acre block, were auctioned in stages between 1837 and 1839. Due to the limited supply of freehold land and high demand, the value of town allotments doubled in the first six months.



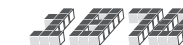
By 1841, Melbourne's migrant population grew from 177 to 4,479. The number of public reserves remained relatively unchanged but speculative investment in privately held land led to lucrative transfers of ownership.



The discovery of gold, the separation of Victoria from New South Wales and a surge in population to over 20,000 people financed a building boom on the public reserves, whilst the remaining allotments yielded to the pressure of subdivision. The surface of the city began to crystallise as a complex matrix of lots and laneways.



The extent of public reserves reduced as government activity relocated to eastern hill outside the grid and the size of church land contracted. Legislation permitted the market sites to be leased to private operators.



The total area of the city effectively doubled by the construction of multi-level buildings.



Speculative pressure to subdivide land was relieved by the introduction of hydraulic passenger lifts which encouraged the vertical multiplication of land areas up to eight or nine times.



At the time of the 1890s crash, the building programme on public land was effectively complete with the construction of the library, post office, town hall, royal mint, registrar-general's and titles office, supreme court, records office and eastern market. This level of consolidation sat awkwardly against the backdrop of a growing metropolis, encouraged by the completion of the suburban railway system.



By Federation, the metropolitan population crept over the half a million mark. In 1906, the first multi-level residential apartment block with 27 flats was constructed in the city, on the current site of 101 Collins Street.



In 1916 the height of city building was limited to 132 feet, or around 12 storeys. The limit was determined by the ability to pump water vertically to extinguish fire but allowed building elements of greater height, as long as they were not inhabited.



The desire for increased floor areas associated with the retail boom encouraged the consolidation of smaller individual lots into one title and the construction of large block buildings up to the height limit. Architectural features or ornaments were incorporated in the designs to stress the presence of the building to the street.



The revival of retail and industry after the Depression increased the value of land for economic use. Twenty-one year leases were negotiated for the market sites and in 1934, the western market was used as a carpark. Pressure mounted for the reclamation of housing areas which had survived commercial redevelopment on the north-eastern edge of town.



The resumption of property development after the war was countered by an increased interest in town planning ideals, in particular Melbourne's lack of a civic square.



In 1957, the building height limit was replaced by a plot ratio bonus system which allowed increased floor areas in exchange for open residual (civic) space at ground level. In the same year, legislation required the widening of the laneways by 4'6". A metropolitan plan was prepared by the MMBW but was not given statutory force until 1968.



Throughout the 1960s, the decline in city commerce, particularly by retailers who had vacated to the suburbs, was countered by bids to consolidate individual allotments into large sites to attract corporate investment back to the city. In 1962, the first high rise office tower with a landscaped forecourt to the street was constructed under the new plot ratios, representing the vertical multiplication of original land by 26 times. The eastern market, then the largest single under-developed area of public land, was granted a ninety-nine year lease and redeveloped as a hotel with two levels of shops. The western market was redeveloped as a high rise corporate office block which included a large north-facing public area to Collins Street. By 1968, at the peak of the boom, Council had completed its first formal attempt to buy back individual land holdings and consolidate a site for a city square south of the town hall. At the time, Melbourne had the smallest population of any municipality in the State.



The boom in office re-development slowed down under the inflationary effects of the oil crisis in 1973. Heritage legislation was introduced under Premier Hamer in 1974 although demolition permits were not refused for fear of invoking a compensation claim against Council. 7-day trading (for bakeries, chemists, petrol stations and pet shops) was permitted in 1972.



In 1982, the liability clause for the refusal of permits was excluded from the provisions of the planning scheme by the Minister of Planning and Environment and 300 buildings were placed on the historic buildings register. By 1984, although the city had more office space than in 1972 (and a greater proportion of it unoccupied), 7/10 of the country's largest multinationals had headquarters here. Around the same time, land buy-backs the size of city blocks were initiated – across the river to Southbank, and over the railyards for a new city square.



The 1990s opened up with a commercial floorspace oversupply, low land values, a raft of protected heritage stock and a residential population which continued to decline. In 1992, subdivision laws were relaxed to allow for the multiple division of any one building and reduced stamp duty when 'buying off the plan'. Vacant heritage and commercial buildings began to be recycled for residential use and new apartment blocks constructed.



The former hospital site was subdivided and developed by public-private-partnerships for commercial and residential use. The new high rise towers are elevated hard against the street, multiply the original land area up to 44 times and provide almost 600 new dwellings in the air. The interior of the block is irrigated by a system of pedestrian laneways, underground retail and commercial carparking. The current redevelopment of the post office building, will leave the library, town hall, supreme court and churches as the collective remnants of original public land, as it was surveyed in 1837. The remaining city land has, on average, been demolished and rebuilt at least three times. In 2002, the Bracks Government released Melbourne 2030, a metropolitan plan for the sustainable growth of Melbourne for the next thirty years.

