





“The street is the river of life of the city, a place where we come together, the pathway to the centre.”

William H. Whyte. *City: Rediscovering the Centre*, 1988 ⁰¹

For much of history the needs of pedestrians have been an important factor in shaping the urban environment. Since the days of ancient Athens, city streets and urban plazas have been essential meeting, conversation and activity zones for the general public. The ancient Romans provided open-air public toilets and seating to enhance the comfort and convenience of their streets. After a period in the twentieth century where the needs of the pedestrian were largely overlooked, in the twenty-first century we once again recognise the importance of the pedestrian’s needs, and look to history as we reconfigure our modern cities to provide greater convenience and comfort for pedestrians, public transport users and light, low-environmental-impact vehicles. We now face the challenge of designing our urban public spaces and transport facilities in ways that rival the comfort and convenience of the car; the challenge of creating an extended, efficiently serviced, comfortable and safe urban lounge room.

From its inception and careful urban planning in the 1830s Melbourne’s central business district has been the subject of continual design research and intervention as the city fathers have sought to create civilised, comfortable and attractive services and amenities for pedestrians on the city’s streets. Eminent American sociologist, William H. Whyte, has observed that successful public spaces require places to sit, food, water, sun, trees and elements to distract or entertain.⁰² All of these have appeared as part of the history of the design of Melbourne’s streets and urban infrastructure. This exhibition seeks to locate that activity within the larger history of the evolution of public spaces within the city as desirable, convenient and comfortable spaces for its citizens.



The Footpath and Street in History



While the form of cities has remained fundamentally stable for thousands of years, over time they have undergone changes that reflect cultural shifts. For the Greeks, the *polis* literally meant a place where the people achieved unity, and public space was important as the location for vigorous debate. The *agora*, the main public square, acted as the daily meeting place in which Athenian citizens could linger, listen, discuss and participate in the democratic process that determined the rules and future of the city.⁰³ The Romans revelled in the *teatrum mundi*, the drama, ceremony, pomp and grandness of the city, and all Roman cities were created in the image of Rome. Roman public facilities were considered critical to creating any city and essential to a civilised existence. These included public baths, public toilets, drainage and fresh running water. Public life and public participation were crucial to Roman politics and commerce.

In the seventeenth century William Harvey’s treatise *De Motu Cordis*, on the circulation of the blood, created a new model for the healthy and vital city, one based on circulation and freedom of movement. Harvey equated movement and flow with life and health. This created a revolution in thinking about the planning and design of such cities.

Ease of movement was seen as vital to stimulate commerce and innovation.⁰⁴ Streets were cleaned and re-paved with larger flagstones to make them smoother and more easily trafficable. Planners were concerned with emphasising the importance and experience of the journey, and the design of the street was central to this. One-way streets were introduced on the basis of the logic of arterial flow. In the nineteenth century planners proposed the idea that in a densely populated city people got on better if there was distance between them, a sort of collective isolation where the separated, freely moving crowd was also detached from the space in which it moved.

The arrival of the automobile in the early twentieth century brought this planning logic to a head. The street was no longer like the civic park, a place for all to occupy and mingle in together. It was now becoming a space of isolated transit, speed and physical danger. In Chicago in the early 1900s the auto dealers and auto clubs began campaigning to give the car greater priority in public streets by redefining walking as an inappropriate pastime and use of the street.

“... one way they did this was to invent a new term of ridicule, and direct that against pedestrians walking in streets. They used a mid-Western American term ‘Jay’, which was an insult; it meant that you were uneducated and rural, and they connected it with ‘walker’ and invented the term ‘Jay walker’ and it was used as a term of ridicule against pedestrians.” Peter Norton⁰⁵

In Melbourne, Janet McCalman observes in *Struggletown*, that “The Edwardian working-class child grew up in a lively street community that the motor car has since destroyed.”⁰⁶ A rich and inclusive street life prevailed on our inner urban streets where horsedrawn carts and pedestrians co-existed. The streets were a source of abundant life and activity, characterised by the laughter and shouts of children playing rather than the drone of engines.⁰⁷ Much of the design activity of Melbourne’s planners in the latter part of the twentieth century and into this new century has been centred around finding ways to rehabilitate the streets for pedestrian use, safety and comfort.



The Footpath as Lounge Room

In addressing the design of the modern city the contemporary urban planner and designer is faced with a complex cocktail of demands and competing forces, along with a constantly transforming political landscape. In the face of an emerging awareness of the disadvantages of the isolation and disconnection engendered by car usage, along with concerns about the pollution and energy consumption created by them, are strong pressures to reassess how cities should be designed to best serve the needs of their populations. The history of cities suggests many of the ways they have succeeded and failed in providing for their citizens. The modern city, Richard Sennett suggests, is a place where people come alive and are allowed the freedom to explore and express themselves. However, modern urban individualism in the street, café, railway station, bus stop and city square is generally confined to the passive gaze rather than participatory discourse. For the Athenians, on the other hand, the great promise of the city was the chance to share and test ideas and participate in the process of shaping the city.⁰⁸

One of the challenges facing the modern city designer is that to draw people to use public space, it must compete with the standards of autonomy, efficiency, amenity and comfort set by the private car. We need to find ways to encourage people to come to the city without their cars.⁰⁹ American designer, Richard Buckminster Fuller, has observed that the automobile has allowed people to expect the same standard of service from their remote and mobile spaces as they have in their homes.¹⁰ This sets the bar for the design of public space planning at a very high level. From this position we may consider the city as a collective urban lounge room, a space potentially as comfortable as your own home but with the benefit of being filled with the presence and creative output of many other people.

The visionary English architect Cedric Price proposed that public spaces and facilities were most valuable when they functioned as opportunities for education, creative expression and interaction. Price believed that city, public architecture and public facilities could be thought of as valuable generators of innovation and new ideas and information.¹¹ This position echoes the earlier idea that the city is a territory of adventure and a symbol of what is possible.



Melbourne’s Bluestone Lounge Room

The footpaths and public spaces of Melbourne have undergone a continual evolution over its history in terms of occupation and design. Early on, a wide range of amenities were provided for the public on the footpaths, including toilets, telephone boxes, lighting, water fountains and seating. While Melbourne has been blessed with an initial clear and spacious street grid, footpaths across the city were not always generous in size. They could often be described as convenient spaces rather than comfortable or delightful spaces.

In the 1980s the Melbourne City Council began to address the specific idea of creating delightful spaces for pedestrians. This approach included planting additional trees and the beginning of a long-standing campaign to widen the footpaths to create more room.

This strategy represented a conscious decision to place pedestrians at the centre of Melbourne’s life. The arrival of Melbourne’s first sidewalk café, opened in front of the Oriental Hotel, in Collins Street in the 1950s, would herald an entire cultural transformation of the city as the focus moved away from creating city spaces designed to facilitate work to one that offered pedestrians places to linger and socialise on the streets. Often, unrecognised urban design decisions, such as those to widen footpaths across the city, were the platforms which allowed later transformations in occupation of the city to occur. This design thinking was extended in the 1990s to embrace the transit spaces in the city, particularly the tram stops. These have been redesigned to provide greater physical safety, shelter, seating and digital information on waiting times.

The design and implementation of this infrastructure is further changing the cityscape, extending the pedestrian spaces and creating a landscape of pavilions and service spaces on the footpaths. These structures have been designed as part of a larger, coherent family of designs, from police boxes and fruit stands to railings and rubbish bins, which

now create a street character across Melbourne. Less obvious design interventions include a network of removable bollards to easily convert Melbourne’s lanes into pedestrian-only zones at lunch times and the continual evolution of street lighting to provide better illumination of the streets at night. Combined with the systematic use of regular bluestone pavers, this strategy to create visually similar families of infrastructure across Melbourne has been carried out as a ‘recessive design strategy’, achieving a consistent background for the city’s streetscapes with the intention of creating a legible sense of place.

This exhibition focuses on just a few of the many ways in which the design of Melbourne has reflected changes in thinking and the ways in which the city’s designers have sought to improve the quality of the urban environment for pedestrians and public transport users, in response to changing conventions, technologies and expectations. The material in the exhibition touches upon some of the design strategies that make up a broad array of approaches and areas of address and expertise. The intention is to begin to unpack the elements of the design process and reveal fragments of it to begin to indicate the enormity of the challenge.



Endnotes

- William H. Whyte, *Rediscovering the Centre*, Doubleday, New York, 1988.
- William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Conservation Foundation, Washington DC, 1980.
- Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone. The body and the city in Western civilisation*, Norton and Co., New York, 1994, p. 55.
- ibid, p. 272.
- Peter Norton, ‘The story of highways’, *Rear Vision*, 20 July 2008. ABC Radio National, Melbourne, 2008. Peter Norton is Assistant Professor, Department of Science, Technology and Society, School of Engineering and Applied Science, at University of Virginia.
- Janet McCalman. *Struggletown: Public and private life in Richmond 1900–1965*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1985, p. 64.
- ibid, p. 257.
- Richard Sennett, 1994, p. 371.
- Brian Richards, *New Movement in Cities*, Studio Vista, London, 1966, p. 25.
- Joachim Krausse, et al. (ed.) *Your Private Sky. R Buckminster Fuller: The art of design science*. Lars Muller Publishers, Baden, 1999, p. 200.
- Maddalena Scimemi, ‘The unwritten history of the other Modernism. Architecture in Britain in the fifties and sixties.’ in *Daidalos: Architecture, Art, Culture. Diagrammania*, Issue 74, October 2000, G+B Arts International, Berlin, p. 20.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the support of the City of Melbourne, the Arts and Culture Branch, particularly the enthusiastic support of Eddie Butler-Bowden, Collections Program Manager and Catherine Hockey, Assistant Collections Manager and Julia Johnston. This exhibition would not have been possible without the energetic material, infrastructural and logistics contributions made by Ian Dryden, Team Leader, Industrial Design, City of Melbourne and Rob Adams, Director, Design and Urban Environment, City of Melbourne. Their work and the work of their team forms one of the key themes of the exhibition. Special thanks to Ryan Ward and Robert Nudds from Round for the graphic packaging of the exhibition, Margaret Trudgeon for editing the catalogue essay, Dan Hill from Arup for his support and to Costa Gabriel and Veronica Saunders from Crowd for their design input and ongoing commitment. Thank you also to Citywide for supporting the installation of the bluestone pavers in the gallery.

Dr. Michael Trudgeon, Curator



Captions

- 1 A** People at bus stop on a Melbourne street, 1960s
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 2 A** Collins Street, mid 1960s
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 3 B** Café table and chairs on street, 1960s
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 4 C** Buckley’s on Little Bourke Street, 1960s
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 5 C** Hardware Street Café, 1990s
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 6 C** Collins Street, mid 1960s
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 7 C** Town Hall Plaza, 1970s
Photographer: Wolfgang Sievers
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 8 C** Collins Street, mid 1960s
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 9 C** Bourke and William Street intersection, c1900
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 10 C** Swanston Street, 1888
From booklet, *Album of Melbourne Views*
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 11 D** GPO tram stop, Bourke Street Mall, 2006
Photographer: Andrew Curtis
 - 12 E** Woman on seat, Collins Street, c1970
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 13 E** People on circular seat outside Melbourne Town Hall, 1970s
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 14 E** Stainless steel seat, Bourke Street Bridge, Docklands, 1999
Photographer: Andrew Curtis
 - 15 F** 80 litre bin, Bourke Street, by Ian Dryden, 1991
Drawing
 - 16 F** Litter basket on lamp post, 1960s
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 17 F** Early postbox, photographed 1960s
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 18 F** Butt bin concept drawing, 1996
 - 19 F** Stainless steel drinking fountain, Bourke Street Mall 2006
Photographer: Andrew Curtis
 - 20 G** Street kiosk, Swanston Street, 1961
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 21 G** Woman using a phone booth, Bourke Street, 1970s
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 22 G** News booth, Swanston Street Walk, by Ian Dryden, 1992
Drawing
 - 23 G** Collins Street, c1900
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 24 G** Cast light, Centre Place, 1993
 - 25 G** Pedestrian light, Swanston Street Walk, by Ian Dryden, 1991
Drawing
 - 26 G** Pedestrian lights, Swanston Street Walk, 1991
 - 27 A** Telephone booths outside Atheneum Theatre, Collins Street, 1960s
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 28 B** ‘Milo’ cigarette cards, views of Melbourne streets, 1857
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
 - 29 B** Tree grills and surrounds, 1970s
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection
- Above: Collection of historical images – including park bench and litter bin

City Gallery

Melbourne Town Hall
Swanston Street
(Enter Through Halfix)

Gallery Hours

Mon 10 am – 2 pm
Tue – Fri 11 am – 6 pm
Sat 10 am – 4 pm

