

What do we want for our cities?



Working from home and the CBD



Placemaking and transportation



Cities being reshaped with a people-centric approach

Throughout history, major events have impacted on how we plan our cities.

The 1755 Lisbon earthquake led to the birth of earthquake engineering; the cholera outbreak in London, in 1848, triggered the first public health policy on urban sanitation and a fire in Chicago in 1887 led to vertical construction and the first skyscrapers. The damage wrought by World War II also prompted massive government-sponsored housing and rebuilding programs.

What will cities look like after the recent major disruptions? Some think business as usual will eventually be reinstated. It's too soon to tell but we can take up learnings and make room for change.

COVID reminded everyone about the importance of public space. City dwellers enclosed in their small apartments, unable to enjoy indoor retail and hospitality venues, craved for valuable outdoor space.

Many of our cities were shaped with the mindset of the 50 and 60's – they prioritise private vehicles over pedestrians. As a side effect it created soulless neighbourhoods. More than 60 years later, we still see cities being designed for vehicles.

A lively area is full of people, things to do and see. Highways and extensive parking lots don't go well with people strolling around. High Streets, for instance, should have a speed limit of 30km/h to be more attractive to pedestrians.

We know for a fact that cities should be designed for people... the Greeks and Romans knew this centuries ago! Now more than ever this has acquired a new level of urgency. We can leverage the recent memories of lockdowns to get support from politicians and communities to create places.

Placemaking is an urban planning approach to make public spaces alive. It aims to create an environment to support community needs and encourage engagement, cultural activities, creativity, etc. The idea behind placemaking is designing cities for people instead of cars.



Working from home and the CBD

Up until recently, the main reason bringing people to CBDs was to work. The presence of large number of offices and workers created a constant foot traffic which in turn fomented retail, cafes and restaurants. Flexible work arrangements reduced and, in some cases, eliminated workers' need to be at the office full time. If in the past the digital nomad lifestyle was a privilege of few, today it seems viable to many.

The impacts of this behavioural change on CBDs are undeniable. While office occupancy rates in Australian CBDs improved in March 2022 they are still low, particularly in the cities which had strict lockdowns.

The domino effect of empty CBDs impacted local businesses such as retail and hospitality venues, not only by the reduction in foot traffic but also by the length of time stores were kept closed due to harsher restrictions. These businesses have been struggling to reopen, especially small ones which may not have the financial strength to come back.

CBD hotels also felt the effects of the working from home trend. A reduction in in-person meetings and empty offices generated a decrease in

business travel, negatively impacting CBD hotels occupancy.

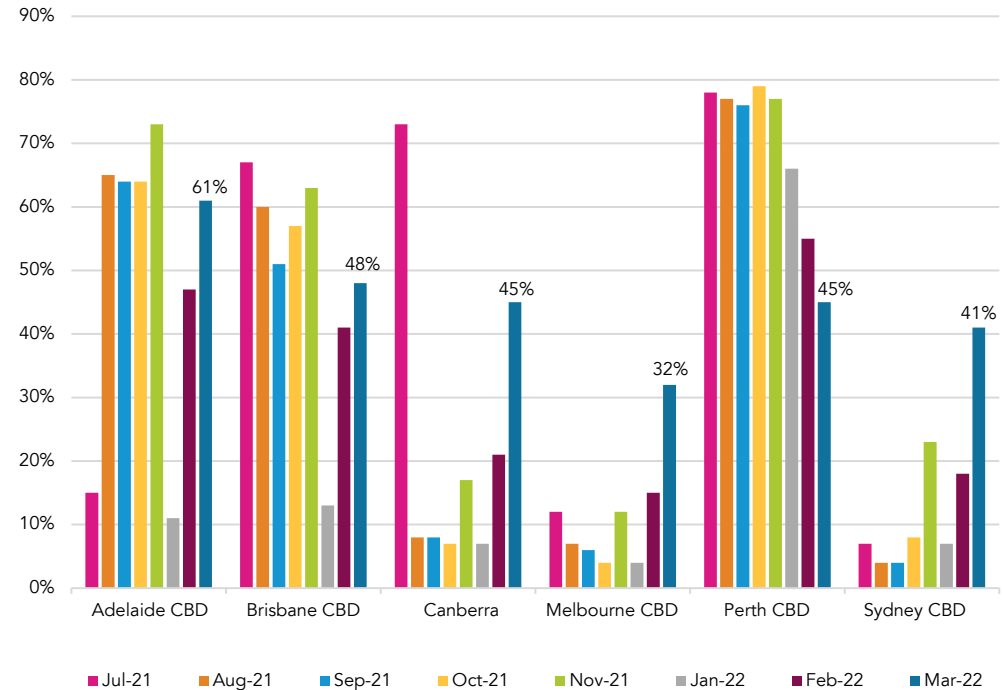
Another sector of concern is public transport. With a lower number of commuters and greater propensity to drive due to health concerns the ability to provide quality public transport is compromised. Can transport agencies keep providing the same coverage and frequency of services?

The recent reversal of the trend

in office occupancy rates in CBDs brought hope that cities will eventually look as lively as they did once. However, we need to question – how deep are the changes in how we relate the workplace?

There is a great uncertainty in what the future holds. Perhaps, it is wise to look at giving people more reasons to visit CBDs and creating new places they will want to shop, get entertainment, visit and, why not, work as well.

Office Occupancy Rates



Source: [Property Council Australia](#)



Placemaking and transportation

Prioritising people over cars doesn't necessarily mean a total lack of private vehicle access or parking. But it does mean focusing on accessibility considering active and public transport first and providing just the necessary space for private vehicles to support people who cannot access the area otherwise.

Good infrastructure and a connected network of alternative transportation should be more important than parking, for instance. An obvious, albeit controversial intervention would be to reduce or completely remove on-street parking to open space for wider footpaths or new cycle paths.

Not only should the need for parking be questioned. The use of the street for vehicle traffic can be reconsidered. Closing streets completely or at least restricting through traffic as a tactic to create more space for people. Congestion taxes in cities like London have attempted to do this with mixed success (apart from creating a new revenue source for governments).

However, removing private vehicles from the road is always challenging. Drivers are very attached to their cars and to the notion of them being an

essential convenience. The pandemic has in fact increased reliance on single occupier vehicles as a way to achieve social distancing and car sales have recommenced to increase.

Congestion

Placemaking is tightly connected with the concept of promoting and prioritising active transport modes. Similarly, solutions to tackle traffic congestion depend on taking drivers off the road and providing alternative transport modes. Therefore, these two topics walk in parallel to each other when it comes to planning cities of the future.

When thinking about public spaces, usually parks and community spaces come to mind. Streets are not often seen as a space to be utilised and enjoyed by people. Realising that streets can be more than a space to move from one place to the other, they can be multi-purpose space, opens valuable space for communities to explore.

A recent study proposed a scenario for a greener Sydney. What if quiet streets near transport hubs were closed to vehicle traffic and replaced by green public spaces? The analysis indicated that it would be possible to de-pave 30% of the area and take 100,000



vehicles of the road. In this scenario, 260,000 more people would be within 300m of 1ha of green space¹.

A more common initiative is reviewing planning codes to encourage a reduction in private vehicle reliance. Eliminating minimum parking requirements, especially at transport rich areas, is a way to discourage private vehicle ownership. These requirements are usually an inefficient way of managing parking demand and supply. A 2018 study indicated a surplus of residential parking spaces in Melbourne, there were 49,500

¹ Streets Ahead – an Interactive Place Study

residential parking spaces against 36,951 cars².

Establishing mixed-use precincts is another important planning strategy when thinking of future cities. The COVID pandemic highlighted people's demand for getting their needs attended locally. The more activities people can do within walking distance or a short public transport or bike ride, the less they will need private vehicles. Concepts such as 15min or 30min cities were strengthened after COVID-19.

² Parking Surplus in Melbourne

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Barcelona

Barcelona Superblocks are an example of giving space back to the community.

The Superblocks are polygon grids measuring 400 by 400 metres where non-resident traffic and on-street

parking are not allowed. Inside the polygon, the roads are narrow and the vehicular speed is limited to 10km/h.

Through the implementation of Superblocks, areas that were previously occupied by cars are now dedicated to playgrounds, street furniture, cycle paths and art installations, changing the way residents relate to the place and to their neighbours.

The Superblocks were first implemented in 2016 after being tested and approved; now Barcelona has a new goal: to make its entire central grid a pedestrian-focused



area. In 2021, Mayor Ada Colau announced that in 10 years, 21 streets of the Eixample district would be limited to local traffic, deliveries and essential vehicles.

The city will open space for 21 new plazas located at intersections of the closed streets. Barcelona will also gain 6.6 hectares of new green space.

Paris

Over the past six years, Mayor Hidalgo has been committed to change Paris and reduce vehicle traffic to become more pedestrian friendly. More than 1,400km of cycleways have been developed. Major roads, including the one along the Seine river, have been closed to traffic.

The next big move will be to prohibit non-essential traffic passing through the city centre by 2024. Exception will be made to residents, public transport vehicles, people with disability and drivers willing to shop or visit someone within that area. Drivers passing through the zone will be fined if they are caught either by cameras (via license plate recognition) or by police checking.

The goal is also to boost foot traffic in the city centre and support local businesses by removing through traffic and encouraging destination traffic.

These plans were meant to be implemented earlier this year but

they were postponed to enable a major public consultation. The current timeframe is to implement the changes in time for the Olympics in 2024.

The city also has plans to become greener by 2026, by which time Mayor Hidalgo intends to plant 170,000 trees.

What about Australia?

In Australia, we haven't seen a city wide change as the ones implemented in Europe.

Melbourne will take the lead if it can move forward with the plans to make the city centre more pedestrian friendly.

City of Melbourne 2030 transport strategy aims to reduce traffic speed, prioritising pedestrians in some shared streets, creating more cycle paths, amongst other initiatives. The city plans are inspired by Barcelona's Superblock to reduce traffic at the city centre by transforming all streets on the Hoddle Grid — bounded

by Flinders Street, Latrobe Street, Spencer Street and Spring Street — into a single lane of traffic. Only King Street would be excepted.

In Sydney, the pedestrianisation of George Street is one of the main projects towards a more pedestrian friendly city. Phase 1, the closure of George between Bathurst and Goulburn Streets to private vehicles allows the light rail carriages to get through, provides more space for sidewalks and street furniture.

A significant investment in Sydney's public transport network is the new metro. The project consists in delivering 31 metro stations and 66-kilometre stand-alone metro railway by 2024. The metro will increase the capacity of the train system from 120 services an hour to 200 services an hour.

NSW transport strategy for 2056 includes as one of its six guiding principles creating successful places. According to this principle, transport can support local communities to create places by enhancing accessibility via active and public transport¹. The strategy shows a willingness to work along Local Government Areas to create better places for local communities.

¹ Future Transport 2056

Connect

Designing for people is an intrinsic part of what we do. Achieving compliance is only the first step of our job. Our goal is to help our clients to design intuitive and safe places for people. The key part is advising our clients on what will work when the project plans become alive.

Whether it is a road, a hospital campus or a commercial building, our consultants consider all user groups to propose designs targeting their specific needs.

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Our approach allows us to provide solutions that are not only compliant but enhance the user experience and contribute to the success of the project”

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