

Creating a Melbourne of many cities

Making liveable, doable.

The CBD and surrounds is Melbourne's greatest asset

Melbourne has been blessed with some very good planning over its long development, starting with Robert Hoddle. In particular, the CBD is a huge asset with its concentration of businesses and government institutions, retailers, services, hospitality providers as well as major cultural, sporting and recreational assets – all within walking distance of the CBD and easily accessible via a compact and multimodal public transport network. In recent decades, the CBD has also been home to a growing residential population, including a lively student quarter.

The successful growth of the CBD has spread to surrounding areas. St Kilda Road came first. Southbank followed, and an area once dominated by old warehouses is now a vibrant precinct. The regeneration of Docklands was also a major new chapter in Melbourne's overall development, which will continue to the north of that precinct.

The growth of a major education and research precinct north of the CBD, including the University of Melbourne, RMIT and the global biotechnology company CSL, has been dramatic – with plans to extend this innovation zone into the Arden precinct through the new Melbourne Metro Rail Project. Another major new urban renewal zone is planned for Fisherman's Bend.

Development above the rail yards from Docklands to Richmond Station has also been mooted. This has already started with the refurbishment of Flinders Street Station, and at Southern Cross, where AGL has built its new Melbourne offices above the station.

The greatest levels of employment growth in Victoria in recent years have been in and around the Melbourne CBD, partly as a result of the overall population growth, but also largely due to a changing economy. Growth in the service sectors and in knowledge-intensive industries has made it favourable to create clusters in places like the CBD and immediate surrounds.

Where the limitations lie

The nurturing and development of Melbourne's centre has been a fabulous success. However, for a combination of reasons, this will not be enough in the future.



Land availability:

While Melbourne still has relatively large areas around the CBD available for redevelopment, large parts are also effectively quarantined due to planning and title restrictions. There is less space available for redevelopment than it might appear, so future conversations will need to focus on reuse of existing available land.



Continued urban sprawl:

Melbourne is a victim of its own success and affordable housing is now often located at the fringes of the city – far from the growth in diverse employment opportunities. These suburbs are often poorly serviced by transport and social infrastructure, as investment struggles to keep pace with growth.



Congestion:

Even after the planned massive investments in public transport and roads to better service the CBD and surrounds, an unprecedented population surge in outer Melbourne is creating substantial demand for space on our roads and seats on our public transport. Consequently, congestion that was once limited to our inner suburbs is now being felt in middle and outer Melbourne. This is contributing to lower accessibility to employment, health care, educational and recreational opportunities in some areas – adversely impacting Melbourne's liveability.



Low density:

Melbourne is one of the largest cities in the world in terms of the space that it occupies. Melbourne is considered the 106th most populous city, the 32nd largest, and the 955th most dense. For example, it is possible to drive 100 kilometres in one direction and still remain in the city. A lot of this land is locked away from higher density development – much of it in the leafy neighbourhoods Melbourne is justifiably famous for. However, this lower density adds to the overall sprawl. It also fails to address changes in demographic trends such as smaller households, an ageing population, and a greater preference for more affordable and convenient medium – to high-density living.

A polycentric city

Melbourne's planners have always taken into account the development of other centres within our suburbs, and growth has also swallowed what were once separate towns. Plan Melbourne is the latest in a line of good plans (the first major citywide plan was as early as 1929) that identify a range of centres outside the CBD and its immediate surrounds that are key to Melbourne's ongoing growth and development. However, to date, none of these centres have come close to the scale or diversity of the CBD.

It's now time to prioritise a small number of these centres for accelerated development into lively, employment-generating mini-CBDs. When you consider Melbourne's continuing population growth, urban sprawl, increasing congestion and subsequent loss of accessibility (in addition to its low density), it is clear that a transition to a polycentric city is critical to maintaining liveability and efficient growth. This requires identifying several areas with the right potential, then investing in better transport links, attracting business investment and employment, allowing higher density residential development, and building social infrastructure and programs.

The best candidates for this accelerated development among those identified in Plan Melbourne are:

- Monash Precinct: already a major centre for education, research, health and manufacturing, this area has huge potential for more.
- La Trobe Precinct: La Trobe University is currently the major employer in the north, but in the longer term this precinct has even greater potential to provide employment opportunities within the surrounding area.
- East Werribee Employment Precinct: a greenfield site well served by transport infrastructure on the doorstep of Melbourne's fastest growing region. The government is currently considering a proposal for the development of a major innovation zone to be called 'Australian Education City'.

- Maribyrnong: a centre of growing importance and potential, especially if the proposed redevelopment of the major Defence site in this region proceeds.

No go, go slow or go go?

The politics of planning is complex and contested. Governments need to plan well and act decisively, but they also need to retain community support. There is an old adage in planning that there are only three approaches in development – some areas are 'no go', some areas are 'go slow' and some areas are 'go go'.

There are key 'no go' areas we need to preserve as the city grows to maintain Melbourne's liveability. There are also vast areas of Melbourne where we need to 'go slow' on densification, not only to maintain liveability, but also to preserve community support. However, there are a few areas where we really need to 'go go'. These include the CBD and surrounds, plus a few select employment-generating mini-CBDs in the suburbs, as outlined above.

We need to do this so our children and grandchildren will have good jobs, opportunities and lifestyles, while still retaining Melbourne's overall liveability for everyone.





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