URBAN & BUILT ENVIRONMENT NEWS

The effort to make Melbourne one of the most liveable cities in the worlds is a sincere one, and there are several projects working simultaneously in the city which aims to reshape the city through constant citizen feedback loopsand engagement. The Melbourne Innovation Districts (MID) is one such partnership formed in 2017 by The City of Melbourne, RMIT University, and the University of Melbourne, to support urban innovation in Melbourne for the benefit of the whole city

MELBOURNE INNOVATION DISTRICTS

The partnership describes itself as "*an opportunity to establish shared projects and places to enhance Melbourne's future by creating new jobs, enterprises, services, and spaces that will contribute to Melbourne's success as it grows to become a city-region of 8 million people*."

The initial focus of the founding partners, was to catalyse an urban innovation district in the area near north of Melbourne's CBD – an area in which many of Victoria's formative institutions are clustered, including the central campuses of RMIT and the University of Melbourne, Queen Victoria Market, State Library of Victoria, Royal Exhibition Buildings, Parkville Biomedical Precinct and Melbourne Museum.

As Melbourne grows into it a leading world city, planners have to factor in more things than a growing population. Deep economic, social and technological changes are also significant dimensions reshaping urban life and more strongly connecting cities around the world. Institutions in all sectors are making big investments to meet the changing needs for transport, housing, green spaces, data and networks, changing world of work, social services, and the development of urban areas previously used for other purposes.

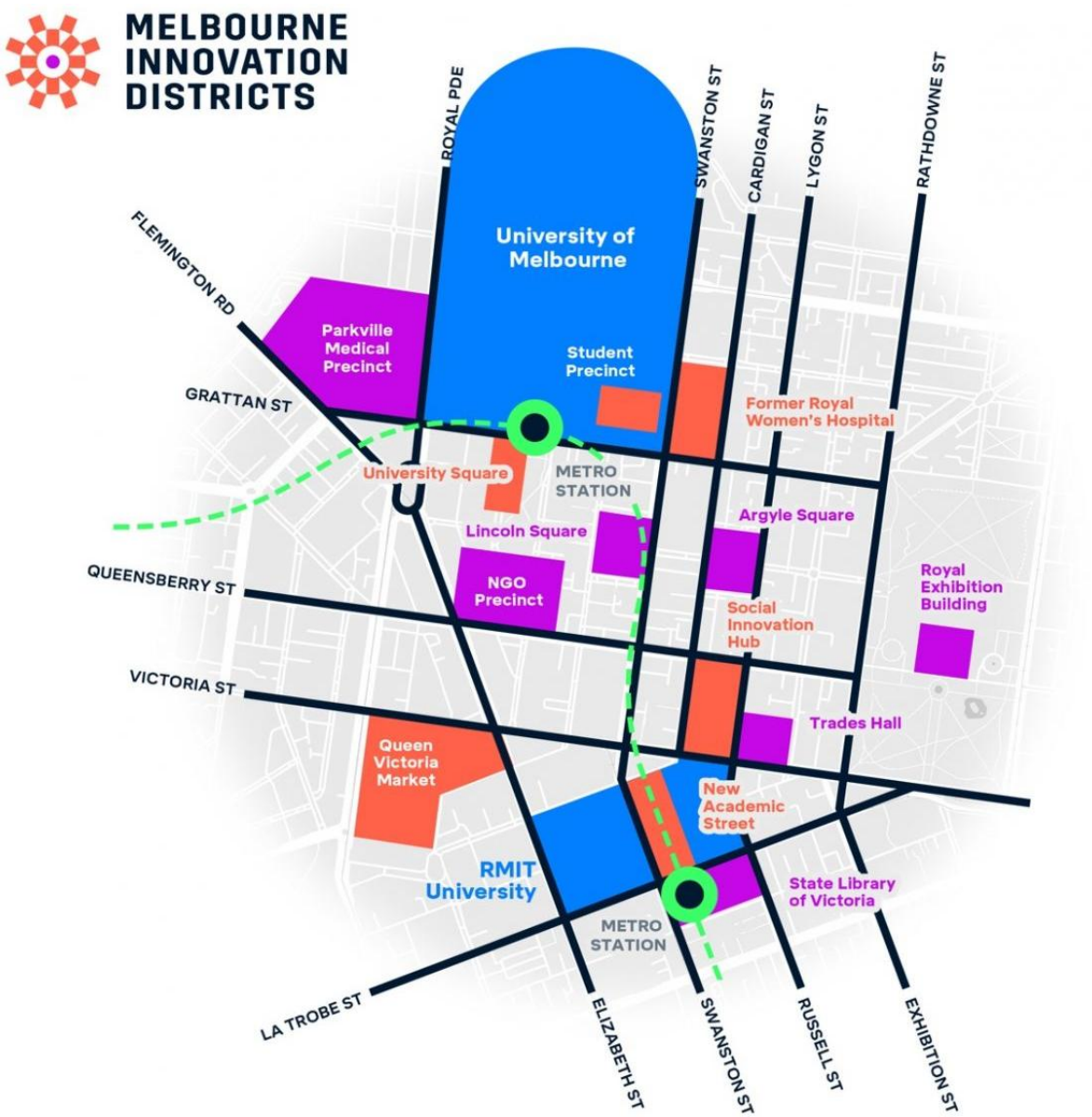
Since the 19th century this area north of the CBD has been one of Melbourne's most fertile sites for innovation, with the location of the first university, working men's college, State Library, artisan 'maker' district, first women's and children's hospital, first cemetery, and the location of the Queen Victoria Market – Melbourne's most visited attraction and the world's largest open-shed market.

Now, to meet the 21st century needs of our city, many of these same institutions are involved in dynamic growth and renewal through investment in new facilities and technology infrastructure.

The three founding partners of MID are already making big infrastructure investments in the development of the city north area including: Queen Victoria Market redevelopment (completion set for 2022), University Square (completion set for 2022), New Academic Street (completion set for October 2017), and the redevelopment of the former Royal Women's Hospital (completion set for 2020) (MID, 2018).

This significant concentration of large urban projects, including the Melbourne Metro Tunnel creates a unique opportunity to grow partnerships and shared infrastructure that will make it possible to adapt exciting new innovations into large scale solutions that benefit the whole community. (MID, 2018)

The approach of the MID, as a dynamic, open partnership – which gives social needs and the public realm equal weight alongside enterprise activation and new technology – is relatively unusual. This continued focus on good city design and social impact as a key driver of city innovation is uniquely Melbourne.



The location of the first Melbourne innovation district is also important because it combines a unique cluster of institutions and activities with connections to a much wider network of locations, transport and institutional connections. The aspiration of the founding partners of the MID is that this approach will grow into a wide-ranging series of projects and partnerships located across Melbourne and other cities.

The program of work for the MID already has some 30 projects underway. Over time, the MID will continue to build the network of people and organisations interested in contributing to the development of innovation districts.

More academic and student collaborations will be created, and industry and community partnerships will be built around the focal points of public realm, enterprise activation, social innovation, digital technology, and institutional design. The MID will also present an opportunity to create longer term proposals for planning, policy and investment. For more information, visit: https://mid.org.au/

THE ENGAGED CITIZEN

Melbourne now has a visual tool that displays buildings that are to be developed. The 3D model of the city is based on an open dataset that can be accessed online. While obviously useful for urban planners, developers, and architects, it has also been able to create another means for the city to reach out to its people. "*You can visualise the city not only as it is now, but also as it will be when the construction is finished*," Rimmer says. "*It's increasingly something that we're using to communicate with the community about what's happening to their city.*"

It helps them be less scared about growth and development, or have a better argument if they're concerned

The next step is to add Augmented Reality to the whole experience so that people on the street can hold up their smartphones to see overviews of planned buildings over current ones. This platform could catalyse conversations around how future buildings will feature into the existing streets: *"Instead of people looking at architectural plans, and saying, 'Oh, I think that's going to be terrible', they can look through their phones*."

City officials are using this platform to kickstart discussions and engage citizens. (Rohaidi, 2018) *If citizens are concerned about the impact of buildings and developments, they can use these data to run awareness campaigns,* Rimmer adds. *"It's not about the technology; it's about supporting the community to have better discussions about the future of the city."*

An example is a recent controversy surrounding the amount of construction taking place near a childcare centre, which was worrying parents. City officials showed them what the area would look like over the next few years, so they could understand why the construction was necessary,

Among the city's the many challenges is traffic congestion is a growing point of contention among many, according to Rimmer. *"Something like 30% of congestion in the CBD is caused by people looking to park"*

So the city is going to be building a network of parking sensors that feed into an open data platform, which shows residents vacant car parks throughout the city.

Another challenge is increasing accessibility for those with disabilities. Earlier this year, the city ran an Open Innovation Competition on Accessibility, inviting innovators, entrepreneurs and communities to develop tech-driven solutions to make the city more disability-friendly.

The first prize winner had developed an app that was *"effectively a Siri or an Alexa but specifically designed to interact with someone who has a disability"*. It provides information about Melbourne to users via voice, text and screen readers.

One of the other finalists had developed an app that ranked restaurants based on their accessibility for four disability groups: mobility, auditory, visual and cognitive. "*It can show that this place has three steps on the way into it, whereas this place has a ramp; or this place has a braille menu,"* Rimmer explains.

Innovation districts

The city with the University of Melbourne and RMIT University to create Melbourne Innovation Districts in the north of the CBD. The area plays host to 21% of Melbourne's knowledge sector jobs, and central campuses of both universities.

These districts were designed to encourage innovators and creators to explore the city. They are made up of plug-and-play spaces right on the street where people can set up prototypes and trial projects. The city is trialling sensors in these districts, and working with Australian telco Telstra to set up 5G.

Instead of building an R&D hub, the city made the conscious decision to take things outdoors. *"We have to build it out of liveability, a great place for people to experience buildings and parks and design,"* Rimmer remarks.

The city runs the Knowledge Week festival every year, and the physical space where it is held is also a test site. "If a research institute is running an open data day, they can use the physical design and the physical infrastructure and plug in," Rimmer says.

Through these initiatives, the city hopes to attract more small businesses, startups and social enterprises to the area.

Excited about the future of Melbourne, which he envisions will have greener infrastructure; better public transport; and fewer cars and more pedestrian space. There will be more trees and greenery, too: Melbourne has a target to increase tree cover from 22% to 40% of the city by 2040.

However, no matter what Melbourne will look like in five years, citizens can keep up with its progress, and take part in shaping the future.

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