



Vital arteries

Laneways have become the right path for the creative thinking that makes better places, writes Kylie Legge

Much is spoken and written about Melbourne's laneways, about their vitality and spirit as well as their evolution. However, they were not always there. In fact they were not originally planned, and they certainly have not always engaged with the imagination of the public. Yet today, they are central to Melbourne city's success as a liveable and exciting place, a city with a sense of creativity at its foundation and an innate energy for entrepreneurship, community engagement and citizen participation. As a result, it is an unusual Central Business District (CBD) within the Australian context, one that welcomes all members of the community from the student to the business executive, from the family to the community group.

When Robert Hoddle laid out the plan for Melbourne in 1837 there was a grid of grand streets, but no

laneways. It was Governor Bourke who insisted on the "little streets" running parallel to the major east-west streets and providing rear access for servicing of buildings. While this reduced the north-south block lengths the east-west blocks were still 201 metres in length, a considerable walk. The landowners themselves rectified this by creating a series of linking arcades, passages and laneways including some of Melbourne CBD's most favoured spaces: Centre Place (between Flinders Lane and Collins Street), the historic Block Arcade (connecting Collins Street and Little Collins Street) and Royal Arcade (between Little Collins Street and Bourke Street Mall). The culture of the laneway was established and has been evolving and expanding under the careful management of the City and through the enthusiasm of the city's entrepreneurs ever since.

Where else in Australia would fine dining and gritty street culture co-exist so well?

Facilitating street life through the activation of the edges of streets, lanes, corners and niches has a multitude of benefits – cultural, social and economic. Where there are cafes and shops, buildings start to open up and become more active, increase visual surveillance and visitation. When there is no edge activity, the laneway is more likely to remain in service, often dominated by garbage bins.

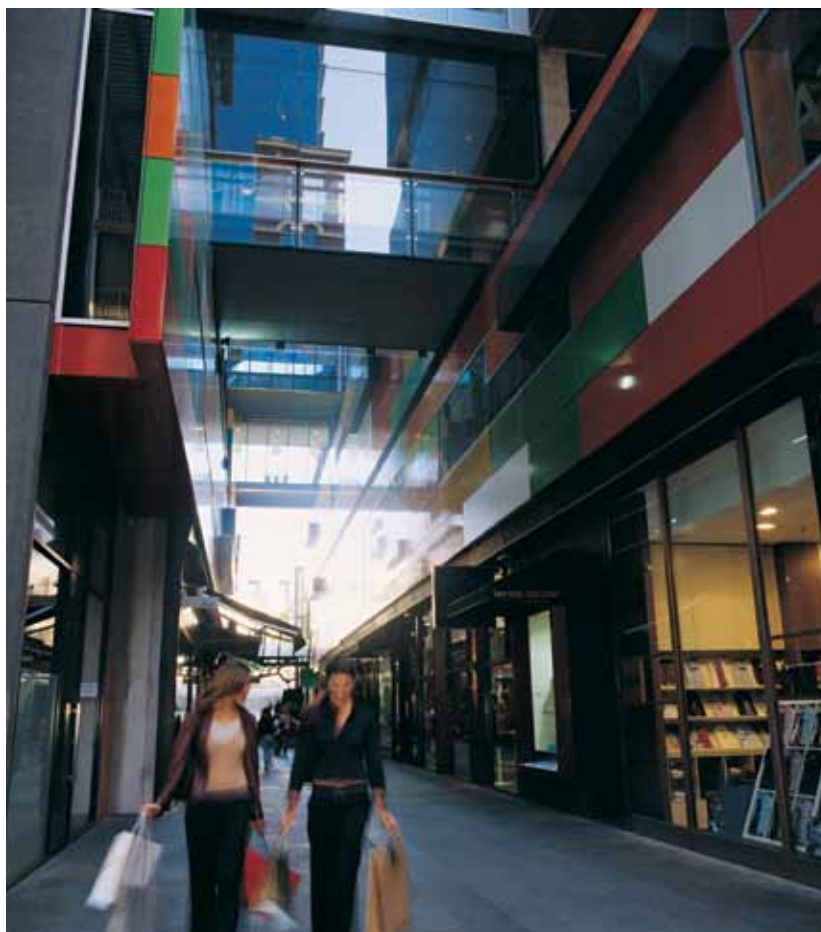
Picture Degreaves Street in the early 1990s with a number of small retail and service offerings, vehicular traffic, narrow footpaths and garbage bins. Today it is full of people, cafes, outdoor seating and life. It is also a burgeoning local economy in its own right. Before: businesses paid rent, landowners paid rates and the council maintained the space. After: businesses receive increasing revenue from pedestrian traffic flows and outdoor seating, landowners receive increased revenue from thriving businesses as well as additional revenue from new businesses, council receives increases in rates as well as fees for outdoor seating. Everybody wins.

It is important to note that the City alone did not revitalise Degreaves Street. The City provided the initial invitation through encouraging policies such as the Melbourne Retail Strategy and by providing the support infrastructure – a pedestrian priority space. Businesses welcomed the opportunity and provided services that reflected the aspirations of the people – great coffee and outdoor dining in a European setting. Great places are a result of these kinds of interdependent relationships where all contribute and all benefit; they also take time and patience to allow for their natural evolution. Rarely do they get it right from day one.

What makes Melbourne unique among Australian cities and perhaps more generally among western cities is the plethora of these small businesses that regularly open their doors in unexpected places across the city grid. The entrepreneurs behind these operations are not from the big business end of town, they are simply people with an idea and the enthusiasm to engage with the small economies being created in the laneways. This kind of creative energy cannot be bought or sold, although it can be facilitated, and this is what distinguishes the City of Melbourne from its counterparts.

Let it be

The idea that places take shape organically over time is another important factor in Melbourne's



success. Sometimes it is best to just let things be, watch and wait. An initial reaction to street art and graffiti could be to remove it as quickly as possible to create a feeling of cleanliness and order that builds perceived safety. Hosier Lane is an example of the tension between letting be and managing. Fortunately the former won out, and this small street is now known as home to the two-hat MoVida Bar De Tapas restaurant, and is also an authentic outdoor gallery space for some of Melbourne's most exciting street art. Where else in Australia would fine dining and gritty street culture co-exist so well?

The making of Melbourne's great laneways is not just about creative menu design or painting on walls – it is about creative thinking that challenges the notion of the contemporary city as an oasis of clean lines and neat edges. It is about welcoming the tensions that arise from different people's relationship to place and allowing them to co-exist – unmanaged. Doing things differently, bending the rules, encouraging new ideas – that is creativity.

Kylie Legge lived and worked in Melbourne for three years before moving back to Sydney to become the Director of Place Partners, a dedicated place-making consultancy. She is passionate about encouraging the meaningful relationships that can develop between people and their environments and understanding that great people places often take time to evolve.