

Renewal – Why the city will bounce back.

It is Spring. A young pair of swans lay an egg. They have built a nest amongst the reeds of the river. They take turns to sit on that one, precious egg. And they sit. And sit. And sit. Patiently waiting for renewal.

Residents of CBD Melbourne are facing an enormous challenge. Our nest has been damaged as though by rain or flood. But the desire for renewal is strong. There is pent up demand for things to consume, to socialise, to progress with our lives – even to get a haircut. What do we do? What will the swans do if their nest is damaged? We, like the birds, will need to re-build our nest to make it stronger and maybe relocate it to higher ground.

How do we re-build to make our lives and those around us COVID safe? Masks are rapidly becoming a fashion statement. Get used to wearing a washable, interesting, charming mask. (Not those disposable masks. They will just pollute our environment.)

Maybe there needs to be a culture shift. Remember “soldier on”. “What will the boss say if I don’t put on a brave face, pretend I am not sick and tough it out at work.” That attitude needs to change. We have to be more sensitive to how our decisions on health matters affect others. Technology allows us to stay home and more often than not to continue to work. Were we blind to contagion? Just like our 19th century ancestors who did not know about good sanitation in cities and in their homes. Is the COVID experience teaching us more about contagion? Not only from this current virus but from the common cold, the ‘flu and other health issues?

Topical at the time of writing, is the matter of contact tracing. We need to isolate people who have been in contact with people who have tested positive for COVID-19. This technique may need to go on for some time. But by being clever and making good use of technology, we can learn how to do it efficiently so that it becomes the norm. The technique has certainly proven to be effective in driving down infections.

So, we will need to re-build our nest. A new and better designed nest. Because humans are good at adaptation (especially when we have to). Even at times when it seems a bit of a torturous process, we are actually good at co-operating with each other. A necessary ingredient to ensure that change happens.

We need to conjure up a new dream – our dream for renewal. But no-one is saying this will be easy. We need to sit on the new nest and sit and sit. Patience, like the birds, is required. Care about the nest now and renewal will come.

However, even when the hatchlings arrive, and there is joy that renewal is beginning to happen, we will still need to use all our resources, effort and faith in the future, to turn our city back to vibrancy, liveability and the economic success story that it should be. Slowly, carefully, thoughtfully, nurture the recovery, the renewal. Look after our new chick.

It is important not to underestimate the effect of suppressed demand. People have put off repairs, gardening, buying clothes and household items. Going to a restaurant will be a newly found pleasure, as will entertainment and simple socialising with friends and family. The need to consume is still there and when allowed to escape, will restart the economy. People will find jobs again. Some new businesses emerge where others, unfortunately did not survive. But this writer believes that you cannot turn off a fundamentally viable city. Renewal will come – eventually.

