

How building community can help re-vitalise our CBD

2022 will be the 30th anniversary of Postcode 3000, the 1992 planning policy that successfully brought population and therefore, vibrant life back to a dying Melbourne city centre.

The policy encouraged imaginative residential development and the promise of a sophisticated, inner city lifestyle. Alongside the apartments, bars, restaurants and cafes came essential neighbourhood infrastructure, like supermarkets, libraries and medical clinics. And with these additions, and the work of community organisations like Residents 3000, a strong sense of place and community developed.

That sense of community in Melbourne CBD was highlighted during the lockdown, as we kept in touch with our neighbours, assisted the elderly with their shopping, organised phone-ins and the delivery of food parcels, just as other communities did right across metropolitan Melbourne. Despite the marked drop in the city population and commerce, local businesses reinvented themselves as neighbourhood hubs, while many longer-term residents stuck it out and did their best to support the remaining local traders. This reinvigorated mutuality between many residents and businesses has been a silver lining as we grapple with our current COVID reality and imagine our future.

As the discussions, strategising and politicking gather pace to revive and recreate Melbourne, it is vital that the residents' voices also be heard as we re-think how we strengthen community in a very changed city. By 'we', I mean residents working collectively with businesses and the City of Melbourne. As residents, we dine, shop, exercise and socialise in the CBD. We walk in the parks, go to the theatre, the libraries and galleries, but it is the connections we make with other residents, businesses and the City of Melbourne that will make us strong as one community.

A new Postcode 3000 strategy would build on this community by attracting new inner-city residents from Australia and eventually, from abroad once again. Prior to COVID, there were around 61,000 residents living in the CBD. COVID's massive impact on our university sector and the city's international student population left many apartments vacant. Slowly but surely though, new streams of city dwellers are finding their way back to town, drawn by the same amenities that led many of us to choose to live in the CBD in previous years. Attracting a diverse range of people to move to the city is part of the solution to building Melbourne's resilience ahead of future shocks.

But without a sense of community, especially at a time when there are so many empty shops, fewer workers, students and tourists, it can feel like we are still living in a hollowed-out city. Community takes effort to build. Living in the same apartment is one thing. Sharing a story, a meal or a pandemic lockdown chat with a neighbour is an entirely different experience of community building. A revitalised Melbourne CBD would balance the building of spaces for commerce with establishing more spaces and opportunities for shared, community-building experiences.

Building community also depends on building a balanced economy together. The last few months have seen a flurry of initiatives led by the City of Melbourne and businesses to encourage people back to the CBD, with the hospitality sector being central to many of these. Yet an excessive focus on an alcohol-led recovery poses risks to the CBD's identity as a genuine neighbourhood for longer-term residents of all ages. Such neighbourhoods not only need cafes and bars, but also a new generation of neighbourhood infrastructure, such as more open, green and multipurpose spaces for all residents to meet, work and play throughout the week.

With such a big challenge ahead of us, the City of Melbourne should continue to use innovative community engagement strategies to invite ideas from all residents and offer a more balanced

approach to the recovery and re-ignition of the CBD. For its part, Residents 3000 continues to work with its members and allied community groups to connect residents, to build a sense of community and to encourage active participation in all aspects of city life.

Almost 30 years on from Postcode 3000, we have a similar challenge of re-vitalising the CBD as it re-emerges from the long COVID lockdown. Yet we are also faced with the challenge of building back better, attracting a more diverse group of residents and businesses for the long run and creating a stronger community than that which existed before.

This is the first article in a series of re-imagining post-COVID Melbourne by Residents 3000. Next month's focus will be on community building and the "20-minute neighbourhood".

Come and meet like-minded residents at our next event which will be Neighbourhood Marketplace at 6pm on Thursday, 6 May 2021 at the Kelvin Club. Details at <https://residents3000.com.au/>.

