

Walking the path to a better neighbourhood

Walking. It was one of the simplest and most joyful pleasures that many of us enjoyed during even the hardest moments of lockdown. For that one hour each day, the fleet-footed among us chose to run. Others joined the packs of two-wheeled enthusiasts on our upgraded bike paths.

However, the slowest transport mode gifted many of us with new perspectives of our neighbourhood. Although the empty streets were a sobering sight, being unhurried helped us notice details that we'd overlooked before. A new mural here. Someone's flourishing plant array there. Like flâneuses and flâneurs, that French species of pedestrian, we took time to just amble and keenly observe.

As we emerged from hard lockdown, it was also walking that brought many of us together. We appreciated the company of slowly unmasking faces that we were finally travelling alongside, enough to recognise, more often than we did before. And we valued not only how easy, but also how pleasurable it was to meander our way through this neighbourhood that is a walker's paradise.

Walkability lies at the heart of the 20-minute neighbourhood concept, which has officially been a council and state government goal for almost a decade now. The 20-minute neighbourhood has everything one needs within a 20-minute stroll – or within around 800 meters. Jobs, affordable housing, healthy food, green spaces, local businesses, recreation, medical care, and public transportation are all ideally connected by a range of safe, green and visually appealing streetscapes.

It's worth revisiting the 20-minute neighbourhood concept and other defining ideas as we consider the kind of city we hope to help build and live in post-COVID. Bourke Street Mall's 1978 pedestrianisation and Swanston Street Walk's inauguration in 1992 are but two. Each of these initiatives simultaneously improved walkability and liveability by giving us more reasons to wander and explore on foot. Nowadays, we can't imagine either street being any other way.

Similar happenings are occurring now as our 'little' streets are pedestrianised, trees are planted, and footpaths widened. Like the landmark changes of the past, there will be some opposition and barriers to negotiate as a community, alongside government and businesses. But maintaining our collective focus on improving walkability will pay off, by attracting future generations of city dwellers and ensuring Melbourne remains an inspiration for innovation and liveability here and abroad.

Although there are elements of our 20-minute neighbourhood that we can't change as residents, there are other aspects that we can and should continue to help improve. The 1837 Hoddle Grid has hardwired laneways and little streets into our neighbourhood, for the better. But the quality and local nature of services and amenities along our path can always be improved through feedback and better design. Our council has quite rightly acknowledged that "cities with a strong design culture are underpinned by an engaged and demanding public with high expectations for design quality". A city and its streets should be

codesigned by its main users: its residents. And the best urban designers are most certainly walkers.

How we are allowed to walk, stop and engage with our environment and each other has vital implications for how connected we feel to our places and communities. The city's unique layout, buildings, footpaths and interfaces are the hardware that provides the fabric for our socialisation, our sense of attachment to places and to neighbours. Noticing how the built environment affects us is an important step towards understanding how to improve it. Ensuring that our city's design remains pedestrian-centred, working for all ages and all abilities is key to attracting new residents from among the thousands of visitors and workers that we welcome to the CBD each day.

So, what can you do to improve this 20-minute neighbourhood and its design? Perhaps you should begin by walking. Slowly, more often, with eyes and imaginations fully awake, and in the company of others. You could do so in a Residents 3000 walking group. Or you could start one in your own building or block. Sociologist and urbanist Richard Sennett defines the city as "a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet". Walking, then – as Sennett might say – is a shared opportunity to turn mere collections of buildings into genuine dwellings. So, walk on, residents. Walk on together.

