

Committee
for
Sydney

Reclaiming Sydney's High Streets

February 2020



The Committee for Sydney is an independent think tank and champion for the whole of Sydney, providing thought leadership beyond the electoral cycle. We bring people together to solve the problems of today and tomorrow.

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Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Sydney already has some great high streets	6
3. But many high streets are suffering	10
4. Cities all over the world are reclaiming their streets for public life	16
5. Sydney has done some world-class street transformations as well	20
6. Our vision: high streets as the centres of neighbourhood life	24
7. The basic moves	26
8. The pathway to action	29
9. Conclusion: Streets are the most important public space resource in Sydney	34

1. Introduction

High streets, sometimes referred to as main streets or shopping strips, are the beating heart of our neighbourhoods: where we meet friends, buy daily necessities, people-watch, or have a cup of coffee. They are a source of neighbourhood pride and identity. They are where we go to enjoy city life, without having to try too hard. But for all their importance we rarely give them the special treatment they need.

This paper outlines some of the techniques and policy tools that Sydney can use to make great high streets. It lays out a pathway to protect, nurture, and support high streets to be the thriving heart of neighbourhoods across Greater Sydney. We focus on reclaiming *historic* high streets, saving them from poor traffic management decisions and other threats. But the ideas in this report also have implications for how we create *new* high streets in neighbourhoods that do not have them.

While this paper focusses exclusively on high streets, other locations will also certainly warrant attention. But we believe that high streets are a good way to start because they are the most obvious and important places to focus on comfort of people on foot as the highest priority.



2. Sydney already has some great high streets

Some of the most beloved parts of our city are the old shopping streets – generally built before the age of the automobile, and somehow protected and still thriving a century later. These places are often filled with people, both locals and tourists.

Beamish Street, Campsie



This main street was built at the turn of the last century after the opening of the Bankstown train line. Its cluster of small shops serve one of Sydney's great multicultural neighbourhoods. Traffic has been slowed and restricted to one lane each way. Parklets and street trees have been planted on the kerbside lane to provide shade and greenery to the footpath and parked cars. Pedestrians have been prioritised with footpath widening, seating and plenty of crossings to allow easy access to both sides of the Street.

King Street, Newtown



This Victorian high street is famous for being one of Sydney's worst traffic jams. It is also famous for being exciting and lively. The road may be noisy and choked by cars, but its footpath is full of people shopping, seeing live music, seeking cool bars, meeting friends over coffee or simply promenading up and down. King Street is supported by a grid of secondary streets and lanes, which link to local parks, medium-density housing and public transport. There are places to see and explore. It has a diverse mix of retail, entertainment, restaurants and cafes and is now one of Sydney's top ten tourist attractions.

The Corso, Manly



Manly's Corso offers one of Sydney's great places. The tight network of narrow streets and lanes that bridge the narrow isthmus of two great beaches, combined with the pedestrianised Corso that offers shops, restaurants and public transport like ferries and buses. Manly isn't known for great architecture, nor is it a major employment or retail centre. But what it has is great streets.

The Spot, Randwick



This little intersection in Sydney's east has become a thriving entertainment precinct. The footpath has been widened to allow the installation of a small parklet, with extra street trees and room for kerbside dining. The street is completely closed each year to hold the largest food and cultural festival and street party in the Eastern Suburbs. Although few intersections in Sydney have the space between buildings to allow for such a substantial public space, the Spot offers a great example of what can be done in places where we do.

Church Street, Parramatta



Source: City of Parramatta

Only a decade or so ago, this was a run down, windswept plaza with empty shopfronts in Sydney's struggling second CBD. Cars were removed during the 1980s in an attempt to create a pedestrian-friendly shopping street, but this failed. Since the return of some movement of cars, the place has come alive. A restaurant-lined, 'eat street' has emerged. Book-ended by the Parramatta River and Riverside Theatre at one end, and the shopping mall and train station at the other, Church Street is now full of pedestrians. The new street vibrancy has started to attract new businesses and long derelict sites are now being re-developed to capitalise on this demand. Although there will be disruption during construction, light rail will further catalyse this street as a key public space when complete.

Cronulla Street, Cronulla



This beachside street is at the heart of Cronulla's town centre area. Lined by palms, outdoor cafes, restaurants and shops, with part of the street transformed into a pedestrian mall leading to the train station. For what used to be the main thoroughfare in Cronulla, it has been converted into a pedestrian-friendly street, mirroring the suburb's activity in the summer months.

Katoomba Street, Katoomba



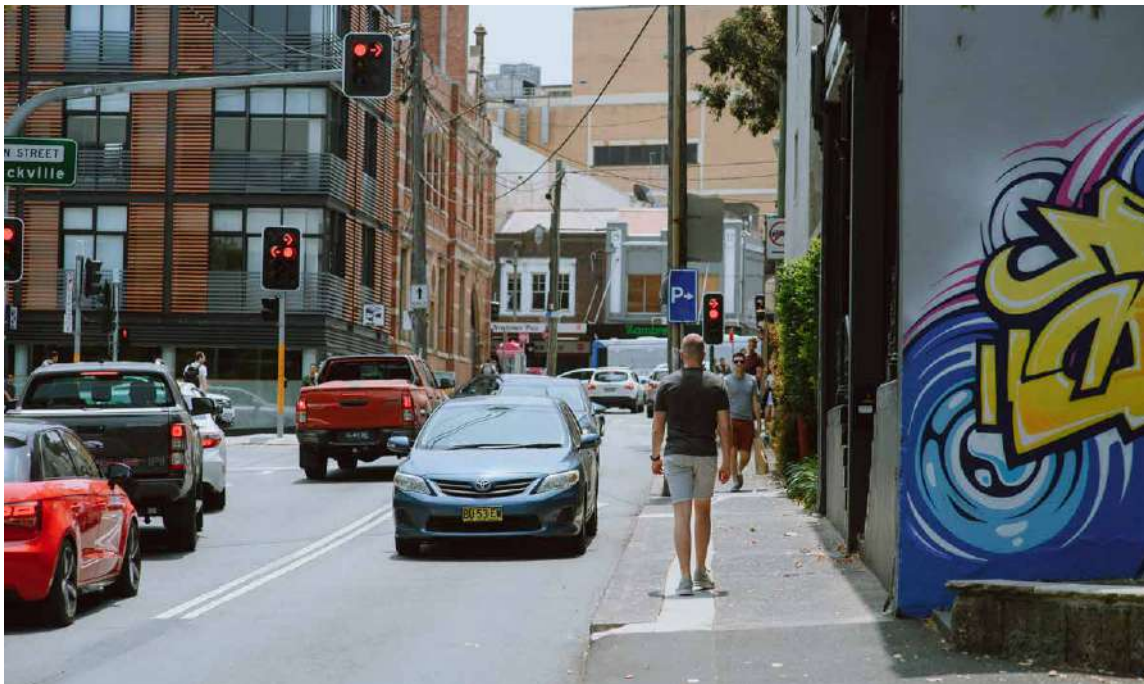
This long, traditional main street has been revitalised with the widening of the footpath to allow kerbside dining at key points. The rear lanes have been activated with street art and murals and are celebrated as tourist attractions in their own right, connected to a vibrant high street where tourists and locals mingle.

3.

But many high streets are suffering

While we can point to wonderful shopping streets across all parts of Greater Sydney, the truth is that we don't have enough of them, and too many of them have been degraded over time. Here are some of the most common problems.

Footpaths are too narrow



Perhaps the most fundamental issue is our footpaths are simply not wide enough. Narrow footpaths make it hard for people to congregate, have a conversation or window shop. It's not as pleasant an experience if you and a friend have to walk single file because there's not enough room to walk abreast. Ideally, we want the footpaths on a high street to be wide enough that there's room for people to congregate, chat, and walk easily. This also presents huge issues for people with mobility challenges, as the limited space can easily prevent them from getting around the city.

Footpaths are too cluttered



Power poles, parking signs, utility boxes, garbage bins, and other items can be unattractive and get in the way. They also squeeze out the things we actually want on the street if there is room: street trees, awnings, benches, footpath dining and bike racks.

Traffic flow is too fast



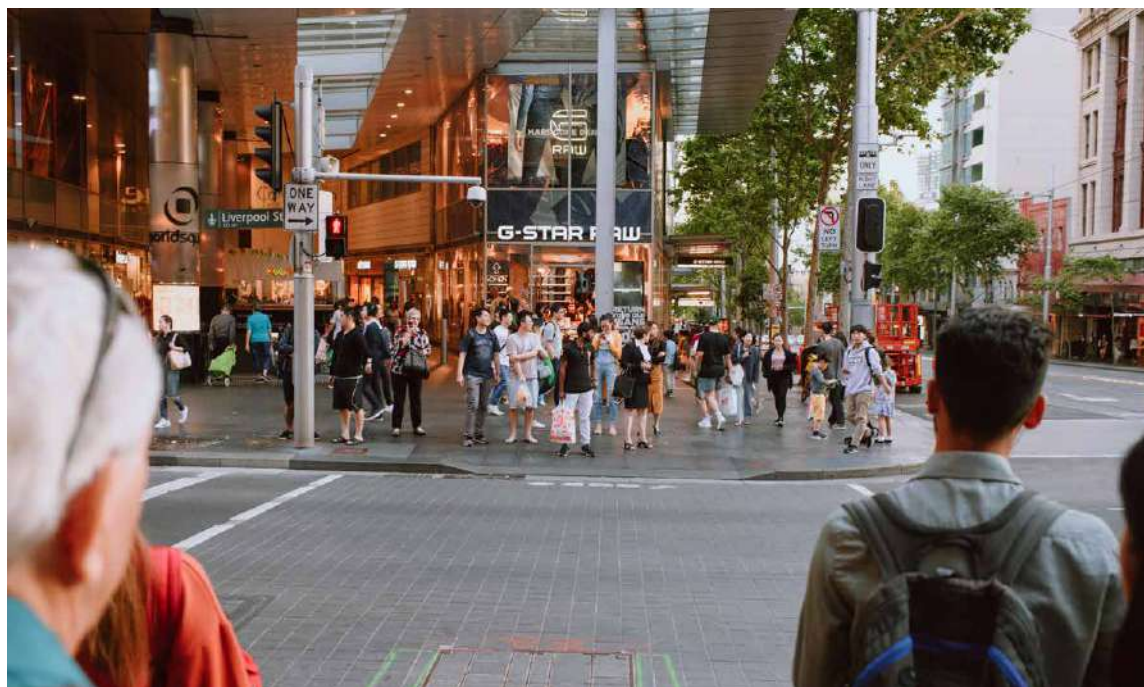
It is not comfortable for people to be right next to fast moving traffic. The noise, fumes, vibration, and intuitive sense of danger drive people away. Limited access for vehicles does not negate the success of a high street, but they need to be moving at human speeds, generally no more than 30km per hour.

Clearways bring speeding traffic too close for comfort



The removal of kerbside parking can have a negative impact on the amenity of the footpath. It is simply not pleasant to walk along a footpath with cars, buses and trucks flying past just inches from the kerb. It's not easy to hold a conversation, browse or enjoy a meal when your senses are assailed by the noise and smell of passing traffic. Kerbside parking provides a buffer between the pedestrian on the footpath and the passing cars. While it's only a lane width wide, this is often all that's needed to make the footpath habitable and enjoyable. There are exceptions: shared streets that mix pedestrians and slow-moving traffic in a single zone, or wide boulevards with extra-wide footpaths. But these are very rare in Sydney. The general rule is that clearways kill high streets.

Crossing signals make the pedestrians wait too long



Most Sydney traffic lights are phased to prioritise the movement of cars, which means that people on foot are forced to wait an exceedingly long time before crossing the street. This even happens at intersections where more pedestrians want to use an intersection than there are people in cars. We also force people to ask permission to cross a street by pressing a button and then make them wait until they are allowed. Having to stand and wait to cross a road undermines the pedestrian experience.

Fences block the flow of people across the street



Healthy high streets tend to make it easy to cross the street, to welcome a mixing back and forth. Pedestrian fences are a sign of failure – an ugly intrusion into a high street designed to make traffic move faster by removing a source of unpredictability for drivers. Healthy high streets should instead proclaim their unpredictability loudly, signalling to drivers that this is a place to move slowly and carefully. For all of these reasons, you just don't see fences used very often in cities that have a high-quality pedestrian environment.

Slip lanes make it feel risky to cross the street on foot



Slip lanes allow cars to seamlessly make a left-hand turn, without stopping. While this kind of continuous flow is good for grade separated motorways, it is not a good solution for surface streets that will have people on foot. Slip lanes (and roundabouts) make it hard for people to safely, and comfortably, cross the street.

Streets are too loud



Loud mechanical noise kills the amenity of a street. On a good main street, you should be able to have a conversation, sit and read a paper or a book or enjoy a coffee. The principle way to control noise is to control vehicle speeds. But paying attention to noise – measuring it, working on it as a key element of public amenity – may lead to other strategies as well, such as changes to the specifications on bus procurement.

Streets lack places to sit



Most of Sydney's streets, including its main shopping streets, lack places to sit. It's a sign of a great street when it invites people to stop, rest, and check out the urban scenery. This, along with shade and shelter, is a key element in enticing people to stay on a street rather than just walk through. We shouldn't have to go to a café every time we want to sit down.

Buildings detract from the street



When high streets were first developed in Sydney, they had a common building pattern: narrow shop fronts, high floor-to-ceiling heights, windows or openings to show off the stores' wares, and sometimes other uses on upper stories. Over time, some high streets have seen the intrusion of buildings that do not respect this pattern, so they lack ground floor retail or present blank walls, utility panels, and fire control rooms to the street. In more egregious cases they have access ramps for underground parking crossing the footpath. On especially troubled high streets, they may even be set back behind at-grade parking lots.

4.

Cities all over the world are reclaiming their streets for public life

What other approaches can we take and what tools do we need to build great public spaces? Here our peer cities can be instructive. Sydney is not alone in struggling to balance the needs of all the users of a street. Across the world, cities are trying new interventions and adopting new policies to make their own streets as pleasant and as functional as possible. Sometimes these interventions are dramatic, with pedestrianisation or the complete overhaul of vehicle movement. More often than not, they are subtle interventions and tweaks that turn ordinary streets into great places.

Exhibition Road, London



Gwoei / Shutterstock.com

Exhibition Road is home to some of London's busiest and most famous museums and concert halls. In 2003, the local council set about trying to rebalance the competing needs of an ever-growing tourist population with the need to provide vehicular access to service the streets' cultural facilities. The project saw a unique criss-cross pattern uniting the footpaths and the roads. The result was a shared street with pedestrian being given priority over fewer, and slower moving, vehicles.

Swanston Street, Melbourne



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Once a boulevard crowded with pedestrians and horse-drawn carts, and a central spine of Melbourne's famous 'hoddle grid', by the 1960s Swanston Street had become a traffic snarled and run-down neighbourhood. In an effort to revitalise the street, the city's civic leaders undertook a number of interventions, including planting street trees and widening the footpath. In 1992, half of Swanston Street was closed to traffic during the day, allowing the installation of public artworks and sculptures. In 2012, the entire length of Swanston Street became permanently car free.

Swanston Street is now a dress circle address for company headquarters, major retailers, bars and cafes as well also a major route for light rail and cyclists.

Third Street Promenade, Santa Monica



Vadik Swenson / Shutterstock.com

One of the first cities in North America to experiment with full pedestrianisation of its main street is Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade. In 1989, all cars were redirected around the downtown, creating a pedestrian boulevard that became the vibrant heart of the CBD. Now three decades later the city is embarking on a revitalisation plan that encourages a more diverse retail offering, including a more vibrant night life, arts and cultural events, and micro-breweries.

Herald Square, New York



New York City DOT

New York's Herald Square was one of the first of that city's "road diets". In 2009, two blocks were completely closed to vehicular traffic and were made pedestrian and bike only. The success of these interventions has seen New York's civic leaders to experiment with putting more main streets on a "diet". This involves reducing the number of traffic lanes a car can use and repurposing them for other uses, such as cycle paths, street trees or footpath widening. In most cases they are reporting reduced traffic accidents, more productive and profitable businesses, and more pedestrians on the street. Importantly these streets are allowing more people to use them to get around.

Valencia Street, San Francisco



Teresa Hammer/Hoodline

Valencia Street was developed as a major 19th Century shopping street, with shops all along it and a train running down the centre. But as it entered the end of the 20th Century, it had been afflicted with surface parking lots, gas stations, and unkind street lighting. San Francisco's Department of Parking and Traffic decided to turn it into a four-lane arterial, speeding cars to and from Interstate 280. The San Francisco Bicycle Coalition fought back, arguing that Valencia Street should instead have dedicated bike lanes. In 2004, the Bicycle Coalition won. The design, featuring one moving lane for cars in each direction and a centre turn lane, flanked by parking and bike lanes, has stimulated a renaissance of the street. San Francisco continues to evolve the design, moving toward greater physical separation of bike traffic from car traffic. Valencia Street has become a beloved shopping street, a busy cycle route, and a safe street for people on foot, while still accommodating cars.

5. Sydney has done some world- class street transformations as well

The notion of transforming a street to make it more friendly for people has been tried in Sydney as well, to great effect.

The results of these transformations often isn't immediately obvious, but they are worth celebrating in hindsight – because while transforming streets requires bold thinking, it's worth reminding ourselves that Sydney can and has delivered great streets, time and time again.

Crown and Bourke Streets, Surry Hills



Glen Berlin / Shutterstock.com

With the opening of the Eastern Distributor in 1999, surface traffic moved underground and surface streets were remodelled. The City of Sydney took the opportunity to put some of the local streets in Surry Hills to better use. Bourke Street had a lane reserved for cars replaced with a bike lane. Wherever possible, footpaths were widened, more street trees planted, and kerbside dining encouraged. Bourke Street has been transformed from a traffic tangled road, with little amenity or commerce to one of the best streets in the suburb.

On parallel Crown Street, the morning and afternoon clearways were removed, and traffic speeds slowed. Crown Street is now a thriving eat street supporting some of Sydney's best restaurants and bars.

Longueville Road, Lane Cove



In Lane Cove, the Council reduced the number of lanes traveling through its town centre and slowed vehicle speeds to 40km per hour. New pedestrian crossings and street trees have been planted to make it easier, and nicer to get around. A once struggling centre is now the focus of community and commercial life for the whole suburb.

Erskineville Road, Erskineville



Until 1994, Erskineville Road was slated to become a six-lane arterial road. In many cases buildings and shops were removed to allow it to be widened for extra lanes of traffic, leaving derelict and abandoned lots along the road. When the NSW Government abandoned the plan for the arterial road, Council seized the opportunity to return the road back into a main street. Footpaths were widened and trees planted down the median strip and along the path. Traffic was slowed to 50km per hour and reduced to only one lane each way. Several pedestrian crossings were installed and kerbside parking was re-introduced. Vacant lots were turned into small parks or re-developed to support new retail and residential developments. Within a few years a bustling main street emerged, and vacant shops re-opened as shoppers and pedestrians returned.

Riley Street, Penrith



Once part of Penrith's historic main street, by the 1970s Riley Street had fallen on hard times being overwhelmed by traffic and at grade carparking. Following the redevelopment of the neighbouring shopping centre, Penrith Council took the opportunity to widen the footpaths, plant street trees and slow through traffic. While this street struggles on hot or windy days, the street now provides an enjoyable link between the train station and the mall. The Council sponsors several 'pop-up' events and concerts, including a Christmas Parade. The street is now full of pedestrians and crowded kerbside dining.

George Street, Sydney CBD



This once traffic choked artery has been closed to most private vehicles and re-purposed as a pedestrian and transit boulevard. It carries more people along its length than when it was open to cars. Even before its opening as a pedestrianised boulevard, George Street attracted significant new investment and development as businesses crowd in to capitalise on the improved amenity.

6.

Our vision: high streets as the centres of neighbourhood life

The Committee for Sydney has long challenged Sydneysiders to ensure Sydney is the best city it can be. We believe that great cities don't happen by chance. All of us — governments, private companies and citizens — need to work together to make our city healthy, liveable, lovable, equitable, and functional.

We believe it should be the right of all our citizens, wherever they are in our growing metropolis, to be able to easily walk to a neighbourhood shopping street.

Where they don't exist, they should be created. Where they have been seriously degraded, they should be nurtured and brought back to life.

We acknowledge that there is a trade-off here because streets perform two functions: enabling movement from one place to another, and serving as public space destinations in themselves. Policy makers must work to manage this trade-off in complex ways across Greater Sydney. But on the key high streets we believe the greater priority should be on streets as public space, not on movement.

There will surely be other parts of Sydney beyond the high streets that can be improved to have a higher standard of public space — neighbourhood streets, safe routes to schools, major employment centres, and more. But we suggest that high streets are the most urgent, obvious, and impactful places to begin.

Major CBDs are different

While the focus of this paper is on the shopping streets, which are spread across all of Sydney, it's important to note that many of these ideas apply in a different way to the two major central business districts – the Sydney CBD and Parramatta.

Major CBDs are the powerhouses of our national economy, generating hundreds of thousands of jobs, as our urban economy evolves from one based on manufacturing to one dominated by services. This economic transition is changing the structure of our city, as hundreds of thousands of workers converge to work together and power the knowledge economy.

If our CBDs are going to accommodate this growing workforce, they can't do so if large numbers of workers and visitors come by car. In the Sydney CBD alone there are over 400,000 jobs. Combined with tourists, shoppers, and residents it's clear that the vast majority of people moving to and through the CBD must be afforded the opportunity to do so without a car. There is simply not enough room for everyone unless they arrive on a mode that does not require street space and parking.

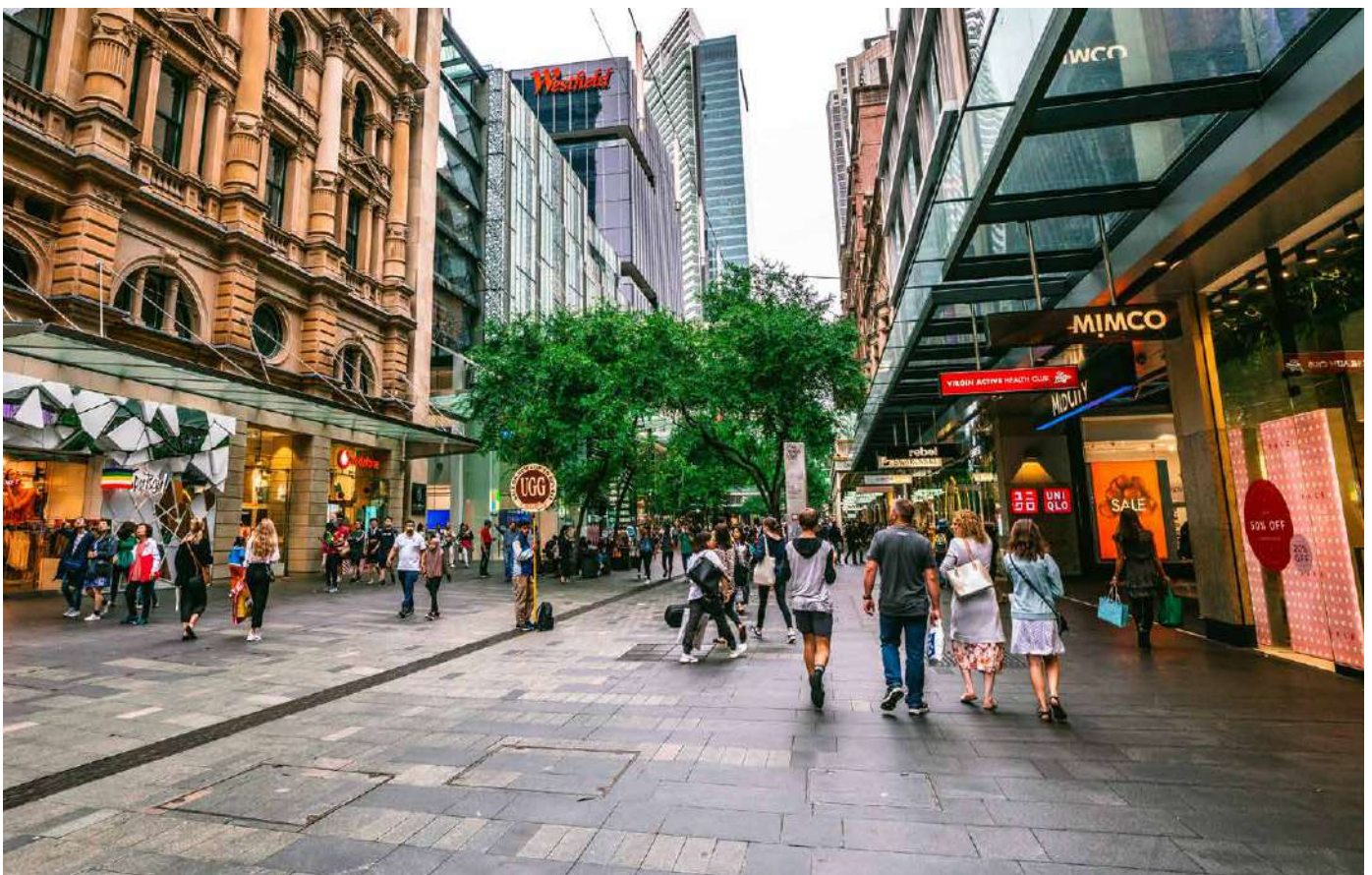
This necessity has forced our civic leaders to rethink and repurpose our streets. Mass transit – trains, buses, light

rail and ferries – do most of the heavy lifting bringing people into the CBD, while our feet do most of the work getting us around once we are there. Over time, footpaths will need to be significantly widened – in some cases fully pedestrianised. Space once reserved for cars will be converted to bike paths, street trees and parklets. Traffic signalling will be re-phased to favour the those on feet or bike. Parking supply will go down, as most people arrive through the front door instead of the basement garage. On-street parking will be preserved for vehicles making deliveries or tradespeople servicing local businesses.

If Parramatta is going to achieve the kind of jobs growth we need it to, then it will have to replicate many, if not all, of the interventions which have worked so well in the Sydney CBD. Parramatta cannot achieve its target of 300,000 jobs over the next 20 years if the majority of those workers come by car. There simply isn't the room.

Over time some of these changes could be appropriate for other centres with economic development aspirations – places like Liverpool, Blacktown, Campbelltown, Bankstown, Hurstville, and Chatswood.

Major central business districts cannot function the same way that the rest of Sydney functions. They need to work according to distinct planning ideas.



7.

The basic moves

There are some simple steps to making great streets, and in the process making great places. These changes do not usually mean removing or banning cars. Indeed, having slow traffic can often be a key ingredient to making a good street great. The trick is to ensure that cars don't dominate to the exclusion of everything else. Streets have to be recreated as places people like — places to spend time, not save time.

Widen footpaths

The first key move is to ensure, as far as is practicable, that the footpaths are wide enough. Ideally, there should be enough space not only for walking but also for those other necessary amenities that make them safe and pleasant — things like lighting, trees for shade, benches for sitting, racks for bikes. Perhaps more importantly the footpath needs to be wide enough to allow those critical human interactions that make great places and great cities: window shopping, chatting with friends, and sitting at a cafe. The footpath is where the life of great cities happen so they should be as wide and inviting as possible. The exact dimensions will vary by street, and on especially narrow streets, the footpaths may be narrower as well. But in general, on most of Sydney's high streets, the footpaths should be widened.

Declutter footpaths

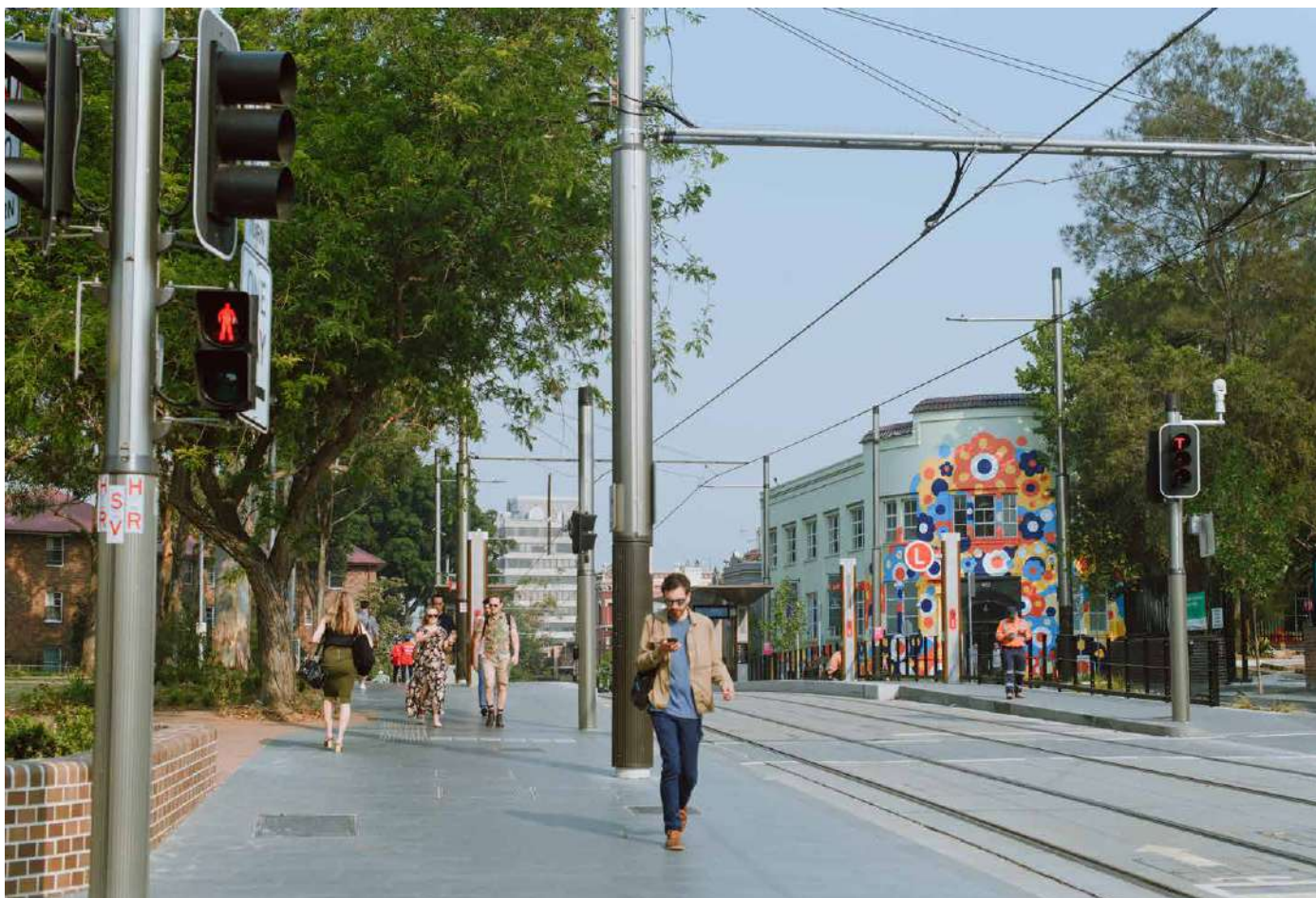
We need to remove, relocate, and redesign the clutter on the high streets to make them more beautiful and to provide room for magic to happen.

Slow traffic speeds

Most great streets still have cars travelling along them, but it is critical that the traffic is not flowing too fast. The best way to slow traffic is to reduce the number and width of the moving lanes. Other tools include traffic calming devices like speed humps, stop signs, and controlling speeds through traffic signal timing. Speed limits on high streets should be no more than 30km per hour. Good street design will generally indicate the appropriate speed to drivers intuitively, so speed limit signs are not always doing the heavy lifting.

Impose buffers between traffic and foot path

To ensure the passing traffic doesn't impact on the amenity of the footpath we need a buffer. Usually the easiest way to this is with kerbside parking but there are other interventions. Parklets — mini public spaces that are extensions of the footpath over a portion of the parking lane — can add both to safety and amenity while also minimising the impact of passing cars. Bike lanes can also be a great buffer.



Plant street trees

Large, shade providing trees do incredible things for the comfort and beauty of a street. Trees can reduce the ambient heat of the footpath in summer by several degrees, making it a much more pleasant place to walk, shop or sit. As well as being visually appealing, they can also help provide a buffer between the footpath and passing traffic.

Make streets easier to cross

Great streets need to be easy to cross, with lots of access points. They should have plenty of formal pedestrian crossings, spaced fairly close together so people don't have to walk far to a crossing. Stop signs are a great tool to platoon traffic and create more casual crossing opportunities. Roundabouts and slip lanes should be eliminated. Fences should be removed. If signalised crossings are required, they should be programmed to favour those on foot.

Reduce the clearways

Clearways, which place fast-moving traffic right next to people, should be removed or scaled back. In some cases, the clearways are dedicated bus ways or at least include buses as part of the traffic mix, so there is certainly an argument in favour of them. On the other hand, clearways and bus lanes immediately adjacent to the footpath can be extremely intimidating for people and take the joy out of being on the street. They should be a last resort and implemented only very rarely on high streets.

Design new buildings to support the high street

Design controls for new buildings on high streets should require the basic elements of tall ground floor heights and ground floor retail that we know from the traditional pattern, while prohibiting driveways, blank walls, utility boxes or fire hydrant cabinets. Planning controls should ensure there is a fine grain of new shops with visual transparency to the footpath to offer people visual interest and vitality.

From old to new high streets

Most of the high streets in Sydney were built before the widespread uptake of the motor car. These pre-war streets are designed to be pedestrian friendly. Before cars were around, they had to be. Mostly, they were the only retail option for their local neighbourhood, so they had lots of small shops to provide consumers with more choice and to cater for a diversity of needs and wants. They had wide footpaths and had awnings which provided both shade and shelter to the passer-by.

Often these streets had civic uses as well: home to libraries, town halls, and plazas.

The high street was the product of thousands of years of city-building: an urban pattern based on access-by-proximity rather than access-by-mobility, a support to sociability, a platform for thousands of small business owners to connect with customers, a source of neighbourhood pride and identity.

In Sydney, these main streets emerged in every neighbourhood and suburb. Often centred along tram tracks and train stations these small retail strips provided goods and services for the local population's day-to-day needs — chemists and bakers, grocers and butchers, bars and restaurants. The shops were small with the proprietor often living above. For those less frequent purchases and services, people made the trip into the CBD with its large department stores — Mark Foy's, Hordern's, David Jones, and Grace Brothers.

After World War II, the next era of city building forgot these lessons. The newer parts of Sydney, especially in Western Sydney, like most cities across Australia and North America, were planned on the assumption that people would drive to do their shopping, often in a large suburban mall. Newly built neighbourhoods were no longer walkable and there was nothing to walk to, in any case.

We believe that this was a mistake.

In order for Sydney to become a more liveable place, and to deliver the 30-minute city to every resident of our city, we believe that all residents of Sydney should be able to walk to a local shopping street. It is not a coincidence that many (although by no means all) of the good examples of high streets in Sydney are in the East and North. If we aspire to a 'fair' city, we must strive to ensure that every community in Sydney has a great high street. Not all of them will be as grand or extensive as the pre-war versions. But as a planning goal, we think that Sydney should be working to develop new high streets to bring this urban amenity to everyone while not losing the essential character and history of the local areas. It just makes life so much better, so much more convenient, so much more fun, when you can walk to a great local shopping street.

For greenfield developments, the standard is clear: does the plan include a shopping street, and does it include the conditions that will support the high street to be successful — a sufficient number of customers within walking distance, and a street network that makes walking comfortable?

New shopping streets should generally copy the key elements of the historic shopping streets: buildings that meet the street; narrow widths for shopfronts to create a diversity of options and enable small businesses to pay the rent; a tall floor to ceiling height on the ground floor; a visually interesting streetscape.

Rouse Hill is an example of how to create a town centre in a new development. A decade of planning led by Landcom, GPT and the NSW Department of Planning combined good urban design with high density urban development to create a new neighbourhood in Sydney's north west. Most importantly, effort was put in to developing a traditional high street as the focus of the town centre, rather than a standard mall. The result was Main Street. This treelined shopping strip has wide footpaths, small parks, and plenty of seating. The buildings present a 'fine grain' of shops and restaurants to the street. Traffic has been slowed providing plenty of opportunities to for people on foot to cross safely and easily.

Councils should require these basic moves to be present in new large-scale developments. If the density is not sufficient to support a shopping street, then the density of the proposal might be wrong.

The older post-war suburbs that lack high streets present a more difficult problem because they were already built without the key ingredients of great neighbourhoods. In many cases the densities are simply too low to support local shopping based on foot traffic. There may be no land available for a new retail strip. And even if land is available, there may not be a retail developer willing or able to develop a new shopping district in these locations. For all of these reasons it is exceedingly difficult to retrofit a high street into a place that was built without one. The most hopeful cases are those where there is a catalytic site to start with: a train station that can support new retail immediately adjacent to it, or an old shopping centre that can be retrofitted.

Economic development efforts like marketing, support for business improvement districts, façade improvement programs, and event programming can be helpful to jump-start the revival of high streets, although we believe in most cases healthy high streets tend to be self-sustaining from their own magnetic pull when the right conditions are in place. This issue was explored in detail in our [Rebalancing the City: Town Centre Renewal](#) report of 2018.

This paper is about how to support and revive historic high streets, which is much easier than making them exist in places that don't already have them. But new high streets are important too.

We don't have a crystal ball about how this historic pattern will evolve in the future. Bricks and mortar retail is likely to shrink in many places as home delivery grows. But we continue to believe that the essential function of a high street is social: people are still going to want to congregate to be with each other, to strut and sit, to eat and drink — and most likely to buy some things too. High streets will have to be reinvented over and over as society changes.

8.

The pathway to action

If we are going to reclaim Sydney's high streets, we are going to have to change our existing planning tools and policies. In many cases we are going to need new tools in our kit and in some cases new governance models.

A. Map the high streets

The argument in this paper has been that we focus public space efforts on neighbourhood high streets, acknowledging that many other parts of Greater Sydney will continue to prioritise traffic throughput. But on the high streets, the priorities should be different. On these streets, policy makers should not defer to traffic engineers but should instead bring together multi-disciplinary teams to work through the trade-offs. We suggest that one of the first steps is to map the high streets. These are either a) places that *currently* have high pedestrian volumes and retail land uses; or b) places that *could have* high pedestrian volumes and retail if they were revived.

The map of high streets allows us to then develop a distinct set of tools and processes for them, pulling them out of the traditional traffic engineering-dominated system.

We propose that this become a major task of the Place, Design and Public Space group within NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE), working closely with Transport for NSW (TfNSW), drawing on a combination of objective criteria and nominations from local councils.

Lead agency: Place, Design and Public Space group and TfNSW with support from local councils.

B. Adopt people-first engineering standards for the high streets

Once the high streets have been mapped, the next step is to apply a different set of design standards. The standard road guidelines from traffic engineers are generating the kinds of streets that are being built today, with all their devastating impacts on liveability. But most other cities we compare ourselves to are using new guidelines. Drawing on the NACTO guidelines in the US and the Manual for Streets and Manual for Streets 2 in the UK, the "kit of parts" for high streets in Sydney should address issues such as:

- maximum traffic speeds
- width of foot paths
- lane widths
- intersection design and turning radius
- signal timing
- distance between crosswalks
- preferred speed control devices
- treatment of bicycles
- street furniture guidelines.

These and other design standards provide the toolkit for the street transformations that Sydney needs to undertake. In the absence of national guidelines like the US or UK have, NSW should adopt its own set of sustainable streets engineering standards to use in places where there is a desire to create a good pedestrian environment.

Lead agency: Joint project of DPIE and TfNSW, with input from local councils.

C. Fund a Healthy Streets program

London spends £460 million per year (as of this writing) converting streets to improve conditions for walking and cycling.¹ If Sydney were to spend an equivalent amount per person, that would be AUD \$512 million per year to invest in making Sydney's streets more walkable and bikeable.² Of course, not all of that would be spent on high streets, but we have argued that high streets are a logical place to prioritise because the massive benefits to quality of life.

We propose that the NSW Government should establish a fund to undertake planning, design, and public works capital investments for healthy streets transformations. This money would be used to reclaim high streets, physically separated bike paths, and other improvements to streets in support of pedestrian and bicycle safety. After the funds are dispersed, we would hope that a new fund would be recapitalised. If councils also contribute matching funds to certain projects, more work would be completed. This fund may include the identification and consolidation of existing funding streams in TfNSW budgeted programs.

We suggest that DPIE would administer a competitive grant program. Local councils would apply for the funds and work closely with TfNSW and DPIE to undertake the street transformations (see below.) The Healthy Streets program³ is the essential, missing component of the NSW Government's growing commitment to public space.

Lead agency: Cabinet and Treasury to establish the program; fund administration by DPIE.

D. Develop a public realm plan for each of the high streets

Each high street needs its own plan. These will range from fast, temporary interventions to major redesigns.

We propose that local councils apply for grants from the Healthy Streets program (see above) to undertake the planning work, working closely with TfNSW.

Our proposal assumes good will and a changed culture at TfNSW that embraces the move toward healthy streets. If this proves to be unworkable, the NSW Government can rethink the allocation of responsibility for street design and management under the Roads Act.

Lead agency: local councils with support from DPIE and TfNSW.

E. Undertake the physical street transformations

Following the planning phase, the next step is to actually build out the street improvements. Again, we propose that DPIE administers a competitive capital grant program to carry out this work, supplemented by local councils. The lead agency for contracting purposes would probably be the local council, although in some cases it could make sense for TfNSW or another state department to be the "client" for the work.

Lead agency: local councils, with support from DPIE and TfNSW.

F. Review clearways on public life street network

Clearways are detrimental to successful high streets – both because they make the traffic move too fast and because they remove the buffer between pedestrians and moving vehicles. On the other hand, in some cases the clearways facilitate bus movement during peak commute hours.

What we recommend is that clearways be used as a last resort, and only for as limited a time as possible. There are much more sophisticated traffic network solutions available, which hold traffic away from high streets, and then give buses and emergency vehicles priority to get around traffic – thus enabling reasonable movement of mass transport and emergency vehicles without resorting to clearways. Using technology to enable signal prioritisation for buses and emergency vehicles can be part of a rethinking of the street designs. In some cases, it will make sense to design a street for buses and emergency vehicles only, but not private cars and trucks. In other cases, it could make sense to adjust bus routes.

This will be a complex undertaking, but one that is essential to supporting successful Sydney high streets.

Lead agency: TfNSW, with input from local councils.

¹ Transport for London Business Plan 2019/20 to 2023/24, page 19

<http://content.tfl.gov.uk/tfl-business-plan-2019-24.pdf>

² This figure was calculated by comparing the investment in Greater London per capita and then converted in Australian Dollars and multiplied by the population of Greater Sydney.

³ healthystreets.com/

G. Change the performance metrics

Our current system for measuring how well a street works is almost always focussed on how well vehicles can move along them, not how they function as a place. Level of Service (LOS) measurements essentially count seconds of delay for traffic. Other functions, like the economic and social vibrancy of the place, are missed. Under the LOS metric, King Street Newtown on a Saturday (when it does not have clearways) is one of the worst streets in Sydney, but under any other metric it is one of the best. What gets measured gets done. If our only metric is the speed and number of cars, then that becomes our priority.

Cities all over the world have changed their performance metrics on streets to:

- increased people counts
- increased retail turnover
- decreased vacancy rates
- reduced traffic volumes and speeds
- decreased level of noise
- decreased pedestrian deaths and injuries
- improved air quality.

The LOS metric might still be a useful piece of information for highway management, but we need different metrics when it comes to our main streets. This involves goal setting at the highest level. Transport for NSW and the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment should jointly commission a body of work to develop performance metrics that replace LOS.

Lead agency: TfNSW and DPIE.

H. Remove infrastructure that clutters high streets

Local councils need to undertake a major coordination effort with state and federal Government to remove infrastructure from footpaths and prevent further clutter on the high streets. The Commonwealth needs to ensure that services add value to the street, including reducing the reliance on public space to host services like NBN nodes and 5G boxes that could be placed underground or elsewhere. The State Government needs to ensure its services — power poles, road signage, bus stops, and the like — balance community benefit without crowding out pedestrians. Without careful coordination, our high streets are at risk with being overwhelmed by well-meaning Governments and their agencies.

A better system would require utility providers to work with councils to coordinate the delivery and location of infrastructure. This could be achieved through legislative amendments to the *Gas Supply Act 1996* (NSW), the *Sydney Water Act 1994* (NSW), the *Electricity Supply Act 1995* (NSW), the *Transport Administration Act 1988* (NSW) and the *Telecommunications Act 1997* (Cth). These amendments would require a network operator to work with councils with respect to the location of any infrastructure so that any cluttering on the footpaths may be avoided. This may mean that utilities are placed underground or co-located with other services. Here 'smart poles,' multi-purpose street furniture, and shared service ducts could help. In other cases, agencies need to question whether the services they are wanting to provide can be placed outside the high street altogether, or whether they are necessary at all.

Lead agency: Minister for Energy, Minister for Water, Minister for Transport and Roads, and Federal Minister for Communications, supported by local councils.



I. Experiment with pilot projects

In some cases, the best way to change the way a street works will be to test interventions through temporary pilot projects. This was famously how New York City began the process of pedestrianising Times Square: the first move was temporary planters and a coat of paint. Cities all over the world have converted single parking spaces at the side of the road called “parklets” - small art installations, mini parks, and café seating that occupy parking spaces next to the kerb. Bike lanes, bus lanes, footpath widenings, and many other changes can be trialled on a temporary basis. Lessons from the trial can then be converted into permanent changes.

In order to support a culture of experimentation, a “light and quick” permitting regime needs to be established that allows these tests to be quickly rolled out and revised.

The Place, Design and Public Space group should establish a program for “tactical urbanism” – temporary activation and experimentation, making grants based on merit. Local councils would be the most likely applicants, but it could be other state agencies or even community groups.

Again, we assume goodwill on the part of TfNSW to enable a culture of experimentation and pilot projects, rather than stifling them through an impossible permitting process.

Lead agency: Local councils and community groups, with support of TfNSW and funding administered by the Place Design and Public Space Group.

J. Put in place design controls for new development on high streets

Wherever there is a successful shopping street — or wherever the intention is to create one — the design controls for new buildings need to ensure that they contribute to the pattern. Key controls include:

- meet the street without a setback
- present retail on the ground floor, also noting that basements with separate access make great bars and night clubs
- make buildings transparent with doors and clear glass, not solid blank walls or black glass
- provide extra tall floor-to-ceiling heights on the ground floor
- hide utility boxes and fire hydrant cabinets
- prohibit kerb cuts
- avoid wide driveways, openings and ramps to basements.

Lead agency: local councils and DPIE.

The broader mobility transformation

Sydney is in the early stages of a bigger transformation in the way people get around. This paper has focussed on just a small part, which is the opportunity of high streets because the benefits to small businesses and neighbourhood quality of life are so overwhelming. But some of the other changes Sydney is undertaking will also be helpful and ultimately change the way streets work.

Broadly, Sydney is converging from a city that tries to accommodate everyone in a car to a city that tries to make it easy to walk, cycle, and take public transport. There will still be lots of driving, but over time, as people get better options for more trips, many people will choose other options. Driving may be more for people that really need a car: tradespeople, deliveries, getting out of town, and people with mobility impairments.

We propose there are four basic moves to the transformation:

1. Build a world class network of trunk transport lines. The growing network of heavy rail, metro, light rail, ferry, and rapid bus lines forms the backbone public transport network. This is what people use to cover distance. As Sydney builds out more of the network the goal is to move toward an interconnected grid of lines that allows a person to go from anywhere to anywhere – like what you see in mature transit cities like London or Tokyo.
2. Enable universal micro-mobility to connect people to trunk transport lines. People will get to/from the backbone public transport stations in all kinds of different ways: primarily walking and cycling, but over time supplemented by new technologies – Ubers, electric scooters, on-demand shuttles, and other modes that haven't been invented yet.
3. Accommodate cars and trucks gracefully. Over time we expect that personal car use will shift from people owning cars to people relying on shared fleets and paying for rides when they need them. As this happens, Sydney is going to be able to convert on-street parking to other purposes – wider footpaths, pick up/drop off zones, and lots of other useful things. We expect there will still be plenty of cars and trucks because they are so useful, but they will dominate city life much less because people will have better options in many cases.

4. Reclaim streets for public life. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, all of changes in mobility translate into a giant improvement in urban liveability. Many streets can become highly inviting places to walk, even while continuing to play an important mobility function.

We know from decades of experience in cities all over the world that when space is shifted away from car traffic, the transport system manages just fine through thousands, maybe millions, of micro-adjustments. Some people change the time of day they leave or take a different route. Some people decide to ride the bus. Some trips “disappear” as they are combined with a different trip later in the week. In the longer term some people make different choices about which houses they live in or which jobs they take. We have a lot more freedom of action to reclaim the streets for public life than is commonly assumed.

We have chosen to start with high streets for the simple reason that we think they offer the quickest, most impactful way to make Sydney more liveable. Giving everyone the opportunity to walk to a local shopping street is something that will bring social, environmental, aesthetic, and economic benefits immediately.

While some of the broader mobility changes will take time, and can only be implemented very gradually, we can reclaim high streets today. There are thousands of other streets that can continue to carry the load of vehicle traffic, while over time, as new metro lines open, some trips can shift to public transport, walking, and cycling.

What do all these changes add up to?

Our vision of the bigger mobility transformation:

- Every person in Sydney has access to high quality, high speed public transport – primarily trains, supplemented by rapid buses and ferries.
- Every person will be connected to a neighbourhood town centre where they can access services and enjoy public life.
- Every person can cycle safely wherever they want.
- People will have more than one option for most trips, so choice will increase.
- Trips that still require a car will be easier because there are far fewer people competing for existing space.

9.

Conclusion: Streets are the most important public space resource in Sydney

In Sydney, like most cities, the area in streets is larger than the area in parks. Most streets need to provide a balance of both movement and place. We argue that on the high streets, the values of place should come first.

Reclaiming Sydney's high streets will require the collective efforts of all levels of government, the private sector and the local community. This paper has set out the case for change, the key success factors and the tools that governments and communities can use to improve their local high streets.

One of the great pleasures of city life is the ability to walk to the local shopping street for a cup of coffee, a visit to the library, to meet friends, or to window shop. If we are lucky enough to have a wide variety of shops so that we can meet most of our basic needs by walking, then life is good.

This experience is not available to vast swathes of Sydney's population. We believe life should be good in this way for everyone who lives in Sydney: we should provide everyone the ability to walk to their neighbourhood town centre. Sydney, like all pre-war cities, was originally built this way. In much of Sydney, it will be relatively easy to revive high streets. In other places, it will be harder: high streets will need to be brought back from the dead, or created from scratch. In both cases, it's worth doing this work.

Innovation Fund Partners

We would like to thank our Innovation Fund Partners for their support of this report and for their broader sponsorship of the Committee for Sydney's research.

Our Innovation Fund Partners are future focussed, and outcome driven. They are leaders of change. Their combined investment underpins our annual research and policy program and together with our members, enables us to grow our impact and output – striving to create a better Sydney that offers unparalleled opportunity and quality of life for everyone.

We are proud to welcome our inaugural Innovation Fund Partners, Dexu, ICC Sydney and Western Sydney University.

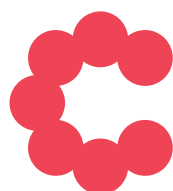
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