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Innovating through urban community

PLENARY 1: URBAN DEVELOPMENT: CITY, INDUSTRY AND PEOPLE

Author: Tom Bentley^{1,2}

¹ RMIT University

² Melbourne Innovation District, Melbourne Australia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Located in Australia's largest and fastest-growing city, the Melbourne Innovation District (MID) has used networked strategies—including collaborative design and civic engagement—to create a shared identity, attract investment and leverage existing strengths. This has been instrumental in cultivating a skilled workforce and growing innovation capability particularly in health systems, climate change, and future cities. More than 20% of Melbourne's knowledge sector jobs are clustered in this district.

The Melbourne City North approach includes creating a civic commons of shared public spaces, knowledge hubs and digital infrastructures to connect individuals, industries, and institutions through open collaboration.

Blending residential life, economic activity, and infrastructure in 21st-century cities creates affordability, congestion, and sustainability challenges. Success relies on adaptive urban ecosystems that promote inclusive growth, address housing needs, support local businesses, and ensure sustainable infrastructure while developing workforce skills alongside technological innovation.

MID's approach outlines a strategic plan for integrating people, industry and city, addressing lifelong workforce learning and innovation ecosystems together, while fostering stronger connections and collaborations with global cities and districts.

CONTEXT AND ORIGINS

Melbourne is the capital city of Victoria, located in south-eastern Australia. A diverse international city of more than five million, its high quality of living has attracted people from around the world with an economy powered by migration, real estate, healthcare, finance, and international education. Over the last century, Melbourne has experienced several waves of industrial restructuring, migration, and urban planning. The city's evolution since its 19th-century colonial foundation has created a compelling mix of factors contributing to its urban economy, social mix, and urban infrastructure—with a classic “grid” Central Business District (CBD) and widely distributed suburbs and local government areas.

The City North district area co-locates major institutions and amenities, including the University of Melbourne, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Queen Victoria Market, Royal Melbourne Hospital, Melbourne Museum, Trades Hall, Melbourne City Baths, and the Parkville Biomedical Precinct, a global cluster of life science research.

These institutional assets and spaces are now surrounded by high-rise residential development and a bustling city economy in what has become the most densely populated square kilometer in Australia. Tens of thousands of students, knowledge workers, and enterprises connect the district to the city region and the world.

Over the last thirty years, the two major universities in the district have grown student numbers and campus sites, while at the same time, major hospitals and biomedical research activities have grown up on adjacent precincts in the same shared district. Since 2017, the two universities have collaborated with the City of Melbourne to develop the Melbourne Innovation District (MID) partnership, developing a common approach to innovation opportunities in a district where many activities and occupants have co-existed without formal governance or connection for centuries.

NEW SOCIETAL CHALLENGES REQUIRE INNOVATION EXCELLENCE

In Australia, as all around the world, drivers of transformative change in demographic, environmental, science, technology and social organisation create complex new societal needs and adaptive challenges. Scientific knowledge and deep technology innovation are needed to respond successfully and to create inclusive, sustainable economic development, primarily in cities, while simultaneously supporting a secure, resilient, inclusive international environment.

As universities attracted increasing numbers of international students and research-driven innovation became central to Melbourne's economy, knowledge-intensive industries—such as finance, media, law, and health—also intensified their demand for skilled talent, innovation capabilities, and purpose-built urban environments. Recognising this opportunity, MID's partners are working to shape the city's future for the common good, strengthening partnerships and shared platforms to sustain innovation amid evolving economic and social conditions.

Universities and scientific research institutes play a vital role but are increasingly intertwined with other actors, including industry, employers, and nonprofit institutions, through ‘innovation ecosystems’. Developing a strategic innovation agenda that can address these cross-cutting challenges and help develop new scalable solutions, such as energy transition, data security, housing, and social and aged care, is vital as the Asia Pacific region and its economies transform. In addition to education and research, universities are increasingly involved in growing entrepreneurship and civic or city- shaping partnerships to address these wider challenges and contribute to systemic solutions. MID illustrates the transformative impact of strategic urban design on innovation. By fostering collaboration among the three anchor institutions, the district has

established a visible presence, built shared intent, and connected diverse activities and spaces through public dialogue and programming.

This approach has cultivated networks, generated shared opportunities, and set the stage for structured, scalable collaboration. This unique combination—a ‘district of precincts’ that would never all be planned alongside each other today—holds enormous potential to generate innovation with economic, social, and public value.

Innovation spaces significantly contribute to economic and societal development. These urban environments effectively integrate academic institutions, industries, and communities to establish dynamic ecosystems that foster economic growth, knowledge transfer, and social innovation. Initially led by three anchor institutions, MID is a vehicle to ‘join up’ the governance, planning and strategic pursuit of innovation and development, including with different levels of government and with international partners and investors.

This includes fostering shared local connections, engaging residents and workers in neighbourhood culture, and prioritising social innovation and community needs while pursuing ambitious responses to industry transformation, climate change and a changing international context. The emergent agenda enhances Melbourne’s capacity for applied innovation amidst fast-changing economic, policy and social landscapes. Beyond its local impact, MID connects to a global network of cities and regions pursuing innovation-led growth. This program promotes a cross-sector, systems-based approach to scaling innovation ecosystems, working to bring together public policy frameworks, entrepreneurial institutions, and private-sector engagement.

MID actively leverages student, creative, and academic project networks, engaging in cross-institutional studio collaborations to envision future possibilities. By integrating public design, science, art, and technology, these initiatives foster new ideas for urban transformation.

URBAN TRANSFORMATION

By 2050, Melbourne’s population is set to reach 8 million, generating an additional 10.4 million daily trips. The City North district will be one of Australia’s most densely populated areas, with tens of thousands of people passing through each day.

To sustain Melbourne’s status as the world’s most livable city, density by design will shape its future—developing transit-oriented, walkable communities linked by high-quality transport. A permanent urban growth boundary, a key component of Melbourne’s sustainable development strategy, will drive high-density development, ensuring new housing and mixed-use spaces are concentrated in renewal precincts across the city, thereby preserving green spaces and promoting a more sustainable urban environment.



Image: Current view of the City North Social Innovation Precinct

By co-locating jobs, housing, public spaces, and activity hubs, Melbourne aims to foster connectivity, innovation, and urban vibrancy. Major transport infrastructure projects, including the Metro Tunnel, will expand rail and road capacity, enhancing mobility, reducing congestion, and lowering emissions. The Metro Tunnel, a major cross-city rail link, will run directly through City North, with new stations near RMIT University, the State Library, and the University of Melbourne, significantly improving accessibility and opening up new opportunities for innovation, international connection, employment and enterprise.



Image: Artist's impression of the future City North Social Innovation Precinct

MODELS FOR SUCCESS

The key to building a thriving district lies in crafting dynamic urban ecosystems that not only meet housing demands but also empower local businesses, drive sustainable green infrastructure, and promote inclusive growth. By combining deep technology innovation with workforce development, we aim to ensure that people are equipped with the skills to thrive in an evolving economy, making the city both resilient and future ready.

The MID area contains a wide range of specific precincts and facilities, which are led by specific partners and focused on different specialised opportunities. For example, Melbourne Connect, developed by the University of Melbourne, is a pioneering innovation precinct designed to foster collaboration between researchers, industry leaders, entrepreneurs, and the broader community. It serves as a hub for developing data-driven and socially responsible solutions that integrate people, places, and technology to drive meaningful impact.

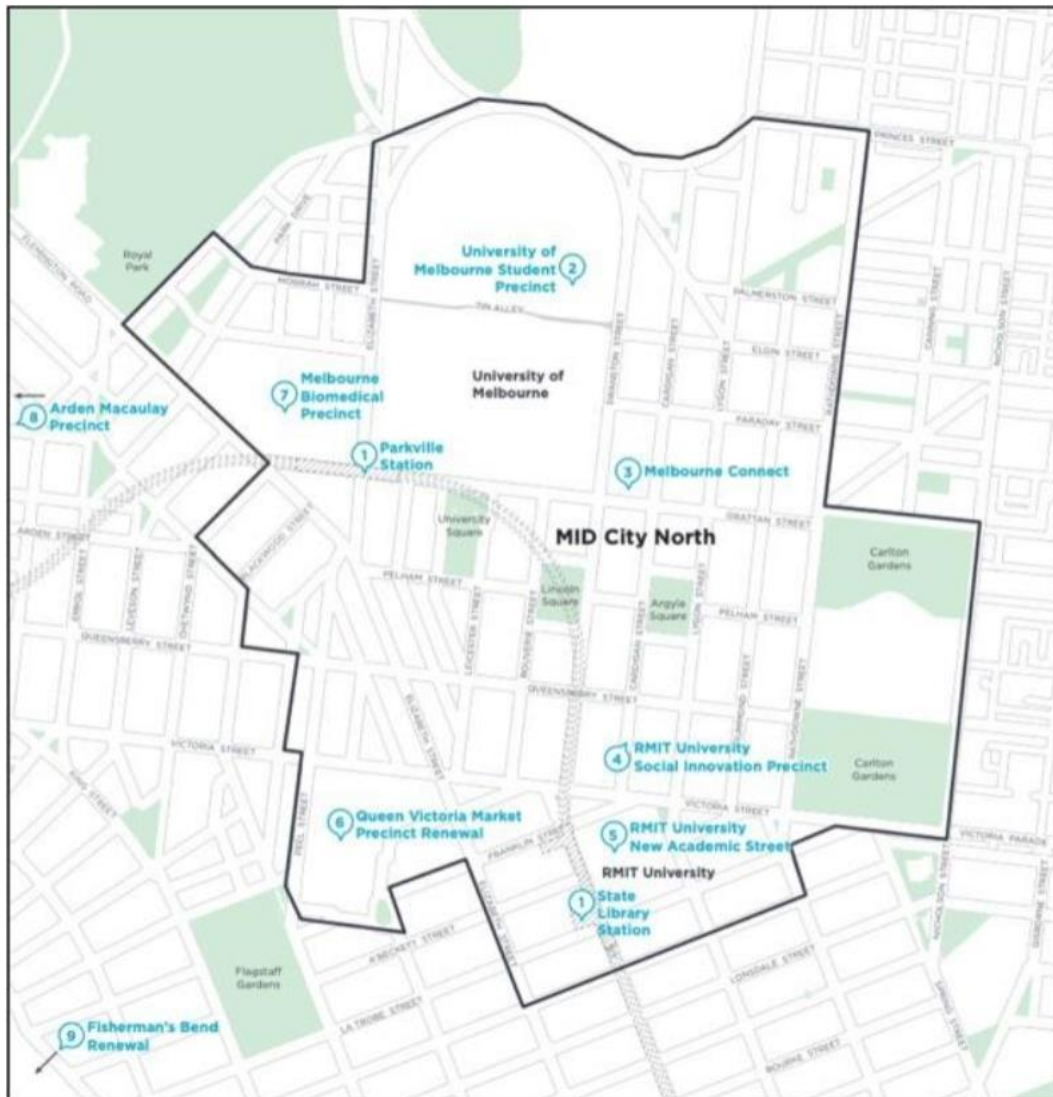


Image: Map of the Melbourne Innovation District (MID)

Situated within the MID area, on the site of a former public women's hospital, Melbourne Connect contributes to a dynamic ecosystem where leading institutions and interdisciplinary organisations can connect.

A commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration is at the core of Melbourne Connect's mission. By bridging traditional disciplinary boundaries, it enables researchers and industry stakeholders to engage in innovative problem-solving, fostering a culture of knowledge exchange and technological advancement. Melbourne Connect continues to drive progress in digital innovation through this integrated approach, shaping the future of research, industry, and society.

Another specific development, the RMIT City North Social Innovation Precinct, is a city block where tens of thousands of skilled workers are already trained for occupations critical to Melbourne's future economy and where people, industry, and the city converge to drive meaningful social and economic impact.

The precinct's evolution is focused on skills-led urban renewal; it fosters collaboration between researchers, industry leaders, and communities to develop solutions that address workforce challenges and societal needs. Strategically positioned within Melbourne's growing innovation ecosystem, the precinct builds on RMIT's strengths by integrating expertise, emerging technologies,

and cross-sector partnerships. As a key component of the wider district strategy for MID, it connects social innovation teams with industry hubs, bridging academic research with concrete application. By working to embed learning and innovation within the urban fabric, it ensures that knowledge is not confined to institutions but actively contributes to city-wide transformation.

The precinct also promotes regenerative cities through civic partnerships, such as with the UN Compact, local social enterprises, and nonprofit networks, co-creating thriving urban environments. A dedicated precinct research cluster works on progressive placemaking, integrating infrastructure with open and green spaces to foster sustainable communities.

The vision for the social innovation precinct is to equip tens of thousands of professionals over the next two decades with essential skills in digital technology, mental health, engineering and healthcare. Through industry-aligned programs and global connections, it reinforces Melbourne's reputation as a leader in innovation and talent development.

Already, flagship initiatives such as the Social Innovation Hub, Activator, Health Transformation Lab, and Workforce Innovation and Development Institute (WIDI) are fostering collaboration between students, businesses, and policymakers. By integrating people, industry, and the city while championing sustainability, the precinct is not just shaping the future of work—it is redefining how urban spaces drive social, environmental, and economic progress.



Image: Artist's impression of the future City North Social Innovation Precinct

CONCLUSION

As cities around the world strive to build innovation-driven economies and adapt rapidly to disruptive and transformational change, the Melbourne Innovation District (MID) offers a scalable example of one approach to effectively integrating people, industry, and urban infrastructure through a shared strategy to grow and connect a dynamic ecosystem that matures beyond siloed institutional boundaries.

Through strategic collaboration among universities, businesses, community organisations, and government, MID demonstrates how shared governance and forward-thinking urban planning can drive innovation, sustainability, and inclusive economic resilience.

By leveraging cutting-edge research, civic partnerships, and the collective strength of the community, MID is pioneering a new approach to urban renewal and participating in the growing range of working models for innovation districts and science clusters—one that is inclusive, globally connected, and deeply rooted in the city's evolving identity.

Increasingly, MID is also forging strong ties with leading innovation districts around the world, including 22@ Barcelona and White City in London. These partnerships facilitate cross-border collaboration and knowledge exchange, enhancing the global innovation ecosystem and reinforcing MID's prominent role in this evolving landscape.