THE (RE)MAKING OF A CITY CENTRE: JAN GEHL AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MELBOURNE CBD

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Abstract. Jan Gehl, an eminent Danish Architect and Urban Designer, has worked in more than forty cities around the world and contributed to revitalising their city centres. Although his work in Australia has drawn considerable attention in recent years, not much is known about his early and exemplary work on revitalising the city centre in Melbourne. This paper explores Gehl's urban design work in Melbourne by examining his engagement with the City of Melbourne after being invited to lead the 'Places for People' initiative in 1993. Gehl's main contributions during his collaboration with the council include developing the methodology for the Public Space Public Life surveys and co-authoring of the Places for People study reports. Gehl made several key recommendations in the reports that turned out to be instrumental in formulating urban design approaches to help transform the Melbourne CBD into a vibrant city centre. This transformation, which led to the revival of the public realm, is evident in several significant changes made to some major public spaces between 1994 and 2004 and beyond. This paper contributes to the urban design discipline by adding new knowledge of Gehl's work in Melbourne and widening its recognition in Australia and internationally.

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1. Introduction

Modern cities have undergone radical transformation in the post-war era, typically characterised by the decline of the public realm in the city centres (Tibbalds, 2001). Scholars argue that public space has been treated as a residual space in modern cities, and received the lowest priority in the urban development process (Madanipour, 1999; Trancik, 1986). Since there is a strong connection between the loss of public space and sociability, the changing nature of the public realm in the city centres has had a profound influence on the way people interact and socialise in modern cities, resulting in an "increasingly individualistic and inwardly focused society" (Orum & Neal, 2009, p. 202).

The decline of the public realm in the city centres has arisen from a range of problems with modernist urban space design. First, city centres have been highly impacted by the increasing presence of automobiles. Gehl and Gemzøe (2001), in their book *New City Spaces*, refer to this phenomenon as an invasion of cities and their public space made possible by the growing use of automobiles (Gehl & Gemzøe, 2001). They argue that public space has changed dramatically in the 'invaded spaces' of modern cities, with traffic and parking gradually displacing the pedestrian space in streets and squares. While the invaded spaces are not intended for walking, footpaths have disappeared in the city centres and all the uses of the city have gradually been adapted to serve the motorist (Gehl & Gemzøe, 2001).

Secondly, the modernist approach to urban space design has been instrumental in the development of city spaces that are devoid of both quality and character. In his classic text *Finding Lost Space: Theories of Urban Design*, Roger Trancik uses the term 'lost space' to charaterise the vast array of modernist urban spaces that have no character, and are 'antispaces' with no positive contribution to the surrounds or users (Trancik, 1986). Some examples of lost spaces include "the leftover unstructured landscape at the base of high-rise towers or the unused sunken plazas away from the flow of pedestrian activity in the city centres or the surface parking lots or abandoned waterfronts" (Trancik, 1986, p. 3). Many critics of modernist urban space design argue that city centres cannot be transformed into vibrant urban spaces unless such antispaces are reconsidered and redesigned.

Good urban design can mitigate the problem of the decline of the public realm in the city centres. Urban design has a scope to transform city centres into bustling activity nodes by considering how people use such urban spaces and interact socially. Evidence suggests that the

'human dimension' has been a growing focus of urban design interventions in recent decades as architects, urban designers and planners strive to create a more people-friendly urban environment by bringing public life back into the city centres (Ridings & Chitrakar, 2021). Jan Gehl, an eminent Danish Architect and Urban Designer, has been at the forefront of this transformation for the last several decades. Gehl has worked in more than forty cities around the world and made a remarkable contribution to the urban design discipline by revitalising city centres. While his work primarily focuses on how people use urban public spaces, his theory of urban design and placemaking has emerged as "a reaction to how [modern] cities have been designed for vehicular movement and function, rather than for people who are inherently pedestrians, especially in city centres" (Matan & Newman, 2016, p. 1).

Over the last few decades, Gehl's work has received significant recognition and his achievements have been acknowledged internationally. This is evident from a number of published works and wider media coverage. For instance, Annie Matan and Peter Newman published a book on Gehl in 2016 with the title *People cities: The life and legacy of Jan Gehl* (Matan & Newman, 2016). Back in 2011, Annie Matan also wrote a PhD thesis on Gehl at Curtin University (Matan, 2011). These two resources represent a comprehensive documentation of Gehl's Australian and international work for the entirety of his professional career. With a large volume of academic works published to highlight several aspects of his urban design work and approaches (Hayter, 2006; McNeill, 2011), Gehl has remained as one of the most distinguished and cited authors in scholarly research related to urban design, public space and placemaking. Planetizen, a planning related news website based in Los Angeles, California, has recognised Gehl as the second most 'influential urbanist' of the last century after Jane Jacobs in 2023 (Planetizen, 2023).

Gehl's work in Australia has drawn considerable attention in recent years, particularly, in the local media and, to some extent, in the academic sphere. Although Gehl later also worked for other major Australian cities, his work in Melbourne is significant for setting an early example of the successful transformation of the city centre by revitalising its public life and making the 'urban renaissance' possible (Hayter, 2006). Yet, not much is known about his engagement with the City of Melbourne, the local council responsible for managing inner Melbourne, including the Central Business District (CBD). This paper explores Gehl's urban design work in Melbourne by examining his engagement with the City of Melbourne and the contribution he has made in transforming the Melbourne CBD into a vibrant city centre. The paper highlights the changes with the public spaces in the CBD, particularly, between 1994 and 2004 that has brought public life back into the city centre. In addition to exploring his expertise and professional collaboration with the City of Melbourne, the paper also discusses Gehl's theories and principles of public space design and placemaking.

2. Regeneration of city centres

Since the development of early cities, city or town centres have evolved as the main activity hub of a city. City centres serve as a venue for a range of socio-economic functions with the concentration of major civic buildings and public open spaces, and are usually characterised by intense human activities and social exchanges (Ge et al., 2023). Apart from being a platform for public interaction, the significance of the city centres is also highlighted by its role in the cultural, religious, economic and environmental performance, and success of a city (Elnokaly & Elseragy, 2011).

Most city centres around the globe were thriving until the 19th century, prior to the onset of large-scale industrialisation and urbanisation. However, due to the rapid urban growth and unprecedented population densities brought about by the large concentration of the rural population into cities, the city centres of industrial cities witnessed a decline and degeneration. Such cities were often perceived to have become the places of crime, disease and poverty, facing a host of social and environmental problems (Carmona et al., 2010). While scholars and planners have sought to find remedies for such problems in the urban growth models such as, Garden Cities and the Neighbourhood Unit, this inevitably led people to move away from the city centres into the growing suburbs. Furthermore, the modernist approach to city planning in developing the city centres as the CBDs, following the logic of functional zoning, transformed the centres into deserted places with no public life and activity outside the office hours (Trancik, 1986). The city centre of a typical post-industrial city was characterised by hostile urban environments that failed to attract people; city spaces were dead and empty, and dominated only by automobiles with little or no room for pedestrians and people-centred activities.

However, there has been growing concerns about urban regeneration since the 1960s, following the criticism of orthodox urban planning approaches (Jacobs, 1961) and the resulting appalling state of the city centres (Bromley et al., 2005). This was the time when city planners first started to realise that the logic of functional zoning reduced the complexity and vitality of urban places, including city centres (Carmona et al., 2010). The concept of urban regeneration, thus, emerged as an approach to protecting historic areas and preserving the unique qualities of old city centres with a growing recognition of the cultural and historical attributes of traditional environments. Since that time, urban regeneration has been used as a catalyst for change to transform the nature and characteristics of urban spaces in the city centres (Elnokaly & Elseragy, 2011). Evidence suggests that not only regeneration of city centres can improve the socio-economic functions of the cities, but it has a potential to contribute to improved sustainability outcomes (Elnokaly & Elseragy, 2011; Bromley et al., 2005).

While the regeneration of city centres has been considered the panacea to the decline of the function of the modern cities over time, urban design and placemaking

principles have been increasingly used as an effective tool to revitalise urban spaces and achieve positive outcomes. As population numbers and density alter and technology advances, the needs and uses of the city also need to evolve and change to support the users – the people themselves. The renewal and adaptation of a city prevent stagnation and allow the urban fabric to stretch and flow by adapting to the changes with public spaces and bringing life and activity. Particular attention is necessary within the very centre, which should in turn gift the promotion of the city's identity and gracefully display, through its atmosphere, the city's essence (Carmona et al., 2010). Dull, inert cities do contain the seeds of their own destruction. On the other hand, lively, diverse and intensely used city centres contain the seeds of their own regeneration (Jacobs, 1961).

Jan Gehl emerged as a leading figure in the regeneration of city centres. Gehl has been a global influence on urban designers and is directly involved in a substantial number of urban design projects to revitalise city centres around the world. This, however, started with some exemplary initiatives in his hometown. Since the 1960s, Gehl's birthplace of Copenhagen has been the location for much of his urban regeneration work. His work has focused on accessibility for pedestrians and bicycle-friendly city to enhance public transport, walkability and liveability. The ethos of sustainable placemaking or, as it has come to be known – 'Copenhagenisation' could be Gehl's takeaway 'mantra' for urban regeneration (Island Press, 2012). Gehl's people-centric philosophy is evident throughout Copenhagen in the carless inner-city zone and bicycle-friendly infrastructure. Its main retail street, Strøget, has been pedestrianised for more than 60 years with wider pavements, regular seating, large proportion of visible sky, complexity of enclosure, layers of transparency and interest and frequent sight lines to allow ease of orientation, creating a pleasant inner-city environment for all (Ewing & Clemente, 2013).

3. Melbourne CBD in the recent past

Melbourne is one of the finest cities in the world. The city has been successful in earning the reputation as one of the most liveable cities. As reported in the Global Liveability Index (published annually by The Economist Intelligence Unit), Melbourne stayed at the top of the world's most liveable cities ranking for seven years in a row, from 2011 to 2017. This achievement can be attributed to the quality of urban life and the wide range of cultural experiences the city and its centre offer to the residents (Chitrakar et al., 2023). But not so long ago, the city centre of Melbourne used to be 'quite awful', as Gehl once said in an interview following his first visit in 1976 (Lucas, 2017). He further noted (Gehl, 2018):

> The city was indeed boring and suffered quite a bit from the double impact of Modernist planning and automobile invasion. Going to the city centre in the evening was not a great experience at all.

It was deserted. A few service people attended to the many high-rise office buildings, but otherwise it was a quiet scene (p. 21).

Professor Norman Day, a Melbourne-based architect, educator, and writer, made a similar comment about its city centre in an article published in 'The Age' in June 1978 (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005):

> Effective city planning has been almost unknown in Melbourne for at least 30 or 40 years. For the ordinary Melburnian that means our city has been progressively destroyed. It no longer contains the attraction and charm it once had...Our planners lack the courage to bring the city back to life (p. 4).

Until the recent past, Melbourne represented a typical example of a post-industrial city, which remained predominantly car-oriented and saw a significant rise in suburban living as residents and local businesses started to move from the city centre to the suburbs during the 1960s and 70s. The city thus even faced the risk of being a 'doughnut' city, with an empty core surrounded by rapidly growing suburban developments (Blomkamp & Lewis, 2019; Centre for Public Impact, 2019). Clearly, the city centre suffered a huge setback with a decline in population and economic activities resembling what Gehl dubbed as "an indifferent collection of offices and high-rises, lifeless and useless" (Gehl, 2010, p. 15). By 1980, the Melbourne city centre appeared to have grown unplanned and transformed to the extent that it had become inhospitable as the city council took the laissez-faire approach and failed to effectively regulate new urban development in the interest of the public and their use of the city spaces (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005, p. 4). Consequently, the city had literally lost the 'buzz' it once had of the 'Marvellous Melbourne' of the late 19th century (Dovey & Jones, 2018). The state government and the Melbourne City Council were increasingly concerned about the changes Melbourne has gone through and their detrimental impact on the quality of urban spaces and public life in its city centre (Centre for Public Impact, 2019). This persuaded the council officials and the urban design team to take appropriate actions and develop intervention measures towards the transformation of the Melbourne CBD.

4. The transformation of Melbourne CBD

Melbourne began to change positively in the 1990s. The CBD started to demonstrate a gradual improvement in the quality of city spaces with signs of public life returning, following the implementation of the urban design plans and policies prepared for revitalising the city centre by the City of Melbourne in cooperation with Jan Gehl. Although the transformation of the Melbourne CBD commenced with initiatives such as City Square in the 1960s, and from the 1970s, with the Bourke Street Mall, these were only some of the first cautious steps towards the regeneration of city centre in Melbourne. But they were taken to a much

higher level by the council's Urban Designer Director Rob Adams and his team in the early 1980s, assisted about a decade later by Gehl. Adams has worked with the council for more than forty years, initially as a consultant and later in a full-time role since 1986, and has successfully led Melbourne city's urban regeneration efforts. Adams and his team wrote the 'City of Melbourne Strategy Plan' in 1985, aiming at bringing people back into the CBD and creating a 24-hour city (Lucas, 2017). The 1985 Strategy Plan was developed as "an intervention to rehabilitate and stimulate the city [centre] following more than a decade of policy neglect" (Blomkamp & Lewis, 2019, p. 187). The team had set clear goals to be achieved and the actions to be taken in the plan to tackle the problem of the decline of the public realm. This document established the foundation for the urban regeneration endeavours to be undertaken for the next two decades (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005).

While Adams was determined to the successful implementation of the 1985 Strategy Plan, he was also looking for someone with significant expertise and international experience in the regeneration of city centres to be part of the team and work as a 'mentor'. Gehl was chosen for this role. Adams said in an interview (Lucas, 2017):

> Usually you get international consultants in for a one-off competition. Like, 'Come and design Federation Square' or something like that. Jan was the first person we said we wanted as a coach: in your own city it helps to come from the outside and tell you what they had done in other cities.

4.1. Gehl's engagement and contribution

On February 9, 2017, a Melbourne-based daily newspaper 'The Age' published a brief report with a title 'From quite awful to liveable: Urban design guru helps transform Melbourne city' to cover the news about the newly published book on Gehl's life and works (Lucas, 2017). The report portrayed Gehl as a 'guru' – an expert in the field – who is internationally renowned for his work in many world cities, including Melbourne, in revitalising city centres. Gehl had established himself as a leading figure in the discipline and become a very well-known for his studies on public space and life by the 1990s (Hayter, 2006), with an outstanding track record in successfully revitalising city centres in many European cities. Gehl popularised the idea of people-centred city design through his work and also demonstrated the benefits its offers to the public (Pepper, 2017). He wrote a very popular book *Life Between Buildings* in 1971 and has made a unique theoretical and methodological contribution to the understanding of different types of outdoor activities that people conduct in using public space (Gehl, 1971). These points explain why he was chosen to collaborate with the City of Melbourne.

In 1993, Adams brought Gehl to Melbourne to assist in the survey and in redesigning its city centre (Blomkamp & Lewis, 2019). Gehl led the 'Places for People' initiative and worked with the local officials to enhance the quality of city spaces (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005). The team conducted Public Space Public Life surveys in the city centre (Matan & Newman, 2016) and produced the study reports in 1994 and 2005. These reports made a number of recommendations for urban design intervention aiming to transform the Melbourne CBD. As a team leader of the two studies, Gehl's engagement and contribution to the transformation of the Melbourne CBD can be discussed around the two themes: a) developing the study methodology for the Public Space Public Life surveys; and b) co-authorship of the Places for People study reports.

4.1.1. Study methodology

One of the dilemmas the Urban Design team at the City of Melbourne had to face was about the efficacy of the study methodology proposed in the 1985 Strategy Plan and the outcome it was supposed to deliver in terms of the positive changes to the city centre. What Adams said clarifies this (Matan & Newman, 2016):

> After nearly 10 years of implementation across a broad spectrum of projects in Melbourne, it had become apparent that because of the very nature of these projects, namely small scale and incremental, the community would, like slowly warming up in a bath, not notice the changes taking place. With this in mind, and aware of the work that Jan had been doing in measuring the changes in cites, we decided to make contact and see if he would advise us on how best to measure and tell our story (p. 112).

Gehl's approach to public space study and the methodology he had developed and employed in both the Public Space Public Life surveys of 1994 and 2004 have been instrumental in overcoming such barriers. Not only is his methodology unique and innovative, but it is based on the 'Copenhagen experience' meaning that he would bring the elements of the first Public Space Public Life survey carried out in Copenhagen in 1968. At the same time, Gehl made a comparison of his findings against Copenhagen in an attempt to emulate or execute elsewhere what Copenhagen had been able to achieve (City of Melbourne & Gehl, 1994).

Working closely with Adams and his team, Gehl surveyed urban spaces and public life in the Melbourne CBD, and together they developed "a list of necessary and ambitious goals" (Matan & Newman, 2016, p. 110). While Gehl's study methodology incorporates some novel ways of examining the use of public spaces, an important feature is the attention to the 'human dimension'. The study methodology was supported by extensive use of surveys that included pedestrian counts and public activity and behavioural mapping based on observations (City of Melbourne & Gehl, 1994). While the 1994 study primarily focused on the two interrelated components – the people and the places (Table 1), the second study conducted in

Table 1. Elements considered for the people and place components in the Public Space Public Life survey 1994 (source: City of Melbourne & Gehl, 1994)

The people	The places
The people who use city centre	Attractions
The pedestrians in the city	Outdoor cafes
Stationary activities	Public seating
Intensity of use	Ground floor frontages
Pattern of use	Noise and fumes
	Sunshine and shades
	The amount and quality of pedestrian space
	Footpath capacity

2004 used exactly the same methods, including the same study locations and similar weathering conditions (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005). Both the surveys examined key aspects of how people use public spaces and engage in necessary, optional and social activities. The surveys also looked into the numbers and the quality of public spaces existing in the city centre. The study produced a rich amount of robust data based on which some highly useful recommendations were made, and the major challenges were identified in the Places for People reports.

4.1.2. Places for People reports 1994 and 2005

Gehl co-authored the Places for People study reports with the Urban Design team at the Melbourne City Council, following the completion of the Public Space Public Life surveys. Although the 1994 Places for People report follows on from the previous study reports, particularly the 1985 Strategy Plan, produced by the city council, Gehl's contribution lies in writing an 'essay' – a major section of the report – that evaluates the strength and weakness of Melbourne as a city and offers ideas for its improvement in the form of the four key recommendations: a) improving the pedestrian network; b) making gathering spaces of excellent quality and making more of them; c) strengthening street activity by physical changes; and d) encouraging more people to use the city.

Gehl refers to the importance of the spatial quality of the streets and the degree of walkability they offer in strengthening the pedestrian network. In the case of Melbourne city centre, he particularly mentions Bourke Street Mall and Swanston Street and argues that both of these streets have a "major problem" due to the "inconvenience and noise caused by trams" and "pedestrian spaces interrupted at every intersection by car" (City of Melbourne & Gehl, 1994, p. 7). He suggests that these streets, due to their potential as arterial routes, ought to be further developed as 'the great walking streets' of Melbourne, bringing more life and activity. Gehl notes that "the centre of Melbourne is peculiar in that it has virtually no public outdoor space for people to gather in other than the poorly designed City Square" and suggests that the CBD needs more plazas (City of Melbourne & Gehl, 1994, p. 7).

Gehl further notes that "much of the city [centre] has blank, uninviting walls" and suggests that "the areas of good quality frontage must be maintained and expanded" (City of Melbourne & Gehl, 1994, p. 8). He suggests that motor traffic in the city centre needs to be discouraged to enable the widening of the footpaths for the convenience of the pedestrian. Moreover, the quality of such pedestrian spaces needs to be enhanced to strengthen street level activities by adding more public seatings, trees and greeneries and public art installations. Further in the essay, Gehl argues that the Melbourne CBD "houses too few residents" and recommends bringing more people in the city centre by adding more dwelling units – at least 4000 more by 2001 (City of Melbourne & Gehl, 1994, p. 9). While he endorses transforming the CBD into an 'activity centre', this aligns with and gives more impetus to Adams and his team's earlier initiatives of promoting the city centre as a 'catchment area' and increasing the residential population through the project 'Postcode 3000', which had already begun in 1992.

In 2004, Gehl was invited to return to Melbourne to update the previous study and conduct the second Public Space Public Life survey. While the 2005 Places for People report highlights the key findings of the second survey, Gehl's study methodology implied making "comparative assessments against the data" presented in the 1994 report to highlight the major achievements made over the 10-year period (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005, p. 10). Some of these achievements include: a) an increase in public life, residential community and student population; b) improved streets for public life; c) a revitalised network of lanes and arcades; d) addition of new squares, promenades and parks; e) more places to sit and pause; f) a greener city; and g) a 24-hour city.

4.2. Some major changes to public spaces in the Melbourne CBD

In sharp contrast with old European towns, Melbourne did not have a clear centre or a town square when the city was first laid in the form of a grid by surveyor Robert Hoddle in 1837. Several attempts were made to address this apparent shortcoming, including the development of City Square and Bourke Street Mall, and ultimately, the construction of Federation Square, which opened in 2002. Other attempts to allow for more space for the public include further pedestrianisation of Bourke Street, the widening of the footpath along Swanston Street (renamed Swanston Walk) and revitalising of city laneways (Figure 1). While the latter changes were made in line with the recommendations made by Gehl, some writers argue that Melbourne may be labelled as "the poster child for Copenhagenisation" and the positive impacts they have had on the quality of urban spaces stand as proof of the successful application of the Danish Urban Design principles in revitalising its city centre (Turner, 2012, p. 32).

Figure 1. Aerial map of the Melbourne CBD showing: 1 – Bourke Street Mall; 2 – Swanston Street; 3 – Federation Square (source: modified from City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005)

Figure 2. Trial closure of Bourke Street, 1973–1974 (source: Luly, 2024a)

Figure 3. Bourke Street Mall today (source: authors)

4.2.1. Bourke Street Mall

Bourke Street has been a site for major urban intervention since the early 1970s, with an attempt to temporarily close it for vehicular traffic in 1973–1974 (Rivett, 1975) (Figure 2). However, the final conversion of the Bourke Street between Elizabeth Street and Swanston Street into the Bourke Street Mall did not take place until 1978, and works were not fully completed until 1980. While Gehl, as quoted above, is less than complimentary about Melbourne in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Bourke Street Mall, together with the City Square, were the first steps in bringing public life back to the city centre. However, the mall, like the later Swanston Walk, was a compromised project to begin with – the Bourke Street trams could not easily be diverted and continue to run through the mall to this day, explaining why the Mall is only partly pedestrianised. The mall also arguably benefitted the major department stores which line it as much as it benefitted the public.

Following Gehl's recommendations in the 1994 Places for People report, the Bourke Street Mall was further upgraded and improved from Swanston to Russell Streets, with kerb extensions, footpath widening, bluestone paving and tree planting (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005). The 2004 Public Space Public Life surveys found that the mall saw a remarkable increase in pedestrian traffic between 1993 and 2004 – from 43,000 to 81,000 per day (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005). Further efforts towards the 'wholesale redevelopment' of the mall took place in 2005 and 2006, making it a lively and vibrant heart of the city centre's retail precinct (Figure 3). The redevelopment of Bourke Street Mall demonstrates that the pedestrianisation of Melbourne streets could work, and set the scene for later developments such as Swanston Walk and the Laneways project discussed in the next sections.

4.2.2. Swanston street

Swanston Street is central Melbourne's principal north-south, and main ceremonial, axis. It is the locus for the annual ANZAC Day, Moomba, and Grand Final parades and lined with a number of major institutions, including RMIT University, the State Library of Victoria and its forecourt, the Melbourne Town Hall and the Flinders Street Station. Swanston Street in the 1970s and 80s was somewhat run down, with crumby cafés and 'adult theatres' and was often referred to as a 'traffic sewer' (Figure 4). Melbournians were slow to see the potential of their main thoroughfare, despite its central location and the major institutions lining it, and access to ample sunshine. Throughout the past century, building heights along Swanston Street have been kept relatively low, allowing for good solar access. Gehl commented in an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (Pepper, 2017):

> In Melbourne, very cleverly, a corridor, a valley of sunshine has been preserved along Swanston Street and that's very important because access to the sun in the spring and fall is very important so that the city is not overshadowed.

Similar to the Bourke Street Mall, Swanston Street has also been a site for an early intervention for urban regeneration of the Melbourne CBD. In February 1985, the

Figure 4. Swanston Street 'traffic sewer', 1963 (source: Luly, 2024b)

Figure 5. Swanston Street paved with grass for Melbourne's Sesquicentenary celebrations, February 1985 (source: authors)

State Government in collaboration with the Melbourne City Council, closed a large section of Swanston Street and paved it with grass as part of the celebrations for Melbourne's sesquicentenary (150th anniversary) (Figure 5). Half a million people visited the newly greened and suddenly pedestrianised street, over the weekend of February 9 and 10. The event was considered a great success, even if it had its detractors (Salt, 2018).

After facing considerable opposition for seven years, the Kirner State Labor Government decided to permanently close Swanston Street to vehicular traffic in 1992. While at first, this took full effect during the daytime, it was later extended to a 24-hour ban. By the simple expedient of extending the footpaths, and erecting a few signs, Swanston Street became Swanston Walk. This, with later addition of street trees, public art works and seating, transformed the one time 'traffic sewer' into a pleasant pedestrianised linear urban precinct, an improvement that was considered "the key to the City of Melbourne's receipt of the first Australia Award for Urban Design" in 1996 (Jones, 2018, p. 104). Furthermore, Swanston Walk helped to connect

Figure 6. Swanston Walk today (source: authors)

with other urban improvement areas, the Bourke Street Mall, City Square and eventually Federation Square, greatly improving the public realm of central Melbourne.

As with the Bourke Street Mall, the continued need for trams to use the street has prevented full pedestrianisation of Swanston Street, yet the street has the widest footpath in Melbourne, with substantial active building frontages and many amenities for people (Jones, 2018). The data from the 2004 Public Space Public Life surveys show that the volume of pedestrian traffic increased significantly between 1993 and 2004 – from 41,500 to 60,500 per day (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005; Anderson-Oliver, 2013). Likewise, the number of cafés doubled between 1992 and 2003 (Jones, 2018). The greening of Swanston Street and its eventual transformation as Swanston Walk demonstrates what is possible when people, rather than cars, are given priority in city centres (Figure 6).

4.2.3. Federation square

The development of Federation Square was aimed at addressing the shortcomings of City Square by establishing a quality civic open space in the Melbourne CBD over the railway tracks between the edge of the city grid and the river. Completed in 2002, this new public space, although commissioned by the State Government of the day, may be viewed as a considered response to Gehl's recommendation of 'making gathering spaces of excellent quality' in the city centre. In fact, Federation Square has proven to be the city's "new atrium" that "offers a creative mix of attractions to engage citizens, visitors and tourists" (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005, p. 23).

At first, Federation Square proved difficult for Melbournians to come to terms with and generated considerable adverse comments. For example, renowned Melbourne comedian and wry observer of suburbia, Barry Humphries compared Fed Square to 'leprosy' and called for it to be demolished (Crawford, 2009). Yet observations show that Federation Square has increasingly become a well-regarded and much used urban space, helping connect the city centre to the river front, and providing a complex and layered space for public life and activity (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Federation Square today (source: Smith, 2020)

Figure 9. A non-revitalised laneway in Melbourne CBD (source: Masanauskas, 2020)

Figure 8. 'Yes' demonstration in Federation Square, September 2023 (source: authors)

Figure 10. Centre Place – a Melbourne city laneway after revitalisation (source: authors)

The 2004 Public Space Public Life survey found that Federation Square has added "a lively and highly successful square to the urban environment" of the Melbourne CBD (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005, p. 6). In addition to being an architectural focus, this new urban square acts as a place where Melburnians can gather in large numbers and engage in a range of social activities to animate the city centre throughout the year (Figure 8) (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005; Brown-May & Day, 2013). Brown-May and Day (2013) note:

> The Square creates for the first time in the city a sensible and usable large open public space. It may become a civic piazza in time, because it offers open spaces with unrestricted public access, suitable for large public gatherings and celebrations, in a way that Melbourne has lacked. It is likely to assume the mantle of Melbourne's gathering place, where occasions such as New Year's Eve are celebrated, unionists gather, RSL marches congregate and successful sporting heroes are acclaimed (p. 30).

4.2.4. Laneways

Melbourne city centre boasts a well-connected network of laneways, with the potential to create lively spaces for a range of outdoor public activities. These laneways were developed during the 19th century as the larger urban blocks and plots of the Hoddle grid were subdivided to adapt to the changing use of the buildings and the land they sit on, gradually resulting in the complex network of relatively narrow and rectilinear urban spaces (Dovey & Jones, 2018). Prior to their redevelopment, the laneways remained highly 'neglected spaces', which were underutilised and filled with garbage, lacked active frontage, and often deemed dangerous to be in due to the lack of proper surveillance (Figure 9).

One of the recommendations of the 1994 Places for People report was to increase the 'usable' length of Melbourne's laneways to offer good quality access for pedestrians and with high amenity (City of Melbourne & Gehl, 1994). The 'laneway improvement program' was introduced to achieve this goal that pushed the "new and refurbished buildings alongside laneways to include active frontages and put huge incentives in place for existing developments to open their laneway facing facades to retail activity" (Turner, 2012). The 2004 Public Space Public Life survey found that "the systematic integration of laneways into the walking pattern has had a very positive impact on the pedestrian network and level of activity in the city centre" (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005, p. 5). Laneways can now be found full of bars and cafes and public art installations, making them a tourist attraction and a part of vibrant city spaces and thereby, lending the city centre a unique character (Figure 10). The 2005 Place for People report elaborates (City of Melbourne & Gehl Architects, 2005):

Redevelopment of Melbourne's laneways has contributed immeasurably to the character of the city centre as a dense and lively area for multiple activities. Physical improvement of the city's lanes provides for the comfort, engagement and entertainment of pedestrians, inviting a range of popular uses. They also create opportunities for innovation, surprise and unique approaches to both permanent and transient design (p. 28).

5. Conclusions

Jan Gehl was invited to Melbourne because of his expertise in successfully revitalising city centres in many European cities. His engagement with the City of Melbourne in leading the 'Places for People' initiative can be considered a major step towards the revitalisation of its city centre. Although several initiatives had already been taken by the council by the time he came to Melbourne, its public spaces were still in an awful state requiring thoughtful urban design interventions. Gehl was asked to undertake the challenging task of fixing this. As he did in many other world cities, Gehl chose to conduct the Public Space Public Life surveys in Melbourne too, which apparently led to the preparation of the study reports with some key recommendations. His main contributions during his collaboration with the city council include developing the methodology for and conducting the Public Space Public Life surveys and co-authoring of the Places for People study reports. The study reports reveal that his methodology had a focus on the two interrelated components of 'good urbanism' – the people and the places – which was adapted from his early studies in European cities. The surveys produced a rich amount of data by examining the number and the quality of public spaces and how people use them and engage in different social activities in the Melbourne CBD. Based on the findings of the surveys, the recommendations he made in the study reports have been instrumental in developing the urban design policy directions for the transformation the Melbourne CBD. While his urban design work in Melbourne can be considered largely successful in achieving the council's goal of transforming the CBD into a vibrant city centre, we conclude this paper with the following points as a critical commentary of his contribution.

5.1. Assimilation of earlier works

As we have already noted, the council had prepared the City of Melbourne Strategy Plan in 1985 aiming at improving the quality of the public realm in the Melbourne CBD. In addition to this, there were other small-scale studies conducted in 1984 and 1989 by the council. However, it is not clear to what extent the plans and policies formulated in those documents were incorporated in the 1994 study report. One would hope that due consideration was given to those documents and an attempt to establish a link was made.

5.2. Copenhagen experience and the local context

In many ways, it can be considered an intelligent move by Gehl to incorporate 'Copenhagen experience' in developing his approaches to the revitalisation of the city centre of Melbourne. Guided by the philosophy of people-centred urban design, his methodology wisely employed the elements of the first Public Space Public Life survey carried out in Copenhagen. But given the entirely different nature of the local urban context, an attempt to emulate or execute in Melbourne what Copenhagen had achieved must have been met with a fair degree of complexity in fine-tuning the study methodology. It is to be noted that the urban fabric of Melbourne presents several peculiarities compared to old European cities, such as a rigid grid layout pattern and the absence of a town square within the grid.

Another major contextual factor that has apparently played a critical role in making urban design decisions is the presence of tram lines. Unlike all other major Australian cities, trams have survived in Melbourne and this has led to only a partial closure or pedestrianisation of some major thoroughfares, such as Bourke Street and Swanston Street.

5.3. Only a cheerleader?

In line with several authors, we have argued in this paper that Gehl's contribution to the revitalisation of the city centre of Melbourne is significant as his study methodology and the recommendations made were critical in formulating the urban design policy directions taken by the council. However, it is interesting to note that some staff members at the council who worked closely with him like to think differently. They have a view that, since the urban regeneration work for the CBD had already started before Gehl was invited, his contribution was less significant and, apart from 'supporting' the work already being undertaken by the council, he became Melbourne's greatest 'cheerleader' internationally. This exceptionally critical view of Gehl's work in Melbourne might come out as a surprise for some, but his engagement with the council has been praised by the public in general.

5.4. Final remarks

Jan Gehl is one of the most renowned and successful urban design practitioners in the world. He has worked for numerous world cities in revitalising their city centres and, among them, Melbourne was voted one of the most liveable cities for many years. Initiated by Rob Adams in the early 1980s and led by Gehl in the following decades, the urban regeneration efforts made by the City of Melbourne has been a success story towards the revival of the public realm in the city centre of Melbourne. This paper examined Gehl's engagement with the City of Melbourne and highlights that his work in Melbourne is crucial in achieving the successful urban transformation of its city centre.

The work also demonstrates that his approaches to public space study are unique and innovative, and highly constructive in making urban design policy decisions. Urban design researchers and practitioners can and should learn from his work. The paper contributes to the urban design discipline by adding new knowledge of Gehl's work in Melbourne and widening its recognition in Australia and internationally.

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Author contributions

Rajjan M Chitrakar: Conceptualisation, Data collection, Formal Analysis, Writing–original draft, Writing–review and editing. Rosalind Herriotts: Conceptualization, Data collection, Formal Analysis, Writing–original draft. Peter Hogg: Data collection, Formal Analysis, Writing–original draft, Writing–review and editing.

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