# SHAPING FUTURE CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICTS:

PERSPECTIVES FROM GLOBAL STAKEHOLDERS



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#### **About the Centre for Liveable Cities**

Set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the then Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, the Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) has as its mission "to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities". The CLC's work spans four main areas – Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms and Advisory. Through these activities, the CLC hopes to provide urban leaders and practitioners with the knowledge and support needed to make our cities better. For more information, please visit <a href="https://www.clc.gov.sg">www.clc.gov.sg</a>







#### **About Arup**

Dedicated to sustainable development, Arup is a collective of more than 18,000 designers, advisors and experts working across 140 countries. Founded to strive for humanity and excellence in everything that we do, we collaborate with our clients and partners, using imagination, technology and rigour to shape a better world. For more information, please visit <a href="https://www.arup.com">www.arup.com</a>

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# **FOREWORD**

Cities around the world are reimagining the role and future of their Central Business Districts (CBDs). This is especially critical for land scarce Singapore, where the Downtown continues to play a prominent role in our economy. Hence, we have continued to evolve our CBD policies to ensure they remain relevant to changing needs, including introducing more mixed uses and supporting vibrancy in the local neighbourhoods. As part of the latest Master Plan Review, the Urban Redevelopment Authority is also looking at how we can build up business and job nodes both in the city centre and across the island. These moves reflect deliberate efforts to future-proof our commercial clusters.

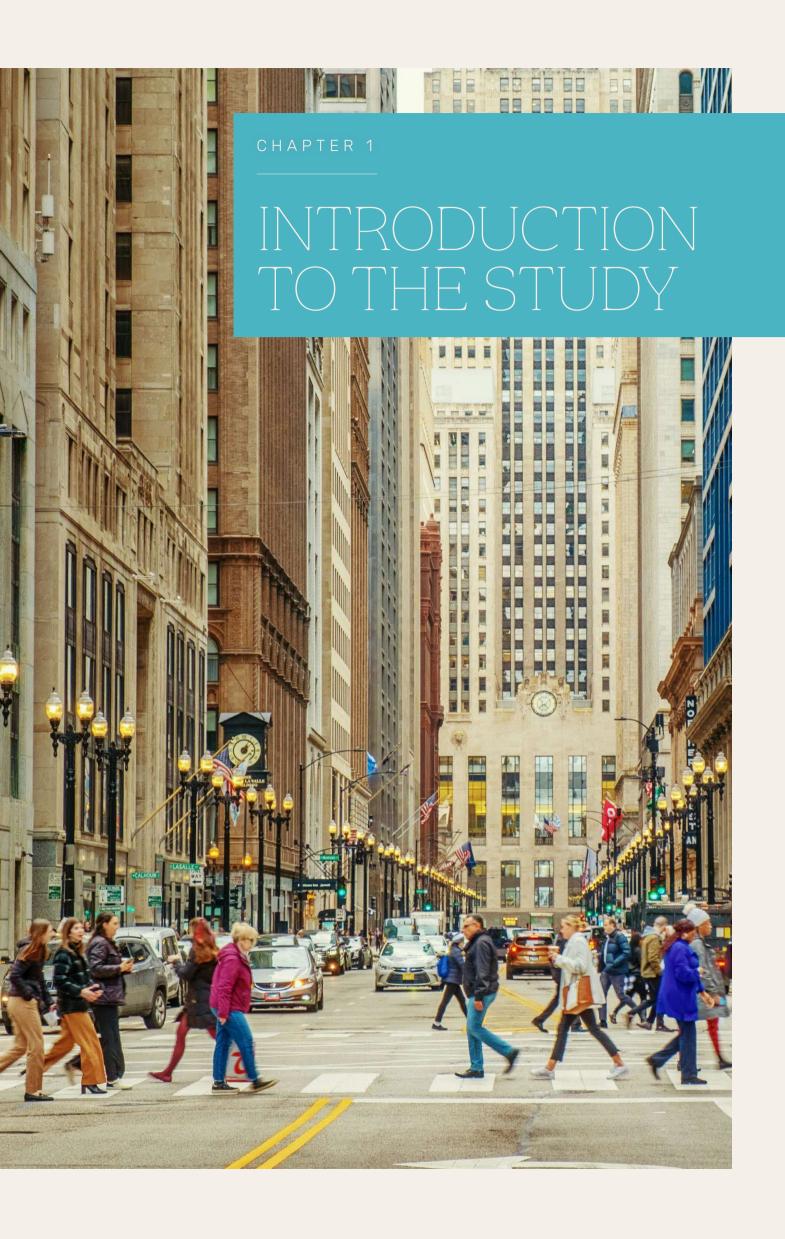
We witnessed how change was already underway in many CBDs as they adapted to market demand and lifestyle preferences. The COVID-19 pandemic gave many cities necessary pause and the opportunity to undertake a more transformational revamp of their downtown areas. Despite pessimistic headlines declaring the death of CBDs, many cities worldwide have displayed tremendous resilience, putting in place innovative strategies to ensure that their appeal and relevance are not lost. Future of work trends such as hybrid or remote arrangements have also initiated new trajectories in knowledge-based economies, with many adopting new technologies and business models, predicated on the fact that flexibility is here to stay.

At the Centre for Liveable Cities, we believe in the benefits of convening different stakeholders to enable mutual learning opportunities across cities. Hence, this project hopes to capture diverse perspectives in revitalising downtowns and commercial centres. By bringing together experiences of CBDs across different regions, we hope that it can help cities that may be dealing with these same issues today or support them in preparing for what lies ahead. I would also like to thank our partner, Arup, for their valuable insights and support in this study.

I hope that this publication will spark new ideas for cities as they take brave next steps in building more attractive and liveable CBDs for all. I wish you an enjoyable read.

# **Hugh Lim**

Executive Director, Centre for Liveable Cities



# INTRODUCTION

Central Business Districts (CBDs), also known as "Downtowns" or "City Centres" in different regions, have been pivotal hubs for global cities, driving economic growth and job creation.



Photo courtesy of Unsplash

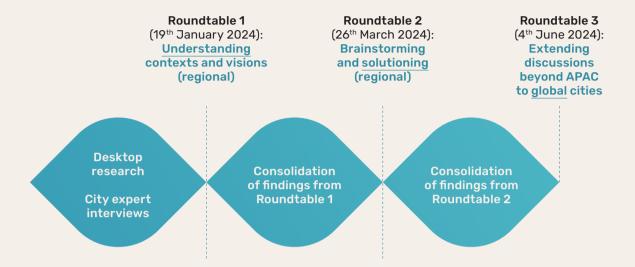
During COVID-19, Singapore saw a dramatic reduction in office crowds. By October 2023, peak period commuter numbers to the CBD was 80% of 2019 levels, signalling an enduring change in work patterns.¹ We also saw how cities like San Francisco were particularly affected as offices in its downtown reached a vacancy rate of 33.9% during the first quarter of 2025.² Some even speculated that San Francisco would fall into a doom loop where decreased tax revenues would reduce the funds available for municipal services.

Through these uncertainties, many cities seized the chance to rethink and re-evaluate CBDs. The pandemic had spotlighted and accelerated many existing challenges, such as how to adapt offices for a workforce that increasingly embraced hybrid working arrangements and the importance of healthy and sustainable workplaces. CBDs have constantly been evolving along with the dynamic needs of the city and this process will continue with greater urgency and scale than ever before.

The Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) and Arup thus embarked on this study to uncover common challenges faced by CBDs around the world and to understand how different cities have tackled them and navigated through emerging trends to remain resilient and relevant. Given each city's unique context, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for a successful CBD. However, one city's current may be another city's future, and this e-publication aims to compile learnings and exemplary initiatives from CBDs from different regions to form a practical comparative reference for cities thinking about rejuvenation.

# **METHODOLOGY**

This study consisted of three roundtable sessions with government officials and planners, industry experts and other CBD stakeholders from real estate development, investment firms, consultancies, research organisations and more.



Recognising common trends across the region, such as stronger return-to-office patterns, the first phase of the study focused on engagements with stakeholders from six cities in Asia Pacific: Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Hong Kong, Singapore, Sydney and Tokyo. This included conducting interviews and two hybrid roundtable sessions with city representatives to identify common challenges faced by CBDs in the region, outline the envisaged roles and aspirations of CBDs, and examine strategies used by the six cities to rejuvenate their CBDs.

The second phase of the study included an in-person Roundtable on the Future of Downtowns at the World Cities Summit 2024, where the conversation was extended to city leaders and stakeholders from other cities around the world. During the roundtable session, participants from diverse regions, including Europe and the Americas were invited to share their insights on the evolving roles and expectations of their respective downtown areas. Participants presented initiatives utilised by their cities to rejuvenate the CBD, and discussed indicators that CBDs could track at either the projector district-level to evaluate performance over time. Following the Summit, CLC also continued to engage various cities to find out more about how they were implementing and measuring their transformation strategies.

Findings from both phases were analysed and compiled into this report.





Graphic recording illustrations for the first two roundtables with APAC cities

Images courtesy of Centre for Liveable Cities





Graphic recording illustrations for the Roundtable on the Future of Downtowns at the World Cities Summit 2024

Images courtesy of Centre for Liveable Cities

# PREVAILING CHALLENGES AND TRENDS FOR CBDS

CBDs have long served as economic powerhouses for cities, but traditional models are being tested by various challenges and trends. While their impact varies across different CBDs, several common themes have emerged from our conversations with stakeholders. The key is for cities to adapt and harness these as opportunities for growth.

# **Evolving Work Patterns**

COVID-19 triggered a major shift in work practices, with lockdown measures forcing many to work remotely during the height of the pandemic. On top of poor utilisation of offices in the CBD, the reduction in footfall also affected the ecosystem of businesses and amenities in the district, such as retail and F&B shops. Consequently, some companies have downsized their floorspace to better align with hybrid work arrangements and reduce operational costs. Although workers have gradually returned to offices, the landscape has fundamentally changed. Surveys have shown that many employees enjoy the flexibility, improved work-life balance and time savings that remote working provides.<sup>3</sup> Hence, how can cities better optimise existing space and offer compelling value propositions to draw people back to the CBD?

As cities emerged from the pandemic, the rate of return to office also varied significantly across regions. A 2023 study by JLL found that Asia Pacific (APAC) led the recovery, with cities like Shanghai, Beijing and Seoul returning to pre-pandemic numbers. In contrast, Europe and the Americas showed lower rates of office re-entry, with decreases of 15% to 35% and 39% to 58% respectively.<sup>4</sup> Two years on, a 2025 report from CBRE shows that this trend has persisted with average office utilisation rates, based on the properties it manages, at about 39%. Similarly, the APAC region had the highest attendance, followed by the Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) region and the Americas.<sup>5</sup>

# **Shifting CBD Demographics**

While residential demographics in CBDs vary across cities, these areas often see higher proportions of single working professionals and expatriates. Given the move towards hybrid work, many cities including Singapore are transforming their CBDs into more mixeduse neighbourhoods to build up their live-in population and enhance district vibrancy outside of office hours. The findings from the Gensler City Pulse 2023 affirms this strategy as it showed that 83% of those living in the downtown felt that the CBD provided a great experience. This was particularly true for families living in the CBD as compared to other household types. The report suggested that this was because CBDs were "ideal places to live and work" while also being "accessible".6

However, this evolution also necessitates a structural change in the composition of CBDs – through diverse housing options and supporting amenities to cater to different age groups and their respective needs. At the same time, our study also revealed that some cities faced roadblocks in doing so either due to factors like limitations in rezoning, lower profitability and constraints in redevelopment or adaptive reuse.

#### **Building Climate Resilience and Sustainability**

Cities account for approximately 75% of global energy use and 70% of greenhouse gas emissions. As high-density urban centres, CBDs are significant contributors to these environmental impacts. Their built-up nature also intensifies the urban heat island effect, where the concentration of buildings and paved surfaces raise local temperatures. Arup's Urban Heat Snapshot identified Singapore's CBD to be a hotspot, even at lower-rise areas like Telok Ayer and Amoy Street as taller developments nearby create an urban wall that blocks coastal breezes. This was consistent with cities such as Melbourne and Brisbane where the CBDs also saw relatively higher temperatures.

Furthermore, in response to Environmental, Social and Governance commitments and potential cost savings, companies are increasingly prioritising green buildings and sustainable environments. Alongside a flight to quality, employers are willing to pay premiums for greencertified offices – ranging from 7.1% in North America, 9.9% in Asia to 11.6% in London. Beyond individual buildings, the surrounding environment in the district should also be resilient to extreme weather events. Apart from safety considerations, the economic cost of climate-related disruptions makes climate resilience critical.

# **Limited Land for Expansion**

Most established CBDs that have grown extensively over the past few decades struggle with limited land for new developments. At the same time, they also face pressure to adapt to new demands – such as housing, community facilities and green spaces. As a result, many cities have increasingly moved towards decentralisation – creating multiple polycentres in addition to the original CBDs. For instance, Hong Kong is exploring land reclamation for the Kau Yi Chau Artificial Islands project which will bring about 200,000 new jobs.<sup>11</sup>

In other cases, fragmented land ownership can also complicate rejuvenation efforts. To facilitate meaningful redevelopment, this may require consensus among multiple owners, consolidation of land parcels or even acquisition from the government. While cities may have ambitious plans for revitalisation of their CBDs, such challenges can significantly impact feasibility and timelines.

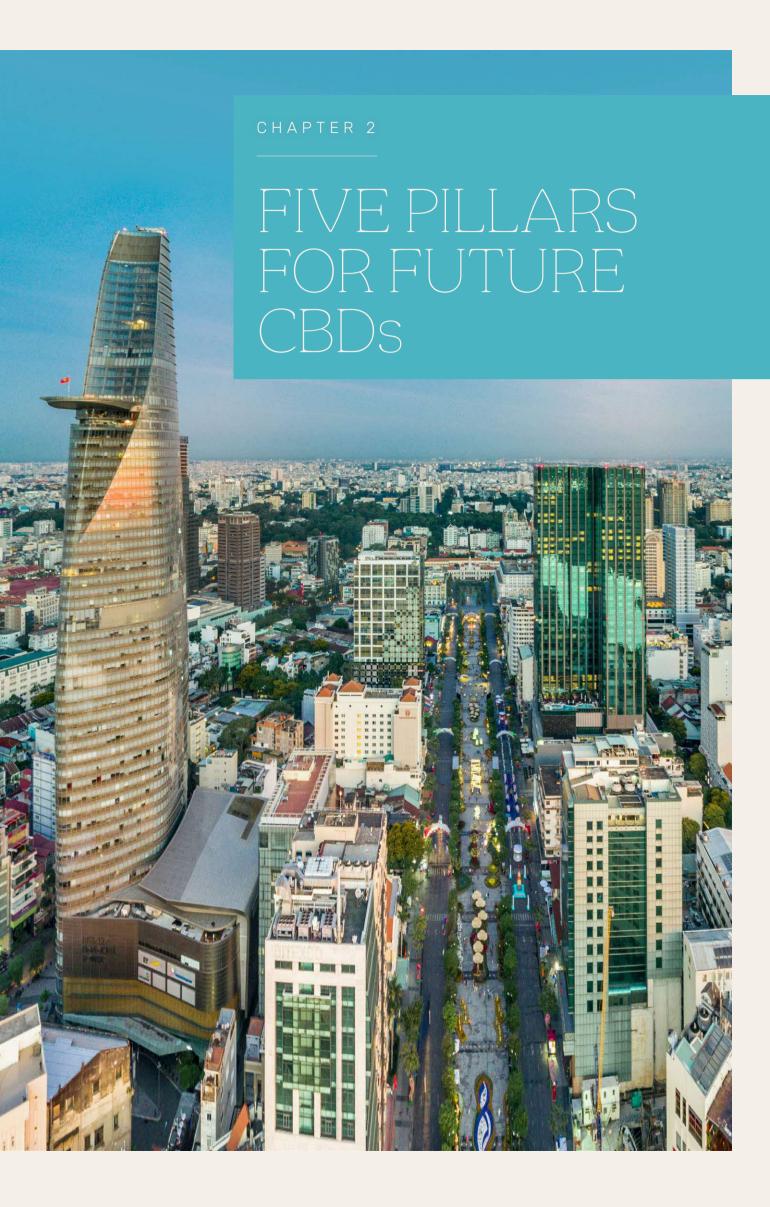
## Constraints in Optimising Built Assets and Public Spaces

As cities mature and buildings age, the ageing infrastructure may no longer meet the needs of modern occupants. Yet, in keeping with sustainability goals, demolition of old buildings is not always a viable option. Many CBDs are pivoting towards mixed-use districts and considering changes to their spatial usage, such as repurposing office and industrial buildings to residential and other lifestyle uses. This is often challenging, due to the technical constraints from existing building layouts. At times, inflexible and rigid land use policies may also hinder the conversion of existing developments to other uses.

While buildings form the core of CBDs, the public realm plays an equally crucial role in their success. Yet the management and activation of these spaces typically involves coordination across numerous government agencies that oversee different aspects – from transport and greenery to safety and planning. Participants in our roundtables acknowledged that community or private sector initiatives often had to deal with an "agency alphabet soup" and it could sometimes be unclear which government department should be approached. Furthermore, the need for approvals and permits also impedes spontaneous placemaking and ground-up programmes.

## **Growing Competition between CBDs**

As more and more CBDs take shape, they cannot afford to stay generic. The race between business districts has intensified globally, as cities vie for talent and investment. In 2020, EY and ULI collaborated to come up with rankings for 22 global business districts. The ensuing report underscored that competition is tightening – as reflected in the narrowing differentials in scores between districts. Hence, CBDs need to set themselves apart from their competitors by offering unique experiences – for example, as wellness hubs, cultural districts, night-time destinations or innovation precincts, among others. This can also increase their attractiveness to a wider scope of people like tourists, students and researchers as well as professionals beyond the traditional finance and business sectors.



# INTRODUCTION TO THE FIVE PILLARS

To address the wide-ranging challenges and trends that CBDs face, cross-domain solutions are required. Hence, drawing from the common themes arising from our series of interviews and roundtables, the study has identified five key pillars that underpin the success of CBDs going forward: Connected, Distinctive, Integrative, Vibrant and Responsive. These pillars, though differing in focus, are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. By keeping these goals top of mind and applying targeted strategies, cities can formulate comprehensive approaches to create future-ready CBDs.

## CONNECTED



As centres of economic activity, CBDs have to depend on efficient city-wide transport networks to connect workers to their downtown workplaces. Such urban infrastructure facilitates the flow of both commuters and goods and help maintain the performance of CBDs. Connectivity also refers to accessibility within the district – so that users can move with ease to engage, interact and collaborate with others. By connecting peripheral towns to downtown cores efficiently, this can also stimulate local economies and expand business ecosystems. As cities rejuvenate their existing CBDs or even create new ones, an opportunity to reimagine mobility planning with people at its core is presented.

## DISTINCTIVE



To remain relevant in an age of intense global competition, CBDs must identify and spotlight their unique value proposition. Those that distinguish themselves will be better equipped to attract investors, businesses, residents and tourists. In addition, cities adopting a polycentric approach (with multiple CBDs or "nodes") should seek to strategically differentiate each district by capitalising on existing regional characteristics or local assets to build critical mass. In this way, each node becomes an attractive locality that supports healthy competition and contributes to the city's overall economic vitality.

# **INTEGRATIVE**



CBDs around the world are pivoting from their traditional focus as a hub of office spaces to embrace a more inclusive and mixed-use approach. This transformation involves integrating residential, commercial, recreational and educational facilities to cultivate a district where people can live, work, play and learn seamlessly. Accordingly, CBDs will need to accommodate a more diverse range of needs and services that are affordable and accessible to all.



The notion of CBDs can no longer hinge on the traditional nine-to-five office paradigm, as the nature of work itself changes. Instead, CBDs need to aspire to become attractive and engaging urban destinations in and of themselves, offering a good mix of activities even beyond work hours. The idea is that the buzz and liveliness generated will help to foster social interactions and stimulate local businesses, adding to the overall urban experience.

# **RESPONSIVE**



Cities are increasingly impacted by climate change, shifting economic and work trends, and evolving societal expectations. As major components of urban areas, CBDs are not exempted from these challenges. To remain resilient in this dynamic landscape of complexity and uncertainty, CBDs must be able to adapt quickly to emerging trends and lifestyle preferences. They must also bolster their environmental resilience by incorporating mitigation strategies while boosting adaptive capacity to the impacts of climate change. To achieve this, suitable policies and regulations must be in place for CBDs to be agile and responsive.

## What steps are CBDs taking?

Cities are at varying stages in their respective journeys toward these CBD aspirations. While some CBDs have made significant progress, there is no clear finish line as constant improvement is required to keep up with the dynamic landscape. The historical context, economic structure and existing urban form will influence the types of interventions required. The following sections will dive deeper into each pillar and use city examples to demonstrate how CBDs worldwide are taking action.



# CONNECTED & DISTINCTIVE INTEGRATIVE VIBRANT RESPONSIVE

As our CBDs grow and evolve over time, they continue to be a central place, characterised really by connectivity and convenience... they bring people together and have remained focal points because of their accessibility.

## Kate West

Chief Officer, Business and Markets, Asia Pacific, Arup

From an urban planning perspective, we cannot respond to the current demand, especially for things like parking spots or car lanes, but we need to steer the future demand by providing or changing the supply, which means reducing the space for cars and increasing space for active mobility and other kinds of uses.

Lena Rücker Urban Planning Officer, Vienna

The pedestrianisation of George Street and the light rail has been maybe the most impactful transformation to the Sydney CBD in 50 years... It has transformed the CBD and how people interact with it. If you go to George Street in the morning, in the afternoon, at night; it's full of people walking up and down and it never would have been that way before."

Eamon Waterford CEO, Committee for Sydney



hoto courtesy of Unsplash

As explored in Chapter 2, CBDs are dealing with changing work patterns and diverse user profiles. Hybrid and remote work may cause travel volumes to fluctuate within the week while residents living in the CBD may have increased demand for off-peak transit services. This means that cities will need to review and optimise their transportation systems to serve both the live-in population as well as those coming into the CBD for different purposes. This requires installing more extensive transport networks as well as offering alternative modes of travel.

Besides constructing transport infrastructure like rail to serve those coming from broader distances, CBDs will need to ensure accessibility for different demographic groups. A no-regrets move would be prioritising a built environment that features safer and friendlier pedestrian experiences through human-scale urban design. This provides added pull for businesses in deciding where to locate, as employees value convenience.

Better connectivity within the CBD not only leads to reduced congestion and more efficient travel times, it also creates a more walkable CBD with heavier pedestrian footfall that will be vital for thriving street life and retail activity. Moreover, cities that embark on active mobility strategies also derive sustainability and health benefits. Hence, how can CBDs develop comprehensive transport solutions while also transitioning away from car-dominated environments?

# O1 STRENGTHEN REGIONAL AND LOCAL CONNECTIVITY

To maintain their competitive edge both globally and regionally, CBDs of the future will need to retain their role as economic cores while reconfiguring to become mixed-use districts. It is important for CBDs to be well-connected to other cities and local regions to attract businesses, talent, tourists and residents. Cities are thus investing in robust infrastructure like airports and mass transit solutions to enable people to reach the CBD as well as move seamlessly within it. Improved connectivity at various levels enhances the overall accessibility of the CBD while also helping to support its evolving roles and functions. New networks also serve to open up possibilities for growth, as commercial nodes often emerge around major transport hubs.

# LONDON

Elizabeth Line



An eastbound Elizabeth Line train
Photo courtesy of Unsplash

Officially opened in 2022, the Elizabeth Line (Crossrail) is a long-awaited project aimed at easing the pressure on the strained public transit system.<sup>13</sup> It spans over 100 km - from Reading and the Heathrow airport in the west to Shenfield and Abbey Wood in the east - carrying commuters from outer suburban areas into the heart of the city.14 In addition to reaching the traditional CBD stations like Liverpool Street, it also goes to other commercial areas like Canary Wharf and Paddington. Despite being a long-distance rail service, the Elizabeth Line has managed to offer "metro-style" frequencies within Central London with 24 trains running per hour during peak times.<sup>15</sup> It is also one of the first large-scale railway infrastructure in the United Kingdom (UK) to follow the European Union's Interoperability specifications, allowing it to integrate smoothly with the broader regional rail network.16

From 2022 to 2024, the line facilitated 350 million trips, as well as helped to redistribute passenger loads from other rail lines. Surveys also revealed that 62% of passengers felt the Elizabeth Line had improved their access to job opportunities.<sup>17</sup> This example illustrates how a city's transport infrastructure, when comprehensively expanded, can dramatically boost the connectivity of the CBD. The line's thoughtful and cohesive architectural design, which won the 2024 RIBA Stirling Prize, is further proof of how the commuter experience has been elevated.<sup>18</sup>

# **BANGKOK**

Public Transport in Bangkok



One Bangkok

Photo courtesy of Chainwit (own work), CC BY 4.0

Bangkok is facing rapid urbanisation and this has increased congestion and travel times. In response, the city has implemented public transport systems including the Bangkok Mass Transit System (BTS Skytrain) and the Metropolitan Rapid Transit (MRT) that connect people to the CBD. These and other transport initiatives like the Area Traffic Control system to optimise traffic signal timing, have led to a reported 25% improvement in traffic flow speeds over the last two years.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, developments such as the upcoming high-speed rail linking Bangkok to Chinese cities also serve to catalyse the growth of new commercial nodes outside the city centre like Bang Sue, as they become more accessible.<sup>20,21</sup>

This transit-oriented approach to urban rejuvenation is also exemplified on a district-scale at One Bangkok, a mixed-use development. Integrating office, hotel, residential and retail uses, it maximises the accessibility provided by its direct link to the Lumphini MRT station.<sup>22</sup>

# HO CHI MINH CITY

Saigon Waterbus



Saigon Waterbus at the wharf

Photo courtesy of Centre for Liveable Cities

The Saigon River is a defining feature of Ho Chi Minh City's landscape, and the government is leveraging on the waterway to ease traffic on its streets. Complementing the typical bus and metro services, the Saigon Waterbus serves as an alternative mode of public transportation for visitors to the CBD.<sup>23</sup> While the metro was under construction, it also helped to plug the gap by ferrying passengers across the river to the new modern centre in Thu Thiem.

The Waterbus has gained popularity among tourists seeking scenic river views, thus boosting the blue economy of the city. In 2021, the operators also launched evening routes, creating a night-time attraction while also extending transport options beyond regular commuting hours.<sup>24</sup> Although the limited vessel frequencies and relatively higher fare prices currently limit its regular use by workers, plans for expanded routes and enhanced infrastructure together with well-connected facilities could make it a more viable transport option in the future.

# PROMOTE CAR-LITE CBDS

Many cities developed from the 1950s onwards were structured around automotive transport, prioritising space for roads and parking. To reduce traffic congestion, address climate change concerns and enhance the overall quality of lived experiences, some CBDs are now moving towards more human-centric environments, where roads are being reclaimed or repurposed as corridors for active modes of transport such as walking and cycling. These strategies aim to reduce demand for private vehicles, lower carbon emissions, improve intra-district connectivity and promote street life.

# **BOGOTA AND SYDNEY**

Ciclovía and Pedestrianisation of George Street





Dining parklets along the northern end of George Street

Photo courtesy of Unsplash

Cities are taking back streets for people - through both temporary and permanent interventions. In 1974, Bogota started a longstanding tradition of closing a 5-km stretch of its streets for pedestrians and cyclists. Known as Ciclovía (Open Streets), the programme now sees two million residents enjoying over 100 km of car-free streets every Sunday and public holiday.<sup>25</sup> These streets run through the city centre as well as different neighbourhoods and corridors. While this initiative is not limited to the boundaries of the CBD, Ciclovía has brought about a strong cycling culture and infrastructure network that encourages more residents to cycle to work on weekdays.26

On the other side of the world, the pandemic spurred Sydney's pedestrianisation of George Street, the central axis of its CBD – something that was conceptualised as far back as 2007. This was realised in 2019 with the northern segment of the street converted into a pedestrian boulevard alongside the introduction of the CBD and South East Light Rail. When COVID-19 hit in 2020, vehicle barricades, seats and benches were added along the southern parts of George Street to expand the car-free zone. This received positive response from the community, giving the city confidence to permanently pedestrianise the street.<sup>27</sup>

# VIENNA

aspern.mobil / Mobility-centred District Planning



Rental electric cargo bicycles in Aspern Seestadt

Photo courtesy of Lim Ren Ai

Aspern Seestadt is an up-and-coming business area in Vienna that is set to host about 20,000 workplaces. With its focus on sustainability, the district has ambitious goals for 40% of all trips to be made via public transport and another 40% via cycling and walking. On a macro level, Aspern Seestadt has been designed for people to easily connect from point to point using active mobility modes. This is achieved through thoughtful urban planning and design, which create compact, high-density areas with efficient circulation flow between buildings.

Aspern Seestadt also features a limit of 0.7 parking spaces per apartment, all consolidated at collective garages, keeping cars off the streets.<sup>30</sup> To facilitate this car-lite lifestyle, Aspern Seestadt offers a range of supportive measures such as free shopping trolleys and rental bicycles as well as a mobility advisory service for residents to understand what would work best for their individual needs.<sup>31</sup>This case study highlights how active mobility is optimised through comprehensive district-wide planning.

# **NEW YORK CITY**

Congestion Pricing



West 59th Street in New York

Photo courtesy of Unsplash

New York City is one of the pioneers of carlite projects. From 2009 to 2017, it embarked on a series of projects to shut down roads at Times Square, freeing up around 10,000 m<sup>2</sup> of pedestrian space for both tourists and New Yorkers in Midtown Manhattan.<sup>32</sup>

Now, the city is also enacting deliberate policies to reduce car usage, particularly in the high-traffic downtown areas. New York City has delineated a Congestion Relief Zone in Manhattan, covering south of and including 60th Street, encompassing the city's CBD. Vehicles entering the zone will have to pay a daily toll.<sup>33</sup> This intervention aims to tackle the gridlock in the CBD where average travel speeds have dropped to just 7.1 mph.<sup>34</sup> Thus far, this has led to a significant reduction of 60,000 vehicles entering the Congestion Relief Zone each day, and pedestrian volume increasing by 4%.35 The revenue generated will be channelled towards projects that enhance the city's transport systems.<sup>36</sup> While early results are promising, the sustainability of the programme will depend on continued support from the administration.<sup>37</sup>

# GLASGOW'S AVENUES PROGRAMME

## **Background**

Glasgow's city centre is at the core of Scotland's only metropolitan city. It not only houses a third of the city's jobs, but it is also a hub for higher education as well as the culture and creative scene.<sup>38</sup> Historically, the city centre also symbolises Glasgow's resilience, having evolved from a difficult era of deindustrialisation into a thriving retail and hospitality destination.



Glasgow's city centre is indicated in orange

Image courtesy of Glasgow City Council

However, recent years have revealed several structural challenges that have been threatening the resilience of the city centre. These include a small residential population of only about 26,000 – a result of previous policies to decant residents – and a shift to e-commerce. In addition, despite Glasgow having one of the lowest private vehicle ownership rates per household in the UK, its city centre remains overly reliant on cars.<sup>39</sup> Hence, the city outlined a series of proposed actions, with improving pedestrian and cyclist use of the city centre being a key aim. This was then further articulated in the Glasgow City Centre Strategy and Action Plan 2014-19 which first introduced the Avenues Programme.<sup>40</sup>

The goal is to build a better-connected city centre through more active and sustainable modes of transport. At the same time, the initiative will reinvigorate businesses and create a greener environment. The broader aim is to enhance liveability in the city centre and attract more residents to move into the CBD.<sup>41</sup>

## **Implementation**

#### Assessment Framework to Identify Avenues

Before embarking on the Avenues Programme, the city worked with consultants and stakeholders to conduct detailed studies. This consisted of mapping exercises and evaluations of each street. Using the following indicators, streets were selected for conversion into Avenues based on their potential to revitalise the city centre:<sup>42</sup>

- Improving Connectivity
- · Enhancing City Image
- Strengthening City Economy
- Supporting Redevelopment
- Enhancing/Protecting the Environment

## Pilot Testing and Scaling Up

This was first tested at Sauchiehall Street as a proof of concept in 2018 where half of its four road lanes were transformed into pedestrianised areas.<sup>43</sup> The pilot also featured widened walkways, a new two-way cycling path as well as street furniture like bus shelters, seating and bicycle racks.<sup>44</sup> As a result, this delivered a quality public space that the city centre previously lacked.<sup>45</sup> Universal design was also integrated into the revamp, catering to the needs of those who are visually or mobility impaired with step-free connections at junctions and between walking and cycling paths.<sup>46</sup>

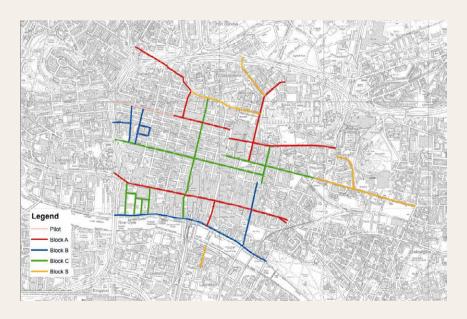




Sauchiehall Street before and after the Avenues Programme intervention

Photos courtesy of Glasgow City Council (left) and felibrilu, CC BY-NC 2.0 (right)

Following its completion in 2019, the Avenues Programme has identified 15 more sites across the city centre such as Argyle Street and Cathedral Street. The flagship project will be at George Square which will be the focal point of the city centre for residents, workers and visitors to come together to rest, socialise and take part in events.<sup>47</sup>



Streets that are identified for the Avenues Programme have also been categorised into different blocks for implementation

Image courtesy of Glasgow City Council



Proposed plans for the George Square Avenue

Image courtesy of Glasgow City Council

Aside from pedestrianisation, each project will incorporate tree planting, landscaping and rain gardens that will help with rainwater runoff. Intelligent Street Lighting is also installed to enhance safety at night.<sup>48</sup> The technology allows for better wayfinding and the ability to organise exciting light shows along the Avenues.<sup>49</sup> This brings about holistic benefits to the city centre beyond just connectivity.

# Working with the Community

Throughout the planning and development of the Avenues Programme, Glasgow City Council has actively engaged stakeholders. This comes in various forms such as online surveys, in person consultations and drop-in events where interested parties can speak directly to the teams in charge. With regard to George Square, there were also dedicated websites and social media campaigns to raise awareness among the public and amplify the reach of these feedback platforms. Workshops were also conducted to discuss with stakeholders about aspects like sustainability, heritage and active mobility in greater detail. 51





Engagement session for South Portland Street project

Photos courtesy of Glasgow City Council

During the process, it is also to be expected that there would be disruptions to traffic which in turn adversely affects residents and businesses. The City Council has thus pre-emptively put in place measures like phasing construction and maintaining access to affected properties.<sup>52</sup>

There has also been feedback from stakeholders that the Avenue improvements alone do not fully address the issues faced in the city centre. For example, there remain several empty premises along Sauchiehall Street and footflow is still lower than it was in 2019. Nonetheless, it should be noted that footflow for the night-time economy is up from 2019. One way this is being tackled is through the City Centre Improvement Grant Fund which was launched in 2024. It will support pop-ups and short-term uses in vacant ground floor properties as well as minor repairs. Application is open to eligible businesses new to the city centre, social enterprises, cultural groups and community councils, in hopes of encouraging businesses to move into the city centre. This reflects a responsive and flexible approach in rejuvenating the Glasgow City Centre.

# Funding Mechanisms

The Glasgow Avenues Programme is funded by the £1.13 billion Glasgow City Region City Deal, which represents a partnership between the UK Government, the Scottish Government and eight different Local Authorities in the wider region.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, rising costs have led to delays which the city has attempted to overcome by sourcing for alternative funding and by deprioritising the work for certain Avenues.<sup>56</sup> Most importantly, the city has also reiterated their commitment towards the programme given the value that would be achieved in the long run.

#### **Outcomes**

As of April 2025, eight Avenue projects are in the pipeline and on track to be delivered.<sup>57</sup> Glasgow excels in maintaining transparency through monthly updates, which are published in the Avenues Programme Progress Report.<sup>58</sup>

Glasgow also hosts a live City Centre Performance Dashboard which has 20 interactive data reports, cutting across themes like footflow, tourism as well as business and employment. These indicators allow users to track the effectiveness of various strategies by monitoring changes over time. The data is typically updated monthly, while indicators like foot traffic are captured daily. In addition, the dashboard enables comparisons between different areas within the city centre, as well as benchmarking against other UK city centres.

This is made possible by tapping into open data sources such as the Civil Aviation Authority for air travel numbers, rail and bus operators on passenger numbers and the Glasgow Convention Bureau for information on conference attendees. Access to a more detailed dashboard which includes data from paid sources is available upon request. These include information on spend, economic sectors such as Food and Drink, Fashion, etc. In 2025, mobile phone data will be added to the dataset to help users understand who is visiting and where they come from. A combination of these datasets will, in due course, be used to report on the impact of the Avenues programme.





Screenshots of the City Centre Performance Dashboard

Images courtesy of Glasgow City Council

# CONNECTED DISTINCTIVE INTEGRATIVE VIBRANT RESPONSIVE

Traditional office space absolutely still has its role...but we hope that the private sector is buying into that vision of experience, habitat and innovation that we are trying to develop in the post-pandemic here and now.

Chief Councillor Susan Aitken Leader of the Council, Glasgow

All historic issues, the existing urban fabric and development visions need to be included in the regeneration of the new CBD, to create an identity for competitive attractiveness for the city.

# Dr Nguyen Anh Tuan

Head of Ho Chi Minh City Infrastructure Planning Division, Department of Construction in Ho Chi Minh City

Ultimately, you're competing for experience. We've seen this in various asset classes like retail, and we're going through a similar challenge with office. Both of these are fundamentally a major aspect of cities. How can CBDs be more experiential by being more accessible, providing a better physical environment with more amenities and having buildings with the flexibility for multiple uses?

# Benett Theseira

Head of Asia Pacific, PGIM Real Estate



Photo courtesy of Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño

Businesses and talent are becoming increasingly footloose, influenced by the prevalence of remote work, cost factors and access to new markets. CBDs can no longer rely solely on being efficient and functional. Instead, they need to set themselves apart to remain attractive. Cities must thus design compelling narratives for their CBDs to put them at the forefront of this global landscape. Even within a city, there could be multiple CBDs or growth nodes to promote a more balanced distribution of economic activities, reduce over-dependency on one single business district and alleviate traffic congestion and strain on existing infrastructure at the city-wide level.

As more of such CBDs or nodes of economic activities develop, both regionally and globally, it becomes essential to create authentic and distinctive brands that resonate with residents and visitors alike. This branding proposition can often become the driving force behind the marketing, activities and programming that pulls people and businesses in. On a strategic level, this also stimulates constructive competition between districts and encourages continuous innovation and improvement.

Shaping the identity of CBDs contributes to a city's overall appeal to investors and visitors, elevating its competitiveness against other international players. Hence, how can CBDs effectively strengthen their distinctive qualities and offer a unique value proposition to distinguish themselves?

# 03

# CULTIVATE DISTINCT AND SYNERGISTIC ECONOMIC ECOSYSTEMS

How do cities start the process of identifying a desired branding for each CBD? One way is to look at the CBD's defining attributes and formulate a positioning in relation to the broader economic landscape of the city. This could include its historical background, dominant industries or even its geographical linkages. Such an approach promotes the development of clusters where specific industries and businesses are deliberately congregated to benefit from natural synergies and a collaborative ecosystem.

# **GREATER SYDNEY**

# A Metropolis of Three Cities



The Metropolis of Three Cities plan

Image from Greater Sydney Commission

A Metropolis of Three Cities envisions the growth of three cities in Greater Sydney over the next few decades, addressing the need to distribute economic activity and opportunities across the region. While the Eastern Harbour City is well-established with the traditional Sydney CBD and newer areas like Barangaroo, the plan also introduces two other development zones – the Western Parkland City and the Central River City, that will all be connected through existing and planned transport networks.<sup>60</sup>

The CBD in Eastern Harbour will continue to build upon its strength in financial services and connection to global markets. On the other hand, Western Parkland City will capitalise on the upcoming airport infrastructure for aerospace and logistics.61 Its city centre at Bradfield will thus prioritise advanced manufacturing with cutting-edge facilities.62 Over at the Central River City, the Parramatta CBD will aim to attract local and international headquarters. This will be complemented by surrounding precincts like the Health & Innovation District which will strengthen capabilities in these industries and tap on the cluster of hospitals, medical research institutes and universities.63 This demonstrates how each CBD can develop its own distinct economic identity.

# **HONG KONG**

Hong Kong 2030+ Conceptual Spatial Framework



Three complementary business areas in the Harbour Metropolis

Image courtesy of Planning Department of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region In 2021, the Planning Department of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region formulated a Conceptual Spatial Framework (CSF) under a strategic planning study, "Hong Kong 2030+: Towards a Planning Vision and Strategy Transcending 2030" (Hong Kong 2030+), to meet various land demand in the city.<sup>64</sup>

The CSF under the Hong Kong 2030+ introduced the "Harbour Metropolis", which aims to enhance liveability and further strengthen the economic competitiveness of this area with a competitive advantage in finance and business. This initiative covers consolidation of the traditional CBD in Central and the adjoining areas that continue to serve as a global financial centre; transformation of Kowloon East from a revitalised industrial district into a CBD to serve as a hub for emerging industries, small and medium enterprises and startups; and creation of the business area on the proposed Kau Yi Chau Artificial Islands through land reclamation to offer a smart, modern and innovative environment. It will strengthen the city's profile as an international financial and trade centre.

# **GLASGOW**

Glasgow City Innovation District (GCID)



The Technology & Innovation Centre is a cornerstone of the GCID

Photo courtesy of John Lord, CC BY 2.0

As Scotland's first innovation district, the Glasgow City Innovation District (GCID) in the eastern end of the city centre brings together over 1,600 businesses, ranging from start-ups to small and medium-sized businesses and research centres.65 The network of companies and academia like the University of Strathclyde exemplifies the concept of agglomeration where different stakeholders are co-located to encourage the cross-pollination of ideas. In addition, the GCID also houses several Innovation Hubs that offer spaces such as creative studios that are conducive for collaboration.66 This shows how purposeful urban planning and design can help to nurture the growth of emerging sectors. Glasgow's efforts have attracted key players and investment into the district, boosting the city's image as one that is "inventive, pioneering and productive".67

# 04

# OFFER UNIQUE EXPERIENCES AND FOSTER A SENSE OF IDENTITY

Culture and identity play a pivotal role in shaping the character and appeal of a CBD. For example, cities can use iconic landmarks, memorable architecture and thoughtfully curated events to embed the local identity into the fabric of the downtown. These, if well curated and drawing on authentic experiences, have transformative potential, turning an ordinary commercial hub into a distinctive epicentre of community and experiences. As users interact more closely with their immediate environments and establish a stronger sense of attachment, these CBDs will grow into more attractive destinations for workers, residents and visitors.

# **ANTWERP**

Boerentoren (Farmers' Tower)



Boerentoren before redevelopment
Photo courtesy of Griet De Koninck

Antwerp has been an important trading port for centuries and the city has preserved many key structures in its centre. These include the Handelsbeurs – the world's first purpose-built stock exchange dating back to the 16th century and now a vibrant events venue, as well as the notable Cathedral of our Lady, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. 68,69 Over time, the seamless integration of preserved structures and new builds has created a distinct physical and visual identity in Antwerp's city centre.

Completed in 1931, Boerentoren is Europe's first skyscraper, standing at around 96 m tall.<sup>70</sup> It served as an office until it was acquired in 2020 by the Katoen Natie -Indaver group.<sup>71</sup> The new private sector owners not only provided much needed rehabilitation works but also made an interesting decision to convert Boerentoren into a cultural tower, complete with a bookshop, exhibitions and retail offerings, to enhance the experiential quality of the city centre.<sup>72</sup> Given its rich historical significance and bold Art Deco style, the landmark is currently undergoing careful restoration to integrate the past and the present. This work is partly subsidised by the government due to its status as a heritage building.<sup>73</sup> While there were initial proposals to incorporate more contemporary features such as a glass structure, the developers will also consider feedback from the public for its final design.<sup>74</sup> This example points to how CBDs can utilise adaptive reuse strategies to enhance its distinctiveness.

# **TOKYO**

# Entertainment City Shibuya



In Tokyo, there are multiple established CBDs, including the Otemachi, Marunouchi and Yurakucho (OMY) district, Roppongi and Toranomon, as well as Shibuya. In response to socioeconomic changes, Tokyo has been undergoing renewal across the city. This is facilitated by various major developers, each steering growth for the CBDs that they have a major stake in.

For instance, real estate in Shibuya is largely driven by the Tokyu Railway Company Group and they have pinpointed "Entertainment City" as the aspiration for the area following a series of studies with stakeholders and residents. This aligns naturally with its vouthful character and iconic attractions like the National Theatre Tokyo. As part of this redevelopment in Shibuya, the developer has lined up a series of redevelopment projects in Shibuya to create a concentration of cultural amenities such as event spaces and museums to offer diverse and immersive activities.75 Since 2012, more than 10 projects have been completed, including the popular Shibuya Scramble Square. This illustrates a private sector-led and long-term planning approach towards both visioning and implementing distinctive CBDs.

# **MELBOURNE**

# Mad March



Carnival attractions in the Melbourne CBD

Photo courtesy of Unsplash

Every March, Melbourne has an exciting and lively roster of events, spanning across domains such as music, fashion and food. Many of these like the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival and the Moomba Festival, a community festival that features carnival rides, performances and exciting activities, take place within the CBD, activating its streets, restaurants, hotels and green spaces, as well as its sports and cultural facilities. South of the CBD, the Formula 1 Australian Grand Prix is also held at the Albert Park Circuit. In the community of the community features.

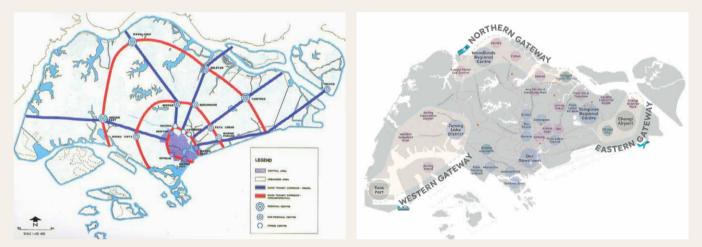
By lining up these activities throughout the month, the city and the downtown solidify their reputation both locally and internationally as the place to be for buzz and entertainment. This provides a clear case of how programming can enliven the CBD's existing infrastructure and shape its identity.

# SINGAPORE'S POLYCENTRIC APPROACH

# **Background**

Being an island city-state, Singapore must always balance both the needs of a city and a country. This means judiciously allocating its limited land to varying uses such as housing, schools, defence facilities as well as industrial, airport and transportation infrastructure. In managing these constraints, Singapore has created distinct planning strategies to support economic growth and vibrancy, including those targeted at its CBD and other economic clusters.

By the 1980s, after nearly two decades of intensive urban renewal, Singapore had to plan for a fast-growing population and alleviate congestion in the city centre. Therefore, to maintain competitiveness of the city, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) introduced a decentralisation approach to develop polycentres at transport nodes across the island. This strategy is aimed at ensuring a well-balanced distribution of commute island-wide by bringing jobs closer to home while complementing the CBD as the global financial hub and lifestyle destination for Singapore.



1991 Concept Plan (left) and Singapore's polycentric nodes today (right)

Images courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority

## **Implementation**

Thinking Long-Term

The idea for business nodes to decant commercial activity away from the city centre was conceived in the 1991 Concept Plan, which put forth a hierarchy of regional centres, sub-regional centres and fringe centres. These business nodes would offer employment and amenity access for residents as well as a range of locational options for business owners and employees.

Business nodes were strategically distributed across the island, chosen based on locational criteria such as good public transport connectivity and sizeable residential catchment nearby. Development kicked off in the eastern part of the island, with Tampines Regional Centre in 1992, attracting companies like banks to move some of their back-office operations to the area. Since then, other business nodes like Woodlands Regional Centre and Jurong Lake District continue to take shape today. This approach not only helped to ease peak-hour travel and improve efficiency in commutes but also ensure that space in Singapore's CBD can be further optimised into a greener and more vibrant district to live, work and play in.

# Planning for Distinct Business Nodes

To foster the growth of more business nodes, the city is developing distinct identities for each district, with a unique focus to attract their respective businesses, users and target audiences. Outside of the city centre, this will be done by clustering complementary industries, innovation districts and institutes of higher learning to foster collaborations.

To the West, Singapore is developing Jurong Lake District (JLD), with an emphasis on the green economy, sustainability and innovation. All new developments in the district will be required to design and operate greener buildings with lush planting and attractive public spaces, optimise on-site solar generation and tap on District Cooling and District Pneumatic Waste Conveyance Systems for more energy and resource-efficient air-conditioning and waste management respectively. To create a sustainable environment, the district will be served by four MRT lines, an integrated transport hub, an extensive multi-level pedestrian network, dedicated bus-only lanes and cycling paths.

The area also supports test-bedding where companies can trial and showcase novel urban solutions in the areas of reducing carbon emissions, energy usage, waste and resource, and car usage. To provide greater flexibility to curate spaces that integrate live, work and play within the district, a primarily 'White' land use zoning has been adopted where developers have greater flexibility to propose a mix of uses for the site. Along with Tuas Port and Jurong Innovation District, which will be a hub for advanced manufacturing, JLD will complement the existing industrial and port uses and turn the West into a stronger engine of growth. JLD is also sited close to the National University of Singapore and the Nanyang Technological University, enabling greater industry-research synergies.





Proposed plans for Jurong Lake District

Images courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority

Anchored by Changi Airport and the paired economic hubs at Changi Aviation Park and Changi City (comprising Changi Business Park and Changi East Urban District), the Eastern Gateway will strengthen its position as a thriving business district that supports global trade flows. Changi Aviation Park will be expanded to strengthen Singapore's aviation hub status by providing more space for aerospace and logistics industries' growth. Located at the doorstep of Terminal 5, Changi East Urban District will serve as a vibrant business and lifestyle destination. Plans are also underway to rejuvenate Changi Business Park by injecting high-value industries which may include aerospace sectors that can benefit from the proximity to Expo Interchange and the Singapore University of Technology and Design.<sup>78</sup>

In the North, the Northern Gateway will provide new opportunities for businesses through enhancing cross-border connectivity with Malaysia, developing new industrial areas as well as rejuvenating existing industrial estates. The expansion of Woodlands Checkpoint, a land border checkpoint with one of the world's busiest international land border crossings, and the development of Johor Bahru-Singapore Rapid Transit System Link, a rail shuttle service between Singapore's Woodlands North Coast and Johor Bahru's Bukit Chagar, will allow businesses to benefit from faster and more seamless access to markets and operations on both sides of the border. Located at the heart of the Northern Gateway, the Woodlands Regional Centre will have new commercial and industrial spaces, transforming it into a bustling hub for economic and business activity.

Beyond Woodlands Regional Centre, the development of new areas such as the Seletar East Industrial Park and Agri-Food Innovation Park will support the continued growth of the semiconductor and agri-food sectors respectively. Existing industrial estates will also be rejuvenated to meet the evolving needs of the manufacturing landscape and integrate green and blue spaces within the urban fabric, such as at Sungei Kadut Eco-District. In addition, the proximity of business and industrial areas to academic institutions including Republic Polytechnic in Woodlands and Singapore Institute of Technology in Punggol Digital District (PDD) enables closer industry-academia collaboration.



Proposed plans for Woodlands Regional Centre. Artist's impression for illustrative purposes only

Image courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority

#### Partnering the Private Sector

While planners set the vision for each business node, the government cannot realise these all on their own. Hence, as the land-use planning agency for Singapore, the URA also harnesses the expertise and capital of the private sector to build up these areas. This is done through the Government Land Sales programme where state land is released for tender by the private sector.

In selected cases, master developers are also engaged to facilitate development on a larger scale, rather than in piecemeal. This allows for better urban design and enables the node to have a more cohesive identity overall. Novel concepts are also being trialled to suit evolving market demands. For instance, for PDD in the North-east, the goal is to create a hub for digital and cybersecurity industries which relies heavily on collaboration and strong integration between different segments of the value chain, such as academia, research institutions and start-ups. Therefore, a new Enterprise District approach was piloted at PDD where allowable Gross Floor Area (GFA) quanta for each land use are allocated at the district (global) level. This provides the Master Developer with more flexibility in deciding the distribution of the GFA quanta to the individual parcels according to the desired use mix and the needs of its target occupants.



Artist's impression of Punggol Digital District

Image courtesy of JTC Corporation

Despite having well-defined goals and plans for execution, some challenges remain. Relatively newer districts lack critical mass to jumpstart as self-sustaining and attractive business nodes. Office occupiers may also value the proximity to existing client bases in the CBD. Alongside the phasing of key infrastructure and amenities, developers and tenants are thus taking a measured approach to investments, reflecting the inherent risks of emerging districts. Thus, Singapore's polycentric model is still a work in progress and policymakers are balancing these considerations while also managing the allocation of resources across various needs.

## **Outcomes**

Nonetheless, the various nodes are gradually being built up and populated. For PDD, it is in the process of completion and will be fully open in 2026. At least 65% of its office spaces have been taken up as of February 2025 to house innovation hubs for banks such as OCBC and UOB.<sup>79</sup> PDD and other business nodes will complement the CBD in the Downtown, which will continue to be a mainstay for Singapore in attracting financial companies and investments. Spanning across Raffles Place, Tanjong Pagar, Anson, Cecil and extending to Marina Bay, the CBD houses more than 2 million m² of office space while serving as the headquarters of many local companies and Multi-National Corporations (MNCs).

While it may be difficult to measure the tangible outcomes of utilising a polycentric approach, there are some proxy indicators that can help us to understand its success such as by looking at the accessibility of various business nodes to other key districts. Other indicators could also include examining the number of people living near their workplace, reflecting a narrowing gap between homes and jobs.

Did you know?	Tampines Regional Centre		
Almost 60%* of morning peak	Tampines		35%
hour journeys to Tampines Regional Centre come from	Bedok	14%	
Tampines, Bedok and Pasir Ris.	Pasir Ris	9%	

<sup>\*</sup>Estimated figures. Source: Land Transport Authority's Travel Data

#### BOGOTA'S BRONX CREATIVE DISTRICT

#### **Background**

The city of Bogota is the capital of Colombia as well as the educational, cultural, commercial, administrative, financial and political hub of the country.<sup>80</sup> While core business and finance activities have shifted out of the city centre, Downtown Bogota remains home to many government offices, museums, universities and local businesses, making it a popular destination for locals and tourists alike. Located within this city is the historic La Candelaria neighbourhood, which houses iconic landmarks like Plaza de Bolívar and the Casa de la Moneda museum.<sup>81</sup>



Bogota's city centre is indicated in purple

Image courtesy of Fundación Gilberto
Alzate Avendaño

The Bronx District, which is situated about four blocks away from La Candelaria, was once subject to drugs, gangs and crime. In 2016, the city administration intervened by demolishing many buildings and initiating the preservation of heritage structures. This action resulted in the displacement of the local community and left the government with the challenges of:

- Safeguarding what was left of the historical buildings
- Making good use of the vacant lots in the area
- Repositioning and rebranding the perception of the neighbourhood
- Bringing community and life back into this part of downtown

The city government thus conceptualised the Bronx Creative District (BCD) project in 2018 to renew and recover the downtown from past dynamics of violence and drug use into one that would promote community inclusion and support local creative industries.<sup>82</sup>

#### **Implementation**

Restoration of Infrastructure

The 22,000 m² BCD aims to serve as Bogota's first induced creative district. Its mission is to become the hub for creative and cultural industries (ICC) in the city, providing a platform for events such as concerts and exhibitions. It will also deliver facilities such as makerspaces and incubators for artists to work and collaborate. To ensure the project retains its link to the community and the historical heritage of the area, a community engagement centre has been planned within the "La Esquina Redonda" (the Round Corner) building.

A creative district is a dynamic hub where culture, creativity and entrepreneurship converge. Leveraging the region's unique strengths, such districts can drive economic growth, urban revitalisation and inclusion while generating significant job opportunities. They may also enhance the creation and distribution of cultural and innovative goods and services to shape a vibrant future.

As part of the redevelopment, many of the buildings in the BCD will need to be updated in order to perform their new roles. These include hosting performances as well as housing Colombia's first public fabrication laboratory equipped with 3D printing, laser cutting and digital manufacturing capabilities. Altogether the project will involve the acquisition of about 46 properties and the establishment of a new building, as well as restoration and adaptive reuse of three historic buildings:





Proposed plans for La Facultad (left) and La Flauta (right)

Images courtesy of Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño

- La Facultad (the Faculty) and La Flauta (the Flute) The two republican heritage buildings completed around the 1930s served as the first School of Medicine of the National University of Colombia and the Natural Resources Laboratory of the Ministry of Industry, respectively. These two structures will be linked up to create an events space and to serve the needs of creative and cultural industries.
- La Milla (the Mile) The pedestrian walkway between La Facultad and La Flauta will be
  converted into the city's first covered public street to host events such as live music,
  theatre and dance.
- La Esquina Redonda (the Round Corner) A dynamic community centre where various stakeholders can come together to tackle issues like violence, promote social inclusion, support local entrepreneurship and provide educational programmes for vulnerable populations. It will function as an arts and culture hub for engaging the community, as well as for fostering social cohesion, identity and inclusivity among local residents.<sup>83</sup>





La Milla before construction (left). The roof that will cover the pedestrian street has been completed in 2024 (right).

Photos courtesy of Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño

#### Community Engagement

A key concern of the project was further gentrification of the area. Thus, the focus was on getting the community involved to foster a distinct identity for BCD. There was strong emphasis on engaging partners such as local artists, entrepreneurs and collectives from the onset to brainstorm, co-create ideas and implement initiatives. All naddition, a georeferencing exercise was conducted to map out the existing businesses and inform more targeted policies and strategies. To build up the branding of BCD as a focal point for the creative and cultural industries, a stakeholder's convention was also held in 2018 to invite industry players to join the BCD. The response was overwhelmingly positive with more than 1,400 proposals submitted.



Workshop where museum and curatorial experts around the country came together to share insights for the restoration of La Esquina Redonda<sup>87</sup>

Photo courtesy of Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño

#### Governance Structures

While the BCD involves a wide range of partnerships, it is overseen and funded by the Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño (FUGA), a public entity dedicated to promoting the cultural, social, economic and heritage transformation of downtown Bogota.<sup>88</sup> This sets the BCD apart from other redevelopment projects and ensures that the project stays true to its vision of becoming a unique creative district.

#### **Outcomes**

Today, the district has successfully rebranded itself as Bogota's first Creative District and is about 75% completed. In 2022, it was reported that before construction began, BCD had already hosted over 100,000 attendees and generated about 2,500 jobs. At the end of 2024, the number of attendees was up to 214,000. Other notable outcomes include the recovery of 35,000 m² of public space, with about 60% allocated to hosting art and cultural events.<sup>89</sup>





Festivals and fashion shows held at BCD

Photos courtesy of Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño

The city continues to actively track the following economic, social and cultural indicators for the BCD:

Category	Indicator	Description	
Economic Indicators	Number of creative businesses	Number of new companies and innovative enterprises established within BCD	
	Growth in creative industry employment	Number of jobs created in art, music, design and other creative activities	
	Revenue from cultural activities	Income generated from events, fairs and cultural activities in BCD	
	Private and public investment	Amount of investment from both public and private sectors in BCD	
Social Indicators	Number of visitors and tourists	Number of visitors and tourists attending events and cultural activities, as well as the foot traffic within BCD	
	Safety insights	Residents and visitors' perceived improvements in safety in BCD (assessed through surveys)	
	Community participation	Number of local community members participating in workshops, events or activities in BCD	
	Recovered public spaces	Total area of public spaces restored or rehabilitated in BCD	
Cultural Indicators	Number of cultural and artistic events	Number of events held in BCD	
	Participation of local artists	Number of local artists and collectives involved in BCD activities	

Examples of indicators tracked by BCD

Adapted from Bronx Creative District

# CONNECTED DISTINCTIVE INTEGRATIVE WIBRANT RESPONSIVE

By integrating people, not displacing them, we can see the historical centre revive in the next few years.

Carlos Fernando Galán Pachón Mayor of Bogota

New York City, like so many other cities around the world, has sent a clear message that having safe, vibrant, public spaces is key to quality of life and economic vitality. That is why we continue to prioritise partnerships with private sector and community organisations to ensure our business districts thrive.

Ya-Ting Liu Chief Public Realm Officer, New York City

CBDs all over the world can no longer capitalise on their sole provision of Grade A office spaces to attract businesses to locate there. They also need to differentiate themselves as great places to be and to live in, a reflection of the blurring of lines in the way we live and work.

Fun Siew Leng

Chief Urban Designer, Urban Redevelopment Authority, Singapore



Photo courtesy of Unsplash

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many cities witnessed to varying degrees, the hollowing out of their CBDs. Since then, there has been an accelerated shift away from CBDs being mono-use office districts. Purely commercial areas are no longer deemed resilient or attractive, and cities need to explore ways to draw diversity into their downtown cores. For their long-term sustainability and appeal, it is essential that CBDs integrate a greater variety of land uses and user profiles into the mix.

Cities can explore creative ways to inject live-in, leisure and educational uses to develop a seamless live-work-play-learn environment that serves workers, residents and visitors alike. However, CBDs, with their prime locations, are generally associated with higher land cost and rental premiums.

It should also be recognised that injecting residential uses alone will not replace the level of economic activity that pure commercial offices once generated. As such, cities will need to constantly calibrate their CBD use and programme mix and incorporate flexibility into their plans.

Hence, how can cities provide a good range of housing options and services, both in terms of affordability and typology, as well as work with stakeholders from all sectors to curate new businesses, infrastructure, programmes and policies to deliver an integrative user-oriented economic environment?

### 05

#### SUPPORT SEAMLESS LIVE-WORK-PLAY-LEARN INTEGRATION

Executing a holistic live-work-play-learn vision needs to go beyond just implementing different housing, leisure and educational facilities. Cities must carefully consider how to bring these elements together in a meaningful and cohesive way. This must be accompanied by supporting amenities for the live-in population's daily needs, schools and childcare services to cater to the influx of young families, and more free-to-use community spaces to engender social integration.

#### **SINGAPORE**

Live-Work-Play Marina Bay



Recreation spaces on the green roof of the Marina Barrage

Photo courtesy of Unsplash

As a greenfield site created through land reclamation, planners had the opportunity to shape Marina Bay into a vibrant 24/7 live-work-play district from the onset.90 Through the Government Land Sales programme, parcels of land are tendered out to developers to realise this integrated vision and expand the city centre. Completed in 2008, The Sail @ Marina Bay marked the first fully private residential development in the area. Looking ahead, there are also plans to build up a new 10-minute mixeduse neighbourhood in the Marina South subzone.91 The first sale site development (One Marina Gardens) was launched for tender in 2022, injecting more than 900 new apartment units to the area.92 To bring more homes closer to the city centre, public housing developments have also been introduced at the fringe areas, such as at Tanjong Rhu and the Greater Southern Waterfront.

Despite being a prime location, planners have also safeguarded multiple public spaces in Marina Bay for leisure. This not only includes the iconic Gardens by the Bay which caters to both locals and tourists, but also Marina Barrage where many enjoy recreational activities ranging from picnics to kite-flying against the city skyline. Marina Bay also acts as a backdrop for many major events like the regular Spectra light show, the Singapore Countdown during New Year's Eve and i Light Singapore which features artworks that combine light, sustainability and technology.<sup>93</sup>

#### SAN DIEGO

Downtown Development Toolkit



Aerial view of downtown San Diego
Photo courtesy of Unsplash

San Diego stands out among US cities for its effective housing strategies. 94,95 Within the boundaries of the CBD, it delivered almost 1,900 homes in 2024 with more in the pipeline. In fact, data from recent years has shown that more residential units and income-restricted affordable housing were built in the downtown than any other area of the city. 96

This was facilitated by various incentive schemes introduced by the government (consolidated within a comprehensive Downtown Development Toolkit). For example, office to residential conversions are permitted by right without the need for further approvals. There are also up to 50% Floor Area Ratio (FAR) grants for incorporating income-restricted affordable housing units. To bring in families to the CBD, higher FARs are offered for developments that include three-bedroom units and 20 bonus square feet for each square foot of a childcare facility. With the ability to stack these alongside a slew of other incentives, it allows most projects to intensify without limits.97

#### HO CHI MINH CITY

Bach Dang Wharf Park



Bach Dang Wharf Park in District 1 of Ho Chi Minh City

Photo courtesy of Ho Chi Minh City's Department of Planning and Architecture

Ho Chi Minh City's CBD is at District 1 and faces the Saigon River. Historically, port activities along the waterfront created a barrier between residents and the river. Recognising this disconnect and the need to address ageing infrastructure, the government thus ordered a revamp of the Bach Dang Wharf Park which stands in the heart of the city.<sup>98</sup>

This has added over 8,000 m<sup>2</sup> of public space to the CBD with greenery, pedestrian pathways and better lighting.99 In the process, walls and fences were also removed to create a more porous and accessible waterfront. Open spaces like these are critical so that users can take respite from the fast-paced CBD environment. The project has proven to be popular, attracting residents looking for a place to exercise while hosting numerous cultural festivals.<sup>100</sup> Going forward, there is also a plan to renovate the park, by adding more facilities, a river-crossing pedestrian bridge and a sightseeing monorail along the riverside to boost its appeal to locals and tourists alike.101

## PARTNER STAKEHOLDERS TO DIVERSIFY BUSINESS MIX AND LOCAL OFFERINGS

Stakeholders on the ground are usually the most familiar with gaps and opportunities in the CBD. Therefore, local governments should consult and work with companies and community organisations to drive targeted initiatives that introduce new ideas, business models and offerings. Such partnerships require planning systems that are able to accommodate feedback and ideas from the grassroots while ensuring capacity to scale successful pilot programmes. This collective effort promotes a sense of ownership and helps to foster stewardship, encouraging everyone to actively contribute and have a stake in the district's future success.

#### **NEW YORK CITY**

Open Restaurants and Dining Out NYC



Outdoor dining in New York

Photo courtesy of New York City Department of Transportation

The pandemic dealt a heavy blow to the food and beverage industry in cities worldwide. In New York City, the greatest impact was felt in the Manhattan borough where the CBD is located, due to the severe drop in footfall.<sup>102</sup> The city was able to move quickly to implement the Open Restaurants programme in June 2020 as a stopgap measure. Under this initiative, eligible restaurants and bars could extend out into public spaces, including sidewalks, plazas and Open Streets (see Vibrant section).103 In part, this was due to the advocacy of a non-profit group, the New York City Hospitality Alliance, to adapt the concept of al fresco dining from European café culture.104

There were clear benefits for both residents and businesses, and the city initiated a series of stakeholder consultations through surveys and virtual roundtables on extending the programme.<sup>105</sup> Complementing these efforts, organisations like Design Advocates and the Alfresco NYC coalition also came together to hold Open Restaurants Innovation workshops to discuss submissions from designers and restaurants owners that would eventually inform design guidelines for the permanent programme.<sup>106</sup> In August 2023, the initiative was formalised and renamed as Dining Out NYC, synthesising diverse stakeholder inputs into an enduring policy.107 The new programme also came along with detailed regulations relating to operations and enforcement protocols, addressing community concerns about disturbances like noise and pollution.

#### LOS ANGELES

Privately Owned Public Spaces



Film screening at California Plaza in Downtown Los Angeles

Photo courtesy of Downtowngal, CC BY-SA 4.0

CBDs are often heavily built-up and land for open space can be hard to come by. Hence, cities often look to private landowners to contribute to the public realm such as through Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS) which are privately developed and managed for the shared benefit of the community. This approach has been adopted in many global cities. In Downtown Los Angeles, for example, where large parks and public spaces are scarce, POPS form a crucial component of the CBD's urban fabric. 108 The city facilitates its creation and long-term accessibility through zoning mechanisms. 109 Under the Downtown Community Plan (DCP), projects can also receive development incentives when they incorporate POPS.<sup>110</sup>

Yet the effectiveness of POPS depends heavily on public awareness of these spaces. Thus, the DTLA Alliance has mapped these out on an interactive online map. The DCP has also refreshed zoning codes that mandate wayfinding signage to POPS in the downtown. These must include operating hours, provide mandatory public access and be placed at all public entrances to the development.<sup>111</sup>

#### **MELBOURNE**

Flash Forward Creative Laneways



Street art at Langs Lane in Melbourne

Photo courtesy of MattExMachina, CC BY-NC 2.0

When lockdowns were in place, the creative industry was severely impacted due to cancelled events and venue closures.

Melbourne thus engaged 168 creative professionals, with a focus on artists from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds, to give 40 of its laneways a makeover.

The innovative approach paired visual artists that made street installations with musicians that composed complementary albums for each laneway. Running throughout the CBD, these projects took place on private properties, which necessitated partnerships with building owners. The investment of AUD \$8.9 million paid off, yielding an equivalent amount in value-added spend. Surveys also revealed substantial positive effects to economic, physical and mental wellbeing of the artists and staff involved, with many having gained new skills and career opportunities.<sup>112</sup> Now, the laneways have become both a social space and a must-visit attraction.

#### VIENNA'S DONAU CITY

#### **Background**

Vienna's traditional city centre is located at the First District. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it houses cultural landmarks like the St Stephen's Cathedral and the Imperial Palace. This historic core, together with surrounding areas, forms the city's CBD. However, the concentration of conserved buildings also means that there is a lower supply of new projects. This thus led to the formation of "CBDs" across Vienna, including Donau City.

Situated on the left bank of the Danube River, Donau City was once a 17-hectare landfill site. While initial plans in the 1990s centred around the hosting of Expo 95 were eventually scrapped, the city proceeded with development and engaged architects to masterplan the district. The aim was to incorporate a broad mix of uses and also focus on the connection to the waterfront. These founding principles remain till this day, creating an integrated environment for a range of users.



View of Donau City
Photo courtesy of Tauralbus,
CC BY 2.0

#### Implementation

Over the years, plans for the district continued to prioritise recreation, entertainment and cultural amenities as well as generous open spaces, allowing Donau City to solidify its positioning as a modern and multi-functional centre. This case study will thus go into how it has injected each component of live, work, play and learn.

#### An Attractive Commercial District

Firstly, the district had to build up its reputation as a commercial node and attractiveness to businesses. It also developed a science and technology park offering offices of various sizes as well as event and collaboration spaces, drawing companies ranging from research firms to established multinational corporations. In addition, it has close proximity to the Vienna International Centre which houses the United Nations office. This gives rise to potential synergies between the two hubs, where Donau City could benefit from the prestige of this locale and collaboration with an international workforce.



Cluster of commercial and residential buildings

Photo courtesy of Tauralbus, CC BY 2.0

#### Homes for Different Demographics

Appealing to a wide range of users, the district also provides multiple housing typologies. Aside from private residential apartments at projects like DC Residential, the DC Tower 3 is dedicated to 832 units of student housing. Although there are no universities directly within Donau City's boundaries, the U1 subway allows for less than 20-minute commutes to the Vienna University of Economics and Business, the University of Vienna and the Vienna University of Technology.

Building on Vienna's established social housing programme, the district also has subsidised housing options such as Wohnpark Donau City, a residential complex with 1,001 units in varying sizes to accommodate different household needs and also persons with disabilities. Within the development, there are also green spaces, shops and amenities such as clinics, a daycare centre and kindergarten.<sup>117</sup>

Planned for completion in 2025, the DC MusicFlats represents rental housing with a unique twist as it was designed specifically for musicians that require spaces to practice. This serves Vienna's vibrant music scene, given its status as a global capital of classical music. Hence, the apartments have features like sound-insulated rooms and practice booths. Additional shared rehearsal spaces are also available to be booked via an app. 118

Through these diverse housing options, Donau City transcends the conventional CBD model, fostering a community that extends well beyond office workers to include students, artists and families.

#### Play Along the Waterfront

Fronting the river, many of the leisure activities in Donau City revolve around its waterfront. For instance, Pier 22 on the nearby Danube Island was recently opened in 2024 as an 18,000 m² public space for the city. Split into three main sections, the waterfront promenade, the Park-Working Platform and the Cultural Kiosk, visitors can take part in a multitude of recreational experiences:<sup>119</sup>

- Waterfront promenade A walkway that brings people along the river to swim or sunbathe, with a shallow play area for children to enjoy.<sup>120</sup>
- Park-Working Platform This area functions as a free outdoor office space for remote workers. Equipped with public Wi-Fi, carefully designed shades and storage lockers, it provides workstations for both solo users and groups.<sup>121</sup>
- Cultural Kiosk Currently in the pipeline, this will be a venue that hosts art and cultural events such as open-air film screenings.<sup>122</sup>

Pier 22 will also welcome further additions that will expand its offerings, including a café, fitness zone with sports facilities and a picnic garden.<sup>123</sup>





People enjoying the waterfront at Pier 22

Photos courtesy of Mostlikely Architecture

#### Campus Within the CBD

It is often challenging to have schools within the downtown due to a lack of critical mass. At the same time, the absence of educational facilities deters families from settling in the area. In Donau City, there are a few schools for the younger age groups within the Wohnpark development. Moreover, the DC Education Campus, an international school for kindergarten to secondary levels, is slated to complete in 2025. These would complement the expected increase in live-in population from upcoming residential developments.

#### **Outcomes**

Donau City currently accounts for almost 10% of the modern office floor space in Vienna. Projects like the upcoming mixed use V22 will further increase this share. Of all the different regional submarkets including the traditional CBD, it also had the lowest vacancy rates in the first quarter of 2025. With its live-work-play-learn provisions, approximately 3,500 people live in Donau City while about 12,000 people work in the district. 126

#### CHICAGO LOOP ALLIANCE'S 2023-2028 STRATEGIC PLAN

#### **Background**

Economic activity and public transit in Chicago converge at its downtown at the "Loop". Despite occupying less than 0.5% of the city's area, the CBD is home to about 1% of Chicago's inhabitants and accounts for more than a third of its employment. Bounded by the Chicago River on the north and west, the Loop also houses retail streets, cultural destinations like the theatre district and the iconic Cloud Gate (more famously known as "the Bean"). 128



Boundaries of the Loop

Image courtesy of Chicago
Loop Alliance

Since the 1970s, Chicago has put in place Special Service Areas (SSA) which are "local tax districts that fund expanded services and programmes through a localised property tax levy within contiguous areas". These SSAs are managed by non-profits to complement services by the city, and can comprise physical enhancements, landscaping or even marketing campaigns.<sup>129</sup>



Established in 2005, the Chicago Loop Alliance (CLA) is one such organisation overseeing the very first and most extensive SSA at State Street in the heart of the downtown. Today, it represents over 300 stakeholders – from restaurants and hotels to developers and universities.

In 2013, CLA launched its first Strategic Action Plan with a focus on areas like hospitality, placemaking and economic development.<sup>132</sup> This has led to transformative impacts and flagship programmes such as ACTIVATE which are pop-up events at underutilised spaces with a unique twist – locations are only revealed up to a week before to generate buzz.<sup>133</sup> Despite challenges like COVID-19, CLA proved to be adaptable and was a driving force in the downtown recovery. With its growing role in the Loop, a second Strategic Plan was released in end-2023 to build on this momentum.<sup>134</sup>



ACTIVATE adds vibrancy to underutilised alleyways in the Loop

Photo courtesy of Chicago Loop Alliance

#### **Implementation**

#### A Clear Blueprint

The main thrusts of the Strategic Plan were informed by in-depth reviews to identify strengths and weaknesses, as well as visioning exercises to picture the future of the Chicago Loop. Four priority areas were identified for implementation from 2023 to 2028, each detailed with catalytic actions that are phased over the five-year period. As a ground up approach to downtown revitalisation, the plan emphasises the importance of being an integrative CBD and is anchored in strong stakeholder collaboration. These strategic priorities include:

- · Build Confidence in the Loop
- Increase Chicago Loop Alliance's Profile & Impact
- · Ensure Everyone's Neighbourhood
- · Create a Complete Urban District



Busy streets in the Loop

Photo courtesy of Chicago Loop Alliance

#### Build Confidence in the Loop

With a goal of positioning the Loop as vibrant, welcoming and memorable, it is necessary to shape positive perceptions through targeted initiatives on cleanliness, safety and visitor experiences. This harnesses the success of the CLA Ambassadors programme where the personnel do more than just maintaining a clean environment. Drawing on their deep understanding of local needs, they also help with wayfinding and offer support to both businesses and members of the community that may require assistance. The Ambassadors also publish monthly reports on hospitality and environmental conditions in the Loop with detailed statistics and before-and-after documentation of interventions. Furthermore, CLA has set out plans to work more closely with the police and transport departments, violence prevention organisations, social services and university leadership to coordinate efforts to improve safety.



CLA Ambassadors engaging with the community

Photo courtesy of Chicago Loop Alliance

#### Increase Chicago Loop Alliance's Profile & Impact

This priority area aims to solidify CLA as the recognised civic leader and effective service provider of the Loop, a role that was clearly demonstrated during the pandemic. When there was uncertainty during the unprecedented crisis, CLA stepped up as the "authoritative source of information". Specifically, CLA pulled together data from its ecosystem of partners on aspects like footfall and occupancy rates, visitor attendance and transit ridership, facilitating more informed decision-making for stakeholders, while also tapping on media platforms to restore confidence in the downtown.<sup>139</sup>

Aside from strengthening resources and capacity, the Strategic Plan also recognised the value of partnerships. CLA set out to have regular dialogues with stakeholders from various backgrounds as well as to engage with all levels of government to champion policies and projects that can benefit the downtown. While SSAs have served as Chicago's answer to Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), the BID structure is a business model that offers greater flexibility and efficiency such as in terms of funding, so that CLA can better deliver change in the Loop. Thus, another key action was to support the adoption of BID legislation both at the state and local levels. In 2024, the new government affairs committee made significant progress through their advocacy work together with other organisations like The Magnificent Mile Association, resulting in state legislation to allow for BIDs. 141

#### Ensure Everyone's Neighbourhood

In addition, CLA underscored the benefits of fostering a human- and community-centric CBD that caters to all demographic segments. On top of having a diverse makeup in its staff, Board, membership and partners, they also endeavour to provide universal access in the built environment as well as organise more events that attract participation beyond the usual crowd.<sup>142</sup> For example, CLA has hosted multiple editions of Hospitality Hires where pre-screened jobseekers and companies in the sector are matched, with many participants from surrounding city neighbourhoods receiving job offers to date.<sup>143</sup>



A Hospitality Hires session Photo courtesy of Chicago Loop Alliance

#### Create a Complete Urban District

Lastly, the CBD also has to be an exemplary downtown with robust neighbourhood amenities and a mix of compelling experiences. This will be realised through an array of measures including activation of storefronts and the street level, designing public spaces that are better equipped to hold events and implementation of pedestrianisation projects.144





Performers and small businesses actively participate in Sundays on State

Photos courtesy of Chicago Loop Alliance

Sundays on State is one of CLA's signature initiatives where road closures temporarily turn State Street into a venue for vibrant block parties. Made possible through city grants from the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events and sponsorships with companies like Macy's and Target, visitors can enjoy a curated selection of activities, dining and shopping along the pedestrian-friendly corridor.<sup>145</sup> In particular, over 90% of activations come from underrepresented business owners such as minority-owned and women-owned businesses.<sup>146</sup>

#### Funding and Governance Structures

The SSA structure and oversight by the State Street Commission, made of public and private representatives, ensures that 100% of collected property taxes are reinvested directly into district improvements. This is bolstered by funds received through the Chicago Loop Alliance Foundation, an affiliate organisation that is able to receive donations and sponsorships. Furthermore, as a membership-based organisation, stakeholders are incentivised to join through exclusive networking sessions and advertising channels. They also have the chance to have a stronger voice in the revitalisation of the Loop by taking part in committees such as those on Planning, Advocacy, Marketing and Placemaking.

#### **Outcomes**

The Strategic Plan also comes with a <u>Priorities Scorecard</u>, where subjective and objective key performance indicators will be shared openly with the Board, stakeholders and members of public for accountability.<sup>150</sup>

Category	Indicator	
Build Confidence in the Loop	Perceptions of the Loop's feeling of safety	
	Decrease in violent crime	
	Transit ridership	
	Increase in pedestrian traffic	
	% increase in the number of building permits issued	
	Amount of trash removed by the Clean Team	
Increase Chicago Loop Alliance's Profile & Impact	Increase in CLA members	
	CLA corporate sponsorship revenue	
	CLA media mentions/hits	
	Social media engagements, impressions, followers	
	Number of strategic partnerships	
Ensure Everyone's Neighbourhood	Businesses participating in CLA events represent city of Chicago demographics	
	Engagements with youth and future leaders	
	Number of Loop business sectors represented on CLA board	
	Increase in residential population	
	Affordability index	
Create a Complete	Number of storefront vacancies filled	
Urban District	Number of storefront pop-ups	
	Number of employees returning to work	
	Number of residential units	
	Number of CLA sponsored space activations	

Examples of indicators in the Priorities Scorecard

Adapted from Chicago Loop Alliance's 2023-2028 Strategic Plan

Besides these, CLA publishes comprehensive annual reports that capture a long list of indicators on how the Loop has performed for the year. Furthermore, CLA conducts rigorous research to gather compelling evidence and make a business case for more to be done for downtowns. Recent reports include the impact of the Sundays on State programme and residential development on the CBD.<sup>151</sup> Past studies captured the economic impact of arts and culture,<sup>152</sup> which generates USD \$2.5 billion annually, and higher education,<sup>153</sup> represented by the 58,000 college students who live and learn in the Loop.

In a 2024 joint study with the International Downtown Association assessing the economic value of US downtowns, over 150 metrics were consolidated across the principles of Economy, Inclusion, Vibrancy, Identity and Resilience. It also utilised a common framework for benchmarking between downtowns in the US using three tiers or archetypes: established, growing and emerging downtowns.

For the Chicago Loop, it is categorised as an established downtown alongside San Francisco and Seattle. Compared to other established downtowns in the study, the Loop surpassed its peers with a 27% increase in employment, a 194% growth rate in number of residents, and a higher sustainable commute score at 74%. On the other hand, it also had a higher median gross housing rent and fewer creative jobs relative to the average for established downtowns, pinpointing potential opportunities for growth.<sup>154</sup>

	Chicago	Established Downtowns
Change in employment (2002-2021)	27%	8%
Citywide creative jobs	22%	42%
Growth in number of residents (Avg. 2000-2022)	194%	72%
Median gross rent	\$2,485	\$1,730
Sustainable commute	74%	41%

Performance of the Chicago Loop and other Established Downtowns studied by the International Downtown Association

Adapted from The Value of U.S. Downtowns and Center Cities: Calculating the Value of Chicago Loop

# CONNECTED DISTINCTIVE INTEGRATIVE VIBRANT RESPONSIVE

How can we keep people in our city centre, but also shops, food and beverage, restaurants and things [that bring] life?... Because I believe very strongly that when we can do all those things, our economy will flourish.

Koen Kennis Vice Mayor, Antwerp

Whenever we talk about the global power of cities, we must also consider the night-time. Tokyo is starting to grow our night-time economy, but it will take time.

Professor Hiroo Ichikawa Executive Director, Mori Memorial Foundation



Photo courtesy of Unsplash

Even before the pandemic, CBDs around the world were already grappling with the challenge of being rendered "ghost towns" after work hours and on weekends. The rise of hybrid work arrangements during and after the pandemic resulted in less human activity and throughput. Some companies also began to downsize their office spaces, diminishing the once-bustling daytime office crowd. The impacts were amplified when the low footfall also affected other local businesses in the CBD. These factors jumpstarted the call for round-the-clock activation.

To achieve this, cities need to break away from conventional commercial-focused CBDs and curate more 24/7 mixed-use urban destinations. Investing in the night-time economy and its supporting infrastructure to attract people into the CBD will not only boost its vibrancy but also ensure that the area remains safe and accessible throughout the day. Businesses will also have a wider window of time to attract customers, adding to the overall economic resilience of the CBD.

CBDs should also offer an exciting mix of activities and amenities to strengthen their role as lively hubs of social interaction and entertainment. In particular, software and programming are important ingredients for bringing life to CBDs through placemaking. When done right, these efforts can bring about a greater sense of community and connection to place. Hence, how can cities reimagine CBDs as "go-to" destinations for buzz, energy and fun?

### 07

#### GROW A 24/7 ECONOMY

Establishing a thriving night-time economy that extends the operational hours of downtowns beyond the traditional 9-to-5 activity cycle has become a central strategy for many cities around the world. This approach can unlock new revenue streams and employment opportunities across various sectors in the CBD. Cities should, however, be mindful to manage potential disamenities and safety issues to residents through planning, regulations and engagement.

#### **TOKYO**

Night-Time Policies and Projections



Projection of Godzilla on the TMG Building No. 1

Photo courtesy of picture cells - Adobe Stock

In recent years, Tokyo has been looking to tap onto the economic and social value of the night-time economy. This initially started with revisions to the Entertainment Business Law in 2016 which allowed clubs to apply for 24-hour licenses. Frants were also offered by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) and the Tokyo Tourism Foundation in 2019 to reduce the financial burden on night-time businesses and events. In 2025, 558 million yen in subsidies was further budgeted to support night-time events.

The city has also created immersive attractions after dark through the Tokyo Projection Mapping Project in areas like Shinjuku.<sup>158</sup> In 2024, TMG officially started Tokyo Night and Light which involves nightly projection mapping of artwork on Building No. 1 to turn the civic infrastructure into a destination for tourists.<sup>159</sup> It has won a Guiness World Record for the sheer size of its permanent architectural projection—mapped display, which features pop culture figures like Godzilla and scenes from the city's history.<sup>160</sup>

Another critical aspect to the success of the night-time economy is safety. In this area, wards like Shinjuku and Shibuya are making efforts by banning public alcohol consumption. Shinjuku rolled this out in its downtown area during the Halloween period, while Shibuya has extended this prohibition throughout the year, to reduce disorderly behaviour and public disturbances.<sup>161</sup>

While the refresh of Tokyo's CBDs continues to be led by private developers, such examples also show how the city government plays an important role in facilitating business-led initiatives and spearheading trials to demonstrate the feasibility of projects.

#### **GLASGOW**

#### Golden Z



Map indicating the location of the Golden Z strategy

Image courtesy of Glasgow City Council

The three main shopping streets at Sauchiehall Street, Buchanan Street and Argyle Street form a Z shape (outlined in the image on the left), and are thus collectively termed as the "Golden Z". The effects of the pandemic and changing consumer preferences away from brick-and-mortar shops have manifested within this spine, with department stores and national chains, which were once anchor tenants, closing their doors. Poor night-time activation was also highlighted as a challenge, due in part to high vacancy rates that led to darker streets with fewer lit shop windows and signages.

The city now has a vision to refresh the area with a 24-hour "breakfast to postclub" culture throughout the "Golden Z". For example, the city proposes to give planning consent to more bars and restaurants at strategic locations, to enable a more mixed-use approach so that each part of the city centre experience supports the creative lighting strategies and live music venues.162 These interventions will link up different clusters within the CBD and thereby establish stronger activity flows after dark. The challenge is that while policy can be set to encourage growth and investment, there are limited funds for the public sector to intervene. So, the appetite by the private sector will be key to delivery.

#### **LONDON**

Night Tube



London Underground

Photo courtesy of Unsplash

Cities need to provide safe, reliable and affordable late-night transportation in the CBD to grow the night-time economy. London has been running its Night Tube since 2016. Today, 24-hour services are available on five Underground lines with trains that run at 10- to 20-minute intervals on Fridays and Saturdays. This is complemented by a network of Night Buses and the London Overground Night Service which help to widen the coverage of public transportation after hours. 163, 164 As a result, both workers and visitors travelling to or from the CBD are able to enjoy reduced travel times by an average of 20 minutes.165 Beyond generating more jobs for the city, a study in 2018 also projected that the Night Tube would result in up to £1.54 billion in positive spin-off effects for the London economy over 10 years.166

## PLACE-MAKE AND ACTIVATE STREETS AND PUBLIC SPACES

Well-designed streets and public spaces act as focal points for gatherings, recreational activities and events. They encourage footfall and create memorable urban experiences that contribute to the overall attractiveness of the CBD. Placemaking initiatives also help to activate underutilised spaces by transforming them into vibrant pockets of activity. In addition, they serve as viable platforms for public-private partnerships towards the common goals of building vibrant locales, supporting local businesses and growing visitorship.

#### **SINGAPORE**

Pilot BID programme



Eco-playground at DTP Community Green in Tanjong Pagar

Photo courtesy of Discover Tanjong Pagar

Local stakeholders are taking greater ownership in boosting the vibrancy of the CBD. For one, Singapore introduced the pilot Business Improvement District (BID) programme in 2017, where property owners in CBD areas like Raffles Place and Tanjong Pagar have come together to fund bottom-up placemaking efforts. During the initial phase of the pilot BID programme, stakeholders' contributions were bolstered by matched funding from the government of up to SGD \$500,000 per year.<sup>167</sup>

The programme has seen success, with pilot BIDs Raffles Place Alliance, Discover Tanjong Pagar (DTP), Marina Central (MC) and Singapore River One choosing to continue on the programme for two additional years after its initial four-year term. Thus far, DTP has worked with the community to co-create an eco-playground in the precinct's park, DTP Community Green, successfully activating the public space and transforming it into an intergenerational gathering place.168 Over at Marina Central, MC has hosted a rich variety of activities and events including heritage and music festivals as well as movie screenings, reflecting how programming can enliven the precinct.169

#### **HONG KONG**

City Dress-up Design Competition



Murals at Kwun Tong Bypass

Photo courtesy of the Energizing Kowloon East Office

Kowloon East has been transformed into Hong Kong's second core business district (CBD2) with a diversity of industries. Public art is used to demonstrate its vibrant and diversified identities. This is because the integration of aesthetic values and social identity has been seen as an effective tool for placemaking, community building and creating a narrative to promote urban transformation.

Together with professional bodies for architecture, planning, urban design and landscape architecture as well as the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, the Energizing Kowloon East Office<sup>170</sup> co-organised a City Dress-up Design Competition. The event aimed to enhance the city's appearance and reflect the unique characteristics of respective districts through the creation of murals in Kwun Tong Promenade.<sup>171</sup>

Unveiled in 2022, the process proved to be as satisfying as the end result. Murals of different characters that captured Kowloon East's history and identity were injected into the public space under the Kwun Tong Bypass, bringing new impetus to community development and helping to transform Kowloon East into a unique core business district full of art. QR codes are also incorporated into the artwork which link to interactive photo filters and the stories of Kowloon East.<sup>172</sup> Furthermore, an openair gallery showcasing industrial cultural elements in the form of public artwork with its unique industrial background has been established within the district at InPARK.<sup>173</sup>

#### **BANGKOK**

Bangkok Creative District



Bangkok Design Week 2020

Photo courtesy of Creative Economy Agency

While Bangkok's traditional CBD spans Silom, Sathon, Wireless and Sukhumvit,<sup>174</sup> a newer hotspot has also emerged at Bangrak and Klongsan along the two sides of the Chao Phraya River. Spurred by ground up efforts by the local community,<sup>175</sup> the Creative District is one of the city's trendiest neighbourhoods.

In 2017, the conserved Grand Postal Building was refreshed to house the Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC)<sup>176</sup> – a government agency which has since been renamed to the Creative Economy Agency<sup>177</sup> – to serve as a dedicated hub for the creative sector. Hence, the restored building does not just feature essential creative facilities and makerspaces but also venues for exhibitions and functions.<sup>178</sup>

The Creative District is thus a fitting host for major events such as Bangkok Design Week, Awakening Bangkok and gallery hopping events where people immerse themselves in the vibrant cultural offerings. The placemaking efforts have done more than just attract visitors – it also drew in 65 new establishments in 2021 and reinvigorated existing businesses.<sup>179</sup>

A study found that vacant shophouses decreased from 127 to 35 between 2017 and 2018. Interviews with new entrepreneurs in the area validated the government's efforts, as they expressed how they saw the TCDC as a long-term investment which gave them confidence to locate in the Creative District. From 2018 to 2022, the Bangkok Design Week also created 1,368 million baht in economic value, 315 million baht in media value, whilst drawing in 1.74 million visitors, and 5,100 participants. With its success, the event is also expanding to other districts across Bangkok.

### NEW SOUTH WALES' 24-HOUR ECONOMY STRATEGY

#### **Background**

The City of Sydney, one of 32 local government areas in Sydney, accounted for about 7% of Australia's gross domestic product in 2022.<sup>180</sup> A significant part of this can be attributed to its CBD, made up of Harbour CBD, Chinatown and CBD South, which serves as a major economic hub and houses many iconic attractions like the Sydney Opera House and Sydney Botanic Gardens.<sup>181</sup>

To some extent, the CBD's strong performance is also a product of the city's investment in growing its night-time economy (NTE). This journey began for the City of Sydney in 2013 with OPEN Sydney, a roadmap till 2030 that recognised the NTE sector's importance to both economic growth and the city's global standing. However, policies aimed at managing alcohol consumption and safety, while intrinsically important, inadvertently constrained the vibrancy and diversity of the NTE. 183



Darling Harbour at night

Photo courtesy of Unsplash

In 2020, the New South Wales (NSW) government thus removed its lockout laws for Sydney's CBD and Oxford Street which previously imposed restrictions like 1.30 a.m. last entry for licensed venues, limitations on serving alcohol and shorter bottle shop opening hours. In the same year, they also laid the building blocks to revive the NTE for the Greater Sydney region through more consolidated government action by publishing the 24-Hour Economy Strategy. The 2020 Strategy also led to the establishment of the Office of the 24-Hour Economy Commissioner which partners and coordinates with various stakeholders in driving its initiatives.

Following the impacts of the pandemic, the NSW Government has continued to refine its plans with the refreshed 24-Hour Economy Strategy 2024, titled A New State of Night. Its focus goes beyond looking at a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. NTE and instead takes a holistic perspective to build a 24-hour economy. For instance, this includes considering the needs of workers in sectors such as healthcare and transport that maintain round-the-clock operations.<sup>186</sup>

#### Implementation

#### A Clear Blueprint

A multi-faceted and integrated approach to fostering a thriving 24-hour economy in NSW is represented through these five strategic pillars :

#### 24-Hour Economy Strategy at a Glance

1

#### An Enabling Regulatory Framework

**Objective** 

Enable a sustainable, safe and diverse 24-hour economy

2

#### Vibrant, Coordinated Precincts and Places

**Objective** 

Foster a collaborative approach to building an environment where the 24-hour economy can thrive

3

#### Night-time Workers, Culture and Industry Collaboration

Objective

Collaborate across government and industry to support night-time workers, businesses and cultural entrepreneurs to thrive in the 24-hour economy

4

#### Safety, Mobility, Access and Inclusion

Objective

Enable easy movement to and from 24-hour economy precincts and champion the wellbeing and safety of workers and patrons in the 24-hour economy

5

#### **Authentic Storytelling**

Objective

Internationally recognised 24-hour precincts delivering exceptional experiences to locals, visitors and workers celebrating their local stories

The five strategic pillars of the 24-Hour Economy Strategy

Adapted from NSW Government's 24-Hour Economy Strategy

#### An Enabling Regulatory Framework

Building on the earlier work to ease restrictions on night-time offerings, a series of changes to legislation and policies called Vibrancy Reforms were announced in 2023 to streamline and simplify regulation around areas like noise, events and liquor licensing. For example, there will be relaxed conditions for licensed premises which will support music and performance venues, a new one-stop portal for sound complaints and longer liquor trading hours.<sup>187</sup> Co-created with different partners, these Reforms are key catalysts in bringing about more businesses, activities and experiences after dark.

#### Vibrant, Coordinated Precincts and Places

In addition, from an urban planning viewpoint, the Strategy also aims to serve diverse communities and attract users from day to night using a precinct-based approach to placemaking. The Uptown District Acceleration Program consists of two complementary elements: the Uptown Accelerator develops business associations' capabilities to cultivate vibrant going-out districts, while the Uptown Grant Program offers seed funding.<sup>188</sup> Haymarket Precinct is one of the participating groups that received AUD \$200,000 in 2023, covering the southern end of the CBD.<sup>189</sup>

#### Night-time Workers, Culture and Industry Collaboration

Under this pillar, the government also acknowledged that more needs to be done to support and understand the lived experiences of the night-time workforce. On top of conducting research studies, a 24-Hour Economy Advisory Council was established, comprising industry leaders, business owners and experts from various backgrounds, ensuring that strategies are grounded in practical expertise and insights.<sup>190</sup>

#### Safety, Mobility, Access and Inclusion

It was also clear that fostering a safe, accessible, and inclusive night-time environment where patrons can move about easily without fear, was important for the success of a 24-hour economy. In 2024, the Sydney Metro extended its services beyond midnight, except on Sundays. However, physical infrastructure alone is not enough – users must be confident that it is safe to go out at night. The NSW Government has invested in an AUD \$30 million Safer Cities Program to co-design and trial place-based interventions to improve perceptions of safety, with a particular focus on women, girls, and gender diverse people. In addition, Sydney has achieved Purple Flag accreditation in four areas to date, including York, Clarence and Kent Streets in the main CBD. This internationally recognised programme awards precincts that deliver excellence in managing the NTE, using criteria such as ready transport access, safety and diversity of offerings.

#### **Authentic Storytelling**

While these initiatives provide the foundation for a vibrant NTE, it is equally critical to have a compelling narrative that reframes the image of the night. The "Feel the Sydney" tourism campaign promotes the city's nightlife to both domestic and international visitors seeking "coolcations" while signature events like Vivid Sydney uses the night as a backdrop for creative light shows and art installations.<sup>194</sup>





Light Projections during Vivid Sydney

Photo courtesy of Unsplash (left) and Marc Dalmulder, CC BY 2.0 (right)

#### Governance Structures

The scope of these initiatives above underscores how developing a 24-hour economy is a complex undertaking that demands concerted effort across all stakeholders. In 2023, the Commissioner appointment was also enshrined in legislation and the Office's purview was expanded statewide. Apart from being the first state jurisdiction in the world to have a 24-Hour Economy Commissioner, the NSW Government also has a Minister for Music and the Night-time Economy to oversee relevant policies. This reflects the priorities of the state and enables a streamlined approach in dealing with cross-sectoral issues across different levels of government.

#### Eyes Wide Open Clause

Vibrancy Reforms have enabled Special Entertainment Precincts (SEPs) to reap additional benefits. For one, local businesses within an SEP are exempt from abiding to standard sound-related criteria and trading hour restrictions set by the council. However, this also means that residents may be subject to greater levels of disamenity. Hence, SEPs are demarcated as areas meant for live entertainment and this will be outlined on planning certificates for people to make informed decisions in their property purchases.

#### **Outcomes**

Launched at the NEON Forum 2024, a conference dedicated to the development of the NTE, Data after Dark will "light the way" in building a better NTE through the use of data.<sup>200</sup> Data after Dark presents a standard framework in evaluating the NTE and this initiative addresses a critical gap by establishing baseline data to measure and track improvements.<sup>201</sup> Working with different groups of stakeholders to collect real-time information on key social, economic and cultural indicators across NSW, this is compiled into an internal government platform to inform policies and decision-making. Key insights are pulled out and published in the NSW Night-Time Economy Quarterly Report for public viewing.<sup>202</sup>

Highlights from the December 2024 report showed that there were 38.5 million Opal tap-offs at night in the quarter (when people tap their cards to end their public transport journeys), a 1.4% increase compared to the previous year. Night-time in-person spending also grew by 17.1% from the third quarter of 2024. However, growth is not even across NSW. To illustrate, Eastern Sydney where the Sydney CBD is located, has stronger night-time public transport usage and contributes to almost half of total night-time in-person receipts. In contrast, areas like Central Coast and Illawarra-Shoalhaven saw a year-on-year and quarterly drop in number of businesses in the NTE, underscoring the need for tailored strategies for each local context.<sup>203</sup>

Indicators extracted from the NSW Night-Time Economy Quarterly Report include:

Category	Indicator	
<b>Economic Indicators</b>	In-person night-time spend	
	Change in the number of night-time economy businesses	
	Quarterly and annual growth in selected core night-time economy sectors	
Transport Indicators	Number of night-time trips	
	Proportion of trips made at night-time	
	Night-time Opal tap-offs	

Examples of indicators tracked by NSW

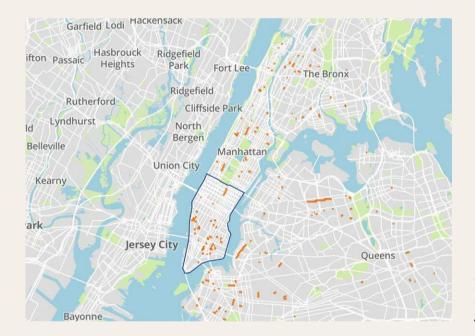
Adapted from NSW Night-Time Economy Insights

#### NEW YORK CITY'S OPEN STREETS PROGRAMME

#### **Background**

New York City has one of the world's most famous and economically significant CBDs. Typically defined as the area south of and inclusive of 60th Street, the Manhattan CBD comprises Midtown and Lower Manhattan.<sup>204</sup> The former houses attractions like Times Square, the Museum of Modern Art, the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Center, while the latter is anchored by the Financial District with key institutions like Wall Street and the New York Stock Exchange. In 2024, Midtown accounted for approximately 61% of New York City's 730 million square feet of office space.<sup>205</sup>

While the city has mostly recovered from the effects of COVID-19, social distancing during the height of the pandemic limited social interaction. In turn, businesses suffered and so did the vibrancy of the CBD. Hence, the New York City Department of Transportation (NYC DOT) launched the Open Streets programme in 2020 with an aim to create safe spaces for the community.<sup>206, 207</sup>



Locations of Open Streets are indicated in orange. Boundary of Manhattan CBD is indicated in blue outline.

Adapted from Open Data NY

#### **Implementation**

#### Pilots and Scaling Up

New York City has had experience with similar street closure programmes such as Summer Streets and Shared Streets. Nonetheless, the Open Streets programme started off with pilots at areas across different boroughs in March 2020, including Park Avenue in Manhattan.<sup>208</sup> Following the announcement of the initiative, this was then progressively rolled out across the city where roads were closed to through traffic for pedestrians and cyclists, with most locations operating daily at the time.<sup>209</sup> By the end of the year, this extended to 83 miles and was the largest network in the United States.<sup>210</sup> The success of Open Streets led to its permanent adoption in May 2021, growing beyond its initial role as a pandemic response.<sup>211</sup>

Today, there are about 250 Open Streets with many located in the CBD.<sup>212</sup> Most Open Streets have to be set up on a day-to-day basis such as through the use of barricades. NYC DOT is thus also studying whether certain sites could be redesigned such as by installing traffic calming infrastructure.<sup>213</sup>



Street art at the Doyers Street Open Street

Photo courtesy of New York City Department of Transportation, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

#### Programming with Stakeholders

Street closures are just the first step – the full potential of Open Streets is only realised when they are actively programmed to make vibrant places for the community to come together. In collaboration with NYC DOT's partners, each Open Street is managed by groups such as business improvement districts, schools and block associations. This follow-through from planning to implementation and ongoing maintenance is crucial to avoid cases of underutilised spaces due to a lack of ownership. This risk is mitigated through an application-based approach, which also looks at the capacity of the community partners, ensuring that there is stewardship from the ground up. Furthermore, NYC DOT also works with the eventual Open Streets stakeholder to craft operational plans and manage access of the roads, to realise more coordinated outcomes. The full potential of the community partners are stored to the roads of the roads.

For instance, FABnyc is a non-profit organisation that runs outdoor arts events at the East 4<sup>th</sup> Street Open Street, featuring musical acts, dance showcases, spoken word and more.<sup>216</sup> Whereas, the Fifth Avenue Open Street is managed by the Fifth Avenue Association as a business improvement district, holding events which transform the shopping district into a festive and experiential corridor during holiday seasons. For the 200th anniversary of Fifth Avenue in 2024, there was a cake-cutting ceremony, immersive art installations, unique retail offerings and an exciting lineup of performances.<sup>217</sup>



Fifth Avenue Holiday Open Streets

Photo courtesy of New York City Department of Transportation

NYC DOT also spearheads programming for public spaces, much of which takes place within Open Streets. This consists of the annual Car-Free Earth Day which raises awareness about climate change and incorporates artwork that explores environmental themes as well as Trick-or-Streets which activates pedestrian space for family-friendly Halloween celebrations.<sup>218, 219</sup>

#### Governance and Maintenance

Given its scale, Open Streets is often reliant on community partners and volunteers. Last year, the NYC DOT offered increased support through the Public Space Equity Program which prioritises under-resourced neighbourhoods. Eligible Open Streets can tap on this scheme to fund programming and landscaping work.<sup>220</sup> However, some organisations recently called for greater financial support for the long-term sustainability of the programme.<sup>221</sup>

Moreover, Open Streets is not solely a transportation initiative and requires inter-agency cooperation. To address this, New York City appointed its first Chief Public Realm Officer in 2023, under the Deputy Mayor for Operations. In this role, Ya-Ting Liu coordinates public space efforts across government, private sector and community stakeholders. She also acts as a central point for policy development, outreach and public consultations for "all City agencies engaged in public realm projects and programmes that touch roadways, curb space and green space". <sup>222</sup> As streets are often contested spaces, the creation of this governance layer allows for oversight and better balance among competing needs.

#### **Outcomes**

In 2024, NYC DOT delivered almost 500 events across its plazas and Open Streets network, demonstrating how software needs to work in tandem with physical infrastructure to build vibrant public spaces. <sup>223</sup> There have also been multiple studies quantifying the economic value of this initiative. For one, a 2024 New York City Department of City Planning report found that storefronts along Open Streets have a vacancy rate of 9.9%, lower than the city average of 11.1%. <sup>224</sup> The impact of Open Streets was even more evident during the pandemic where Open Streets had speedier recoveries when measured against control streets. At Koreatown in Manhattan, the Open Streets achieved better results than other corridors and the borough, as well as its own pre-pandemic baseline. <sup>225</sup>

Research by Mastercard also showed that the Fifth Avenue Holiday Open Street in 2022 generated greater footfall and USD \$3 million in additional spending along the closed streets. Businesses along the pedestrianised stretch also saw a 6.6% increase in receipts and 13.9% more transactions, as compared to non-pedestrianised sections. Hence, the city will make Fifth Avenue's transformation permanent through the Future of Fifth project where there are plans to widen sidewalks and remove two out of five road lanes. There will also be more street furniture and greenery, shaping a safer and more pleasant walking environment.





Conceptual design for the Future of Fifth

Images courtesy of Future of Fifth

# CONNECTED DISTINCTIVE INTEGRATIVE VIBRANT RESPONSIVE

The CBD has a lot of expensive assets and the damage from climate change will have significant financial consequences... How insurance companies insure some of these extreme events is a big question mark. Even the premium is going to be too high for businesses to survive. So, improvement and upgrade in infrastructure to cope with climate change consequences are very important.

Michael Kwok East Asia Region Chair, Arup

Many Asian cities developed rapidly in recent decades, guided by widely accepted assumptions about the future.

As circumstances shift – driven by climate change, economic trends and technological advances – these cities may need to rethink their growth strategies to stay relevant.

Cheng Hsing Yao
Group CEO, GuocoLand Group



Photo courtesy of Pexels

Cities are susceptible to external shocks such as extreme weather events and volatile economic conditions. Even within the CBD itself, its evolving role and functions brings new expectations and demands. As core clusters that represent the "health" of the wider city, it is critical that CBDs can adapt and respond swiftly to an increasingly uncertain global landscape.

To remain relevant and responsive, cities must be agile and have strong policies and incentives in place to support flexible and adaptive reuse of buildings in the CBD. Companies are also becoming more conscious of their responsibilities towards environmental sustainability and recognising the greater emphasis of wellness. Thus, investing in high quality, sustainable buildings and infrastructure will not only help to improve the resilience of the city to the impacts of climate change but also enhance the CBD's desirability to investors and businesses that are looking for low-carbon assets and healthier workplaces. Ultimately, these create a better quality of life for both workers and residents.

The ability of CBDs to not only recover but also bounce back better from challenges is crucial in ensuring their long-term growth. Hence, how can CBDs future-proof themselves against future uncertainties and stand the test of time?

## ENCOURAGE FLEXIBILITY, ADAPTIVE REUSE AND REJUVENATION OF BUILDINGS

Many CBDs aspire to broaden their use-mix to attract and meet the needs of growing and diversifying stakeholder profiles. One approach is to repurpose vacant or underutilised buildings to breathe new life into the CBD while also conserving resources and optimising land. However, there are often financial and technical barriers and trade-offs in doing so. Thus, cities need to implement policies and incentives that encourage flexibility and facilitate adaptive reuse of existing assets. By doing so, the city also preserves its heritage, identity and sense of familiarity. In some instances, cities have explored schemes to spur redevelopment, thereby providing opportunities for developers to introduce more quality and sustainable buildings to meet future demands.

#### LOS ANGELES

Adaptive Reuse Ordinance



View of Downtown Los Angeles

Photo courtesy of Unsplash

Like many other cities, Downtown Los Angeles' office sector was affected by the shift toward remote work, leading to rising vacancies of over 30%.228 Los Angeles was well-positioned to address this challenge, having already established policies to encourage residential conversions. This has helped the population increase by more than four times over the past two decades.<sup>229</sup> Facilitated mainly through the Adaptive Reuse Ordinance (ARO) which started in 1999, over 12,000 housing apartments in the Downtown have been delivered.<sup>230</sup> Under the ARO, almost any building can be converted into housing as long as it takes place within the existing building envelope.231 This particularly helps developers by streamlining approval processes and exempting older and historic buildings from zoning and building standards typically required for new builds.232

However, these downtown apartments represent just a small fraction of the city's housing needs. Los Angeles has thus responded by expanding the ARO into the Citywide Adaptive Reuse Ordinance, set to begin in 2025. Besides widening the policy's geographic coverage, it lowers the age of eligibility for buildings from pre-1974 construction to those at least 15 years old and removes minimum residential unit size requirements.<sup>233</sup>

VIBRANT

### **HONG KONG**

Revitalisation Scheme for Industrial Buildings



Aerial view of Kowloon East CBD

Photo courtesy of the Energizing Kowloon East Office

Hong Kong's CBD2 at Kowloon East has a history as a major industrial district. Over the years, the airport has been moved from Kai Tak to Chek Lap Kok while manufacturing activities have been gradually relocated to Mainland China.<sup>234</sup> Hence, there was a need to review the use of the existing industrial buildings. Starting from 2001, industrial lands in Kwun Tong, Kowloon Bay and San Po Kong have been progressively rezoned to Business use.<sup>235</sup>

Nonetheless, not all buildings took up conversions or redevelopment due to factors such as high costs.<sup>236</sup> While private redevelopment and conversion projects are largely market driven, the Government decided to expedite transformation of Kowloon East as Hong Kong's CBD2 by launching the city-wide Revitalisation Scheme for Industrial Buildings in 2010. Among the scheme's benefits included exemption of waiver fees to encourage private owners to undertake conversion of industrial buildings.<sup>237</sup> The Scheme was enhanced in 2018 to optimise utilisation of existing industrial stock by allowing application for relaxation of maximum permissible plot ratio by up to 20% to incentivise private owners to redevelop industrial buildings.<sup>238</sup> The Scheme also acknowledged cases where multiple owners might not agree to the wholesale conversion of a building, and introduced pro-business measures that allowed arts, cultural, creative, innovation and technology sectors to operate within individual units of existing industrial buildings without requiring separate waiver applications and fees.239

As of December 2024, 72 applications for wholesale conversion or redevelopment within Kowloon East have been approved and executed. This has helped to inject more commercial floor space, life and momentum into CBD2.<sup>240</sup> A 2023 survey also showed that the proportion of business establishments engaged in the "banking and financial services and insurance" and "real estate and professional and business services" sectors in CBD2 had increased by nearly fourfold since 2011.<sup>241</sup>

VIBRANT

### **SINGAPORE**

**CBD** Incentive Scheme



**CBD Incentive Scheme** 

Image courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority

Singapore's CBD continues to serve as a premier business and financial node, reinforcing the city's position as a global financial hub. This is even as the city continues to pursue decentralisation and develop business nodes island-wide.

CBDs worldwide have started to change from mono-use districts into more vibrant, multi-experiential and mixed-use precincts. Singapore's CBD is no exception, and recent new developments are redefining the future work environment by offering a good diversity of amenities, experiences and high-quality public realms.

In line with these global shifts and as part of ongoing CBD rejuvenation efforts, the CBD Incentive Scheme was launched in 2019 to encourage conversion of predominantly mono-use office buildings into mixed-use developments in selected CBD fringe areas. Gross Floor Area incentives, up to 25 to 30% (depending on location and use-mix proposed), are offered to encourage the injection of live-in populations, greater diversity of uses, provision of amenities to serve both the working and living population, as well as enhancement of the public realm and pedestrian and active mobility.

In addition to planning and urban design requirements, developments must also achieve sustainability standards, attaining a minimum of Green Mark Platinum Super Low Energy certification.<sup>242</sup>

In 2025, the Scheme was extended and enhanced, requiring developers to submit a Sustainability Statement to assess the feasibility of rejuvenation options including adaptive reuse. This nudge towards sustainable rejuvenation aims to balance efforts to reflect on and mitigate carbon emissions from the construction sector, while facilitating rejuvenation and CBD vibrancy.

# DEVELOP GREEN, SUSTAINABLE AND HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS

CBDs are generally built-up places of high human and vehicular activity that contribute to carbon emissions. To meet their net zero and climate goals, cities must rethink how to effectively incorporate sustainability and wellness considerations into their CBDs. One effort is to introduce more green and blue spaces that provide wider co-benefits like cooling effects and cleaner air. Such spaces also offer respite from the busyness of the city, boosting emotional wellbeing. Other than incorporating nature, infrastructure should also be designed with climate adaptation and mitigation in mind to strengthen the CBD's resilience. This includes features that address extreme heat and flood risks as well as more energy-efficient building design.

### **SHANGHAI**

Huangpu Riverfront



Shanghai has been conducting revitalisation along the Huangpu River in its downtown. Once dominated by industrial activities, the government focused on restoring connectivity to the water through a Three-year Action Plan from 2015 to 2017.<sup>243</sup> The work successfully created a continuous 45-km promenade and public space as well as 1,200 hectares of green space along the riverbanks. The city has continued to boost this provision over the years, enabling 4.8 million residents to access public areas along the Huangpu River within a 15-minute walk by 2021.<sup>244</sup>

A study indicates that a third of respondents hope to visit the riverfront for health and fitness activities. The revamp has also encouraged residents to spend more time outdoors, with about 47% of users spending at least an additional half hour in these public spaces. In addition, the utilisation of energy-saving features and landscaping contributes toward reducing carbon emissions.<sup>245</sup> Integrating climate response with urban design, 92% of flood barriers were also sensitively incorporated into the public spaces.<sup>246</sup>

### **BANGKOK**

Flood Management Strategies



Benjakitti Forest Park

Photo courtesy of Supanut Arunoprayote, CC BY 4.0

As a low-lying city, Bangkok faces significant flood risks due to rising water levels and heavy rainfall.<sup>247</sup> To mitigate this threat, the city has put in place extensive flood control infrastructure throughout its CBD and beyond, including drainage systems and a network of pumping stations to channel away water toward the sea. Different innovations are also being tested, such as the use of prefabricated flood barriers which are quicker to install and a more efficient alternative to traditional sandbags.<sup>248</sup>

In addition, the government is also incorporating nature-based solutions into the built environment. One such case is Benjakitti Forest Park which is able to absorb rainwater and filter water through its wetland plants.<sup>249</sup> Another prime example is Chulalongkorn University Centenary Park which in addition to being a recreational space for citizens, is also able to collect, treat and store stormwater runoff of up to one million gallons.<sup>250</sup>

The city has also leveraged upon technology to develop a flood warning system under the Global Future Cities Programme. The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration was onboarded in 2021, with the intent to leverage data and tools such as machine learning to help Bangkok get ahead of unpredictable stormwater flooding patterns and prepare emergency responses in advance.<sup>251</sup>

### **NEW YORK CITY**

Local Law 97



Downtown Manhattan

Photo courtesy of Unsplash

Aside from greening the environment, CBDs must also focus on making their buildings more environmentally sustainable. In 2019, New York City passed the Climate Mobilization Act which set an ambitious target of carbon neutrality by 2050.<sup>252</sup> As a city where buildings account for more than two-thirds of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, the Local Law 97 was thus put into effect as one of its main strategies.<sup>253</sup>

Not confined within the boundaries of the CBD, this landmark initiative mandates that from 2025, most buildings over 25,000 square feet must adhere to GHG emissions limits or be subjected to fines. Limits differ depending on the occupancy type. For business uses, the GHG intensity limit is  $0.00846~\rm tCO_2e/ft^2.^{254}$  Emissions limits will become more stringent in 2030, in order to meet the goal of cutting GHG emissions by 40% by  $2050.^{255}$ 

To help building owners in this transition, compliance requirements were only introduced in 2024 and reporting beginning in 2025. This gives them time to evaluate existing systems and implement necessary upgrades. The city has also offered free one-on-one consultation services and financial assistance for those that may require additional support.<sup>256</sup>

VIBRANT

## TOKYO'S URBAN DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

### **Background**

Tokyo's unique urban structure consists of many prominent CBDs. The development of the city's first business district began in 1890 when Mitsubishi purchased land in Marunouchi from the government, 257 eventually expanding into what is now known as the Otemachi, Marunouchi, Yurakucho (OMY) district. In the 1960s, areas like Shinjuku, Shibuya and Ikebukuro were positioned as complementary sub-centres. Following an economic downturn in the 1990s, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) set out the Circular Megalopolis Structure plan in 2001 to form multiple commercial nodes within a 7-km radius of the city centre to encourage urban renewal. Today, Tokyo's CBDs also include areas like Roppongi and Toranomon as well as Tokyo Bay.



Map of different CBDs in Tokyo

Image courtesy of the Mori Memorial
Foundation

While development in Tokyo is largely private sector-led, the government also puts in place enabling policies that help to facilitate rejuvenation. This includes easing of building restrictions on floor area ratio (FAR) and building heights.<sup>258</sup> Amid this transformation, the city has also taken care to preserve historic landmarks that not only serve as a reminder of its rich heritage but also act as visual anchors within the landscape.

One example is Tokyo Station which is located at the heart of the OMY district. Making its debut in 1914, it features an iconic European-inspired red brick facade and is the largest train terminal in Japan. Post-World War II, the building suffered some damage to its north and south domed roofs and the city replaced them with an octagonal structure.<sup>259</sup>

VIBRANT



Octagonal roofs at Tokyo Station before restoration

Photo courtesy of PekePON, CC BY-SA 3.0

Over the years, there were calls for conservation from ground-up groups and also the need to promote responsive and effective urban development to meet shifting market needs. 260. 261 Ultimately, the costs involved to restore Tokyo Station to its original architectural character was just too high for the East Japan Railway Company (JR East). Some attempts by Mitsubishi Estate, the major developer and landowner, to redevelop Marunouchi district also failed to gain traction. 262 Hence, the government came up with innovative approaches, such as the Exceptional FAR regulation, to facilitate renewal.

#### **Implementation**

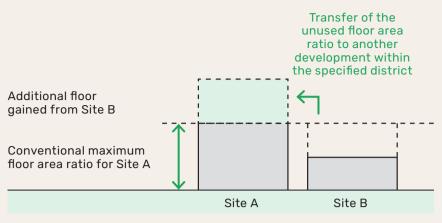
#### Gathering Stakeholder Inputs

Given its prime location, multiple proposals have emerged since 1955 to redevelop Tokyo Station, including plans to intensify the site with a skyscraper.<sup>263</sup> However, there was a clear preference among many stakeholders to pursue preservation. Committees were established to discuss the proposals for enhancement and conservation of Tokyo Station.<sup>264</sup> Some of these were sponsored by the TMG, touching on topics like technical studies and addressing existing issues.<sup>265</sup> In 1996, the TMG, Chiyoda Ward Government, JR East and the OMY Redevelopment Project Council, which consists of the area's landowners, also formed an Advisory Committee, further facilitating conversations between the public and private sector.<sup>266</sup>

#### Easing Development Policies

In 2000, the government revised the City Planning Act and Building Standards Act.<sup>267</sup> This introduced Exceptional FAR districts, that are "set forth in city plans for the purpose of utilising unused floor areas by relocating to other lots".<sup>268</sup> The policy created a mechanism specifically to address the challenge of redevelopment for and around Tokyo Station.<sup>269</sup> Subsequently, in 2002, the area surrounding Tokyo Station was made an Exceptional FAR Zone.<sup>270</sup>

In 2003, JR East agreed to designate the Station as an Important Cultural Property of Japan. In such cases, the government typically accords certain benefits to the landowner, which JR East enjoyed in the form of floor area incentives.<sup>271</sup> This brought the total allowable development density up to 900% of the site area. Since redevelopment works were focused on restoration rather than intensification, JR East was able to sell the unused FAR (700%) or "air rights" for about 50 billion yen.<sup>272</sup> Supported by funding from the government, this provided the necessary capital for conservation works which were carried out from 2007 to 2012.<sup>273, 274</sup>



**Exceptional Floor Area Ratio District Regulation** 

How the floor area transfer works

Image adapted from the Ministry

of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism

The floor area was transferred to the sites for six nearby buildings: the Shin-Marunouchi Building, the Marunouchi Park Building, the JP Tower, the Tokyo Building, and the north and south towers at Grand Tokyo. These developments were thus permitted to build beyond their original zoning height allowances. The Shin-Marunouchi Building, for instance, was able to have about 500,000 square feet of additional floor space.<sup>275</sup>





Domed roofs at Tokyo Station after restoration

Photo courtesy of Pexels (left) and Mark Esguerra, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 (right)

#### **Outcomes**

As a result, the area saw a significant increase in commercial floor space, timely given the growing demand for space in Tokyo's CBDs. This case study demonstrates how government policies can support win-win solutions for both heritage conservation and rejuvenation. Additionally, private owners and the government, today, also have strong working relationships that drive redevelopment through other means, such as incentives that give bonus FAR when developers provide public space.

# ANTWERP'S REDEVELOPMENT OF SCHELDT QUAYS AS A RESPONSE TO FLOOD RISKS

#### **Background**

Antwerp is one of Europe's key port cities and boasts many years of culture, trade and history. Its compact city centre of about 4 km² is located near the River Scheldt, housing many heritage buildings, City Hall and bustling shopping streets. Immediately adjacent is Scheldt Quays which was built at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century along the right bank of the river. Although these quays were once central to the city's maritime sector, operations have since moved to a more modern port in the north.<sup>276</sup> This has led to the decline of the Scheldt Quays, and its redesignation into parking lots.<sup>277</sup>

Besides the need to renew its ageing infrastructure, Antwerp, as a low-lying city, also has had to address its flooding issues. The effects of climate change brought about rising sea levels and intensified weather patterns has further heightened flooding risk for Scheldt River's infrastructure and population.<sup>278</sup>



Aerial view of Scheldt Quays

Photo courtesy of Yves Adams

Hence, Antwerp took a long-term approach and began thinking about how to address these challenges as early as 2007. The redevelopment of Scheldt Quays was conceived as a timely response to flood risk mitigation, as well as to inject new life along the waterfront to accommodate the growing needs of the city.

#### **Implementation**

#### Community Engagement

Stakeholders were consulted early in the process. In 2008, an online survey titled "How closely are your connected to the Scheldt" polled over 3,000 residents. The findings showed that 62% of respondents shared a strong affinity to the river and were keen to play a part in its redevelopment.

While the master plan was being drafted, proposals were presented to the community, civil society organisations and interest groups for their feedback. Information sessions were also organised to teach participants to become "ambassadors of the quays", ready to share project information with the wider public. In addition to numerous roundtable discussions that were moderated by the ambassadors, there were also other initiatives to raise awareness of the project ranging from exhibitions, free guided tours, large-scale advertisement campaigns, an interactive website and a festival.<sup>279</sup>

#### Comprehensive Plans

The master plan was approved in 2010 consisting of a framework with six key components: (1) **Active Harbour** to retain its mooring, (2) **Historical Heritage and Archaeology** to conserve the historical character of the old quays, (3) **New Flood Protection** to preserve connection of the city to the river, (4) **Mobility** along and across the quays, (5) **Public Space and Image Quality** to build a place for both residents and visitors and (6) **Quay Programmes** to refresh and activate buildings.

The 6.8-km-long quays were also delineated into seven zones, including the Schipperskwartier and the City Centre at Zone 4. Of particular significance was how rejuvenation of the disused quays would help to open up new space for the land-constrained city centre.<sup>280</sup>



The seven zones along the Scheldt Quays redevelopment

Photo courtesy of City of Antwerp

In the area of flood protection, the city also went above and beyond. After the 1976 storm surge, the city acted promptly and put in place the Sigma Plan for the wider Scheldt Valley which outlined strategies to prevent similar disasters from happening again. The Plan was further enhanced in 2005 to take a more comprehensive look at ecology, recreation and economic value, aside from just water safety. It also stipulated that the water barrier wall needed to be raised by 90 cm to 2.25 m.<sup>281</sup>





Scheldt Quays before raising the water barrier (left) and under water during a storm in 2018 (right)

Photos courtesy of Yves Adams

However, the master plan recognised that this would compromise the riverfront views. It also understood that protective infrastructure alone was insufficient. Therefore, each zone would adopt tailored measures, depending on its context and needs.<sup>282</sup>

VIBRANT

#### Phased Execution of Plans

Execution of these plans is carried out in phases from 2012 to 2030.<sup>283</sup> For the 740-m stretch at Zone 4, work began in 2019 and is expected to end in 2027. The city centre would see stabilisation of the quay wall through modern engineering techniques and reconstruction of the iconic blue stone quay wall. For this section of the Scheldt Quays, which also serves as a prime tourist destination, the city will utilise a mix of mobile and floating water barriers. As an innovative solution, the mobile water barriers will only be deployed during flood risk conditions, maintaining visual connection to the river on normal days. Moreover, the barriers would also be carefully incorporated into the redesign of the public space.<sup>284</sup> In 2021, Zone 4 also launched a new cruise terminal, boosting tourism activity in the city centre.<sup>285</sup>





Mobile water barrier (*Link to video*)

Photo courtesy of Yves Adams

Over at Petroleum Zuid in Zone 7, a growing commercial node is also emerging. Previously a hub for Antwerp's petrochemical industry, the city has started transforming the 63-hectares site into a climate-neutral business park. Named Blue Gate, the public-private partnership will target companies in the sustainability sector, with the aim to generate 2,000 to 3,000 new jobs by 2036.<sup>286</sup> In line with the global trend of cities transitioning towards greener economies, companies like DHL Express and Amazon have already started establishing operations in Blue Gate.<sup>287, 288</sup>

#### Governance Structures

Redevelopment efforts were made possible through the collaboration of multiple parties, overseen by an autonomous city planning agency – Autonoom Gemeentebedrijf Stadsplanning Antwerpen. This was necessary as the Scheldt Quays involve the Flemish Region as landowner, the Waterwegen en Zeekanaal NV as an external agency that manages the Flemish waterways and their adjacent grounds, and the city of Antwerp as owner of infrastructure and installations on the quays.<sup>289</sup>

### **Outcomes**

Upon completion of the entire Scheldt Quays project, Antwerp will be home to the longest mobile flood defence system in the world.<sup>290</sup> So far, the renewal of the quays has generated an enormous amount of open waterfront space for its residents, which plays host to around 75 medium sized to large events on an annual basis.



So far, this publication has delved into how Central Business Districts (CBDs) are evolving to serve the dynamic needs of their cities and examined a wide range of strategies to achieve downtowns that are well-connected, distinctive, integrative, vibrant and responsive. This chapter continues by referencing the Centre for Liveable Cities' Liveability Framework to distil and highlight key findings, providing insights for urban planners, policymakers and practitioners planning for future CBD rejuvenation efforts.



The Liveability Framework Image courtesy

of Centre for Liveable Cities

Derived from Singapore's urban development journey, the Liveability Framework serves as a practical guide for cities to develop sustainable and liveable futures. It focuses on three intersecting liveability outcomes – competitive economy, sustainable environment and high quality of life – and is supported by three complementary systems – integrated master planning and development, dynamic urban governance and a collaborative ecosystem – that provide the enabling conditions to sustain these outcomes. The Framework also spotlights critical enablers to liveability, namely through the use of evidence-based, scientific approaches that help us appreciate cities as complex systems. While shaped by Singapore's context and experiences, the Framework remains relevant across geographical boundaries and is a useful lens to analyse the key takeaways from this study.

# CBDs MAY BENEFIT FROM PURSUING CROSS-DOMAIN OUTCOMES



Intersections between a competitive economy, sustainable environment and high quality of life

CBDs and downtown areas have traditionally been epicentres for commerce, finance and administration within cities. Characterised by a high concentration of office buildings and commercial activities that are supported by major transportation networks, CBDs play a critical role in the economic growth and development of urban centres by providing the necessary infrastructure for businesses to thrive and attract investments. This study shows that CBDs will continue to retain their core function as hubs to generate growth and jobs, while diversifying into creative and innovative industries to contribute toward the desired outcome of a competitive economy.

Yet, as cities grow more dynamic to adapt to changing lifestyle demands and preferences, CBDs must also evolve to serve the needs of the wider city. The future of downtowns no longer hinges on just office and commercial uses. Many of the cities in our study are actively reviewing approaches to integrate more housing into their city centres, while others are looking at ways to attract more tourists and visitors into the CBD through unique and experiential offerings. As CBDs begin to cater to shifting stakeholder profiles amid land and resource constraints, it becomes all the more important to strive towards initiatives that consider a balanced set of outcomes that are intrinsically interlinked. On top of pursuing economic goals, how can planning decisions and interventions in the CBD bring about synergies that achieve a competitive economy, lead to a high quality of life and encourage a sustainable environment for more holistic benefits?

Identifying such synergies up front allows for cities to channel resources towards initiatives that can maximise benefits. Glasgow's Avenues Programme is a good example of an initiative that aims to deliver positive cross-domain and interdependent outcomes. Put in place to improve connectivity in the city centre, it also enhances sustainability by reducing dependency on cars and adding green spaces. In addition, the walkable Avenues are envisaged to boost footfall for shops fronting the pathways, resulting in more customers and revenue for local businesses.

On the other hand, the cross-cutting nature of CBD strategies also means that stakeholders have to carefully consider competing trade-offs to manage potential negative externalities. In the case of New South Wales' (NSW) 24-Hour Economy Strategy, administrators acknowledged that potential disamenities may arise when extending business and entertainment activities into the night. For instance, this could cause noise and disturbances to residents, affecting their quality of life. Recognising such concerns early, a 24-Hour Economy Commissioner was appointed to oversee the many aspects of curating a vibrant night life and to facilitate downstream collaborations between different parties. Efforts to ensure amenity for both the live-in population and tourists also resulted in the accreditation of several Purple Flag areas in NSW where night-time safety is a core criteria.

# CBDs CAN TRACK VARIED KPIS TO MEASURE SUCCESS



Three desired outcomes of a competitive economy, sustainable environment and high quality of life

As the main engines of economic growth and employment, cities have often evaluated CBDs through metrics like job creation, GDP output and investment volumes. Chapter 2 noted that economic indicators remain among the key performance indicators (KPIs) used to track the success of various rejuvenation efforts. This is seen in the example of New York City, where the spin-off effects of Open Streets for businesses gave the city confidence to further pedestrianise Fifth Avenue. Yet, with the transformation of CBDs into mixed-use districts, there is also scope to expand beyond a purely economic focus.

Many cities have started tracking other types of indicators to measure and define the overall success of their CBDs. For example, US cities in the International Downtown Association (IDA) are at the forefront of analysing and comparing the vitality of their downtowns through a common set of indicators. Besides using economic measures, the IDA also assesses Inclusion and Vibrancy through metrics like resident population by race and ethnicity and the number of venues with live entertainment in the district respectively. Cities like Bogota also look at social and cultural indicators, in addition to economic ones, to measure the KPIs of project-level initiatives in their downtowns.

While there are some common metrics that cities tend to use to measure the performance of their CBDs, such as growth in number of businesses and employment, as well as number of visitors and footfall, the list of indicators that are being employed to evaluate CBD performance is becoming more diverse. For many cities, this reflects how measurements are being tailored to the local context, especially as each CBD responds to varying opportunities and charts its own path forward.

For example, downtowns like San Diego in the US emphasise the injection of more housing to meet growing demand, and therefore track the number of residential units and housing affordability. Meanwhile, cities like Ho Chi Minh City are looking at attracting tourists and visitors through cultural events and offerings. Hence, this shows that there is no one-size-fits-all approach in developing indicators to evaluate CBD performance. Moreover, each CBD may be at different development stages. As some cities decentralise or transition towards a more polycentric structure, newer and growing CBDs like the upcoming Kau Yi Chau Artificial Islands in Hong Kong will undoubtedly have different concerns, focus areas and trajectories as compared to established CBDs. This makes it increasingly difficult to establish a universal set of KPIs for meaningful comparisons and benchmarking between CBDs.

Accordingly, our study points to the need for cities to identify indicators that are relevant to the goals of their CBDs and to monitor performance over time by benchmarking it against preceding years. This can also be done in cooperation with other stakeholders to capture a more comprehensive view of the CBD and its progress over time.

# CBDs MUST BE NIMBLE IN THE FACE OF A MORE VOLATILE FUTURE



Supporting systems: Integrated master planning and development and dynamic urban governance

Just as cities need to have strong planning and governance systems to achieve liveability outcomes, so do CBDs. Having a clear vision and long-term strategic plans are paramount for the successful revitalisation of downtowns and CBDs. Antwerp's redevelopment of the Scheldt Quays illustrates how the city embarked on the planning process early on in 2007 and laid out a phased development strategy through to 2030, tackling both flood risks and urban renewal of the waterfront. Similarly, Singapore's far-sighted plan for land reclamation of the Marina Bay area was also crucial in accommodating the city's expansion of the downtown area to achieve its vision of having a vibrant waterfront mixed-use CBD.

Yet, as we learned from the experience of the past few years, CBDs and downtowns are not exempt from the challenges posed by global disruptions. Even with forward planning, cities need to be agile in responding to emerging trends. Post-pandemic, the rise of remote working fundamentally altered the way people live and work, impacting local businesses, public transportation systems and the vitality of these urban centres. COVID-19 also led to significant job losses, prompting Melbourne to come up with Flash Forward Creative Laneways to support the creative industry. Greater frequency and severity of climate-related events have also called for upgrades to CBD infrastructures for adaptation and mitigation. This was showcased in the example of Bangkok, where nature-based solutions were adopted.

Robust plans must be coupled with effective execution to translate visions into reality. Implementation could often be hindered by a lack of funding, resistance from the administration or even pushback from the community. To this end, a common thread observed across many of the case studies like Singapore's pilot Business Improvement District (BID) programme was to start with a smaller scale to serve as a proof of concept and build consensus. By doing so, strategies can be refined and adjusted iteratively to consider new needs and contexts, before expanding to larger areas.

# COLLABORATION IS IMPORTANT FOR SUCCESS



Supporting system: Collaborative ecosystem

This report presents an array of CBD initiatives, but it should be noted that not all were driven solely by the government. While planners put in place policies like Tokyo's Floor Area Transfers and Singapore's polycentric strategy, the expertise and resources of the private sector were also required to realise these objectives. In many of the case studies, cities drew upon the capabilities and ideas of the community, businesses and professional groups. This was apparent in the example of design competitions in Hong Kong's Kowloon East CBD.

At times, these initiatives were made possible through ground-up efforts where local stakeholders made recommendations and championed change, such as in the Open Restaurants programme in New York City. Cities have also been partnering other international organisations and participants to deliver large-scale signature events to attract more visitors and strengthen the branding of the city and its CBD. For example, Melbourne's Mad March brought in participants from across the globe for the Melbourne International Comedy Festival and partnered with international organisations such as Formula 1. Such examples demonstrate how a collaborative ecosystem with strong partnership and collective stewardship by all stakeholders is necessary in today's age.

Furthermore, as the CBD now encompasses a broader spectrum of users with distinct interests, it is critical to manage these expectations and aspirations. This task is made even more daunting with the involvement of multiple government agencies that oversee their respective domains like greening, transport and commerce. The introduction of roles like the 24-Hour Economy Commissioner in NSW and the Chief Public Realm Officer in New York City represent groundbreaking moves towards more integration and coordination in the CBD.

# CBDs CAN HARNESS DATA AS AN ENABLER FOR CHANGE



Enablers: Tools and methodologies that contribute to and support the processes required to achieve liveability outcomes

Cities are complex urban systems, and it is important to apply Science of Cities approaches, such as harnessing data, advanced analytics and innovative tools, to support policymakers and other stakeholders in making well-informed, evidence-based decisions. This will aid in navigating new trends and challenges with greater confidence and striking a more informed balance in managing trade-offs. Given the multi-faceted needs of CBDs, such data-driven analyses can also assist with prioritisation and allocation of resources.

However, data collection typically happens at the national level, as there is limited availability of data at the city level and even less at the district level. Certain outcomes like vibrancy and distinctiveness can also be challenging to quantify without the use of proxies or subjective datapoints. Despite these challenges, this study has shown how CBDs like those in NSW, the US and Glasgow are starting to lead the way in harnessing data.

NSW's Data after Dark platform and quarterly reports give the government and stakeholders up-to-date information on the status of the night-time economy (NTE). Key insights are published publicly with qualitative explanations to help interpret the data. Additional research is also conducted for selected editions of the report, including the impact of factors like daylight saving time, public holidays and the festive season on the NTE.

While we noted the limitations of standardised assessments of CBDs above, due to their unique contexts and priorities, benchmarking through indicators can still yield useful insights for planning. In this regard, we can learn from the approach taken by IDA's Value of U.S. Downtowns and Center Cities research. Although data is collected for a common set of indicators on the themes of Economy, Inclusion, Vibrancy, Identity and Resilience, comparisons are made within three downtown archetypes (established, growing and emerging). These are classified using factors such as rate of growth, citywide share of residents and jobs, and density of residents and jobs.<sup>291</sup> This tiering enables more nuanced evaluations between CBDs.

Glasgow's City Centre Performance Dashboard is another example of a city actively collecting comprehensive sets of real-time data, which is then cleaned, analysed and presented in a dashboard visualisation. The public version of the dashboard provides granular indicators with multiple time-series graphs and charts, allowing anyone to monitor the impact of events and interventions. This data transparency plays an essential part in strengthening stakeholder relationships and obtaining buy-in for future projects. The data-driven insights are useful to help assess the impact of different initiatives and rejuvenation projects across the city centre and can be used to prioritise resources for future rejuvenation needs.

# CONCLUSION



Photo courtesy of Energizing Kowloon East Office

The findings from this chapter, analysed through the lens of the Liveability Framework, suggest there is value for cities to adopt a more systems-led and holistic perspective when approaching CBD rejuvenation. Looking ahead, CBDs can no longer stick to current ways of working. Instead, the road ahead calls for cities to break down institutional silos, cultivate shared ownership and advance systemic approaches to assess progress. New hurdles will inevitably surface in this journey, but those that take decisive action now will be better positioned to create dynamic and resilient CBDs for the future.

# POSTSCRIPT

As Sir Patrick Geddes, the modern-day father of city planning, said, "The city is more than a place in space, it's a drama in time." Cities and their downtown areas are forever evolving, reflecting the essence of each era. The challenge for designers and urbanists is in honouring this rich history while imprinting their own generation's legacy.

Today, two converging mega trends shape our urban centres: the global pandemic which distanced us, and digital advancements which revolutionised connectivity. In a post-COVID-19, technology-driven world, the allure of travelling to downtown areas for work or socialising has dwindled. These dense urban environments must now find new ways to attract people.

Also impacting our cities are pressing global challenges: the climate emergency, social inequity and biodiversity loss. With over 68% of the world's population projected to live in urban areas by 2050, Central Business Districts (CBDs) will remain pivotal in addressing these issues, shaping a more sustainable, resilient and equitable world.

The work of redesigning CBDs is crucial in helping downtowns foster vibrant, healthy communities, which contribute to a more resilient and connected planet. It provides practical guidance for cities to address immediate challenges and lay the foundation for long-term sustainability.

The framework comprises five key pillars: Connected, Distinctive, Integrative, Vibrant and Responsive. These pillars form a holistic approach to rejuvenating downtowns, ensuring they remain relevant and resilient amid evolving challenges. This study also serves as inspiration for other cities, showcasing the benefits of proactive urban planning. Take for instance:

**London's Elizabeth Line** – Opened in 2022, it spans over 100 km and connects suburban areas to the city core, boosting accessibility and local economies. Efficient transport networks are vital for CBDs, linking workers to workplaces and facilitating commuter flow.

**Greater Sydney's Metropolis of Three Cities**, where each district is differentiated to build critical mass, attracting investors and residents.

**Singapore's Marina Bay**, which has transformed into an inclusive mixed-use district, fostering community and enhancing quality of life.

**Tokyo's night-time policies** like its Tokyo Projection Mapping Project that have turned civic infrastructure into tourist attractions, creating a lively night-time economy.

**Los Angeles' Adaptive Reuse Ordinance**, which converts vacant buildings into housing, addressing both housing needs and heritage preservation.

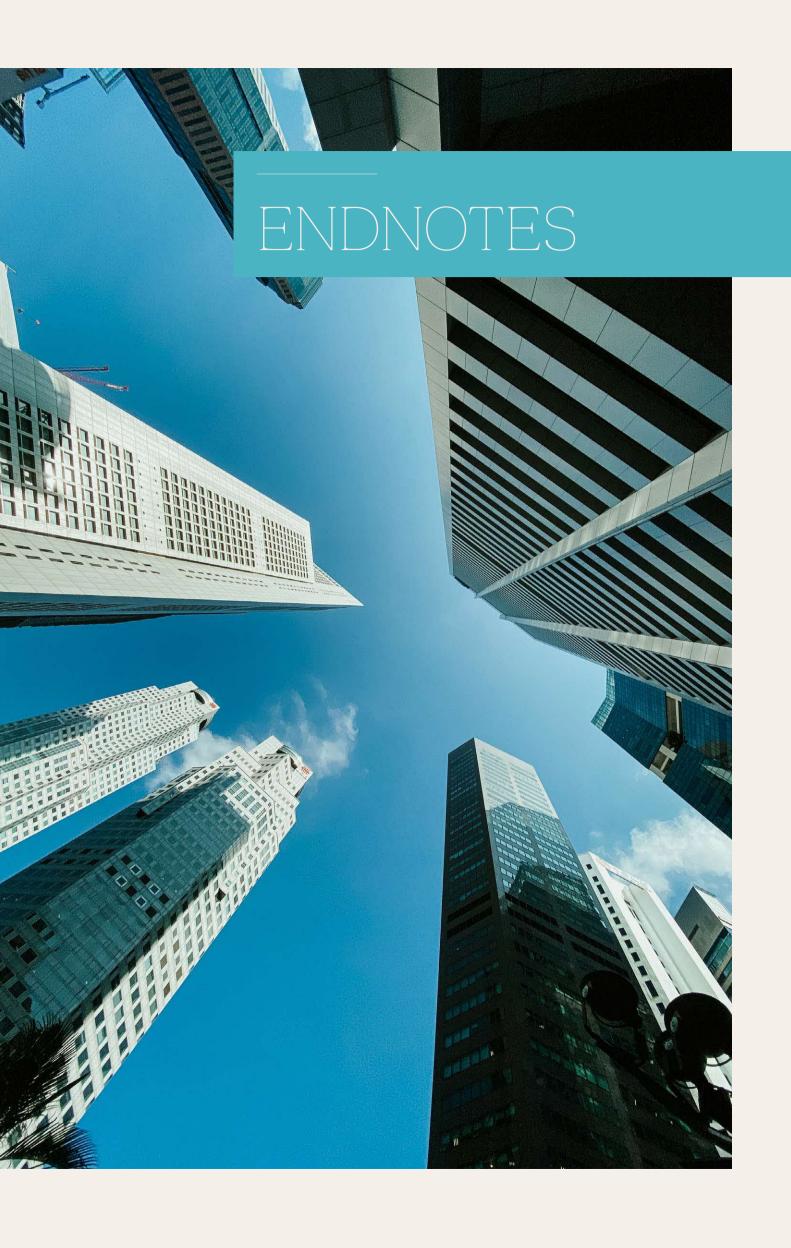
These case studies illustrate that by focusing on connectivity, distinctiveness, integration, vibrancy and responsiveness, cities can create dynamic, resilient and sustainable CBDs, enhancing quality of life for all.

It's inspiring to see the progress made by these cities. I am optimistic that this study will catalyse the creation of vibrant, competitive CBDs, shaping a better world for future generations.

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Photo courtesy of Pexels



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