LANEWAYS IN DANGER

THE NEED FOR NEW POLICIES AND DIRECTIONS TO PROPERLY PROTECT MELBOURNE’S CITY LANEWAYS

ACDC Lane - Iconic wall demolished
This old brick wall and its art at the rear of 108 Flinders Street is now gone, demolished in 2012 for an apartment development.
Preamble

This report provides an account of the current state of laneway preservation and management in Melbourne’s CBD. It is Melbourne Heritage Actions assertion that the current CBD lanes policy is appallingly out of date and does not take into account the rich diversification of uses currently seen in laneways over the last 15 years.

This report will also give an account of the current threats to lanes, how they can be better managed and where the most important existing laneways are which are currently unprotected. Melbourne Heritage Action have also produced a policy steering document which is intended to provide a detailed indication as to how our laneways should be managed and protected.

A major photographic assessment of the CBDs existing laneways undertaken by Melbourne Heritage Action member Tristan Davies, has also been included as an appendix and is designed to provide the reader with an overview of the kind of unique and vibrant places the current policy fails to protect.

Presgraves Place

In a heritage precinct, but it’s laneway buildings current have the lowest amount of protection (D-grading)

The lane itself is also Class 3, the lowest level in current policy, despite a cafe, shops and art lining the lane, and it’s multiple daytime through-block access via the Capital Theatre Arcade and Howey Place.

Street Art and historic bricks in Duckboard Place. neither of these celebrated elements of laneway character are recognised by the current policy. Infact the lane itself is only Class 3.
1. The importance of Melbourne’s laneways

The lanes of the CBD are now undoubtedly one of Melbourne’s greatest assets.

The city’s laneways, like trams and AFL, are something that immediately shouts ‘Melbourne’.

The rapid blossoming of Melbourne’s laneways has long been recognised. Publications such as Essential but Unplanned by noted historian Weston Bates, published in 1994, and entries for virtually every lane in the Encyclopaedia of Melbourne, 2004 set the scene.

The importance of the system of lanes and arcades in the central retail area that form busy pedestrian routes, often lined with shops, is obvious. The retention of lanes, or at least ‘fine grain’ development and retention of pedestrian routes, has long been policy within the City of Melbourne. Some laneways with older warehouse buildings were the first places for residents to re-colonise the city from the 1980s.

What is new is the development of businesses accessible only down ‘hidden’ laneways in the last two decades. This has been hugely popular with new ones springing up constantly. In essence a sub-world has emerged where people can travel, shop and eat in a hidden network of human scale, heritage rich lanescapes. The bars have now been joined by galleries, pop up shops, and specialised retail. They are generally located in older buildings that only front laneways or in the upper floors of building that face a main street, accessed from the rear stair off a laneway.

At the same time, graffiti art, paper art and stencils have become more and more popular, to the point that some lanes are now veritable illuminated churches of modern street art, murals and events, and are internationally recognised. The City of Melbourne celebrates the laneway’s street art, stating that “Melbourne is known as one of the world’s great street art capitals”, and every year at selected sites funds ‘Laneway Commissions’.

Still other laneways remain unchanged, and function mainly as access for rubbish collection and fire escape. Many of these are now appreciated simply for their ‘back street’ grungy appearance.

Melbourne laneways are celebrated continuously in advertising, promotional material and web entries at thatsmelbourne.com.au, onlymelbourne.com.au, and they even have their own Wikipedia page ‘Lanes and arcades of Melbourne’. Indeed they have been written about internationally and other Australian cities are beginning to emulate the network we have. Visitors and locals alike have fallen in love with this vital aspect of our great city.

Yet the City of Melbourne has failed to reflect this. Its out of date and vague lane policy gives nothing but lip service to the character and aesthetic of laneways. Time and time again lanes are sold off for short term gain or developments are approved which replace fine grain and human scale lanescapes with bland and offensive concrete walls.
2. The Threats

Lanes are being sold off, gentrified, or losing the buildings that give them character.

2.1 Lanes recently sold

One entire lane, Elliot lane, complete with older buildings and a dogleg section, all bluestone paved, was sold in 2011, and will entirely disappear into a new large development.

During the redevelopment of Myer in 2009, a number of lanes were sold off by the City of Melbourne. They netted 1.4 million from the loss of Angelo Lane, Staughton Place, Lynch Place and Arcade Alley.

From 2006 to 2008, the City of Melbourne sold off sections of eight historic lanes for $806,301. A 21m Section of Penfold Place was sold off and Havelock Place behind the Exford Scholar Hotel was also sold. Lush lane was within a heritage precinct, but was sold and dissapeared into a new development.
2.2 Lane character lost

In the last two years, a number of changes have already seen the loss of the distinctive ‘character’ of many lanes.

The heritage building once occupied by the bar that began the popular live-music “Laneway Festival”, St Jerome’s in Caledonian Place, was demolished in 2010, and the lane is to become widened for truck access.

AC/DC lane, continuous with Duckboard Place, until recently, hosted four laneway bars, but two developments have been approved, one commenced, that would see modern 10 storey walls on opposite sides of the north-south portion, one with a café and apartments above, the other with car-park entry to an office block. Currently there are only two bars, and the rear façade of another building was recently ‘modernised’; old windows replaced with plain glass, and street art painted over in grey.

With extensive residential developments facing into laneways, the character which makes laneways so unique may be lost. Clearly conflicts are being set up that may result in the loss of what makes lanes special in the first place. The new residents of ACDC Lane may well ensure the closure or ceasing of live music from the 1 or 2 bars remaining.

ACDC Lane>

This old brick wall and its art at the rear of 108 Flinders Street is now gone, demolished in 2012 for the apartment development shown.
Celedonian Lane >
Birthplace of the now International Laneway Music Festival, St Jeromes laneway bar in an Edwardian building, and a number of small businesses facing the lane from Lonsdale House. The lane is currently a construction site, to be widened for a loading bay and sterile facades of an inward looking shopping centre (plan shown).

Duckboard Place>
rear of a Flinders st building facing onto the lane cleaned up and modernised, bricks and street art painted over. Along with the demolition on previous page, this has removed much of the grungy ‘rock’n’roll appeal that attracted tourists and locals to Duckboard/ ACDC lane.
Goldsborough Lane >
An example of a lane ‘retained’ but really demolished and replaced with a modern shopping arcade

Heape Court, west section >
5 storey older brick wall is to be replaced by a 12 storey wall of a new development proposed in 2012.

Centre Place – western dog leg
Recent introduction of door for little used arcade access destroyed street art murals and photo spot popular with tourists and locals in process.

photo by Erik Anderson on Flickr
2.3 Older ‘laneway’ buildings unprotected.

Many of the laneways have older buildings that face only the laneway, reminders that the narrow lanes were often occupied by individual buildings and formed streets in themselves. They are generally plain industrial or warehouse buildings and in many cases are the very places that give life to the lanes.

These places however were largely overlooked in the only major review of CBD heritage buildings (now appallingly out of date) undertaken 30 years ago. It is unclear if that survey in fact looked at laneways and may have excluded the buildings in them for lack or individual architectural significance, missing their collective value to lanescapes.

But given the great importance of laneways both to Melbourne’s historical development, and their current revival, protecting lanes is just as important as the more focussed on street facades. Indeed, the small scale, intimate nature of Melbourne’s lane network should now be considered as important as the main street network and has the ability to lend this city a wonderful dual pedestrian experience. One open and grand, another hidden and intimate.

**14 Watson Place >**
In the lane by the side of the Regent Theatre, was a handsome building built in 1907 and once housed the Salvation Army, and in the 1990s a famous restaurant. It was graded D, and demolished in 2011.

**20 Coromandel Place >**
An example of a heritage building in a lane completely missed by the out of date study. Un-graded and demolished in 2010.
6-18 Downie Stret ‘Seakist House’>
An inter-war brick building with unique Art Deco detailing. It was D-graded, and demolished along with a bluestone driveway in 2005.

51 Hardware Lane>
Victorian era brick and bluestone historic facade altered and rendered over in 2006

22 Drewery Place >
An Edwardian warehouse, now home to Sister Bella laneway bar. Only D-graded, with no official protection.

< 28 Block Place
Victorian building, within a Heritage precinct but only E-graded, giving it no official protection.
3. Laneway character

Melbourne’s lanes have a unique raw character which is too often ignored by planners. Often ‘lanescapes’ are more intact historically that the streetscape found on the main street. Bluestone paving and grungy details are found to dominate in the sub-world of the lanes.

**Rankins Lane >**
Lined with late 19th century and early 20th century warehouses, all red brick, none heritage protected. Used mainly as residences and a cafe.

**Lingham Lane (below)**
older bluestone incorporated into side wall of building facing Flinders Lane. Through the side wall of a place with heritage controls, heritage policy protects only facades or front parts of buildings.

**Balcolme Place (below)**
Balcolme Place – only used for escape access and rubbish, but the 19th century side walls, historic painted sign in it’s vista and mess of services make it full of character

**Albion Alley (Below)**
Heritage signage around a laneway entrance bricked up decades ago.
4. Laneway use

In recent years many lanes have become home to ‘hidden’ bars and galleries and businesses, and the location for extensive graffiti art, which is now world famous. Melbourne's lanes are all individually unique in layout, character and use.

The type of use a laneway experiences often depends on where the laneway is in the CBD, whether it is used as a ‘through block link’, and whether it has older buildings fronting onto it, or where the rear entry of older buildings provide access to ‘hidden’ interiors.

Access through city blocks mostly occurs in the north south direction. Some through block access lanes are relatively wide and are more like streets such as Bank Place. Some of these have always been lined with shops, and thronged with people, such as Centre Place. Some have no shops but provide popular shortcuts through the city blocks, especially in the retail heart. Others outside the retail area are little used by pedestrians, but may be well used by vehicles as car park access or even deliveries. Some of the more accessible lanes that have little vehicle traffic are now virtual outdoor galleries, lined with graffiti and paper and stencil art. Leading to Melbourne’s status as an international hub for street art.

Other lanes terminate in dead ends and were often originally used for access to the rear of properties fronting main streets or have smaller industrial warehouse buildings fronting onto them. Some of these have now become the location of ‘hidden’ bars and galleries. Others are used for residential purposes, and some for both.

Most lanes, whether through block or not, still serve as the means for rubbish storage and collection, while also used by vehicles.

**Shopping lanes in retail heart**
High pedestrian use, many shopfronts.

![Centre Place - lined with shops since the 1920s.](image)

**Lanes as outdoor galleries**
A few well known lanes now attract pedestrian traffic just to see them.

![Hosier Lane – now a must see for all cultural tourists to Melbourne.](image)
The famous ‘hidden lanes’

These lanes may only have a single bar fronting onto a laneway or provide a rear access to the first floor of a building with street frontage. These unique bars and business simply couldn’t exist on a main street or a gentrified shopping / restaurant lane. A strong laneway policy should ensure that these places and this niche aspect of Melbourne’s economy is preserved.

Croft Alley – access to the one ‘hidden’ bar in an historic laneway building and for rubbish collection and street art.

Lanes containing older buildings with residential / commercial use

Lanes in the less travelled parts of the CBD that are often lined with older buildings almost always have no heritage protection at all. These lanes are used for commercial and residential purposes but ensuring that their fabric and char-

Tattersalls Lane
An approved 12 storey tower on the site of Section 8 laneway bar will dominate the low-scale fabric of this Chinatown Lane, and likely obliterate others traces of the sites history such as bluestone foundations and historic brick patterns.

Guildford Lane – Commercial and residential. No heritage protection at all.
5. Current Council Policy

There is little doubt that the current Council policies do not actually protect Melbourne’s unique lanes; in fact 85% of these lanes could be sold or built over under the current policy.

5.1 Local Planning Policy  22.20 CBD LANES

The current policy is mainly concerned with provision of pedestrian access and while character is mentioned, heritage is not. The detailed policy provides almost no protection for the fabric that lines Melbourne’s lanes due to its vague wording and its non-binding nature.

The policy mainly dates from the 1990s, and is itself derived from 1980s policies aimed at preserving ‘small grain’ lanes from being lost in larger developments, and a desire to maintain ‘through-block access’, not necessarily the laneway character or adjoining heritage buildings.

The existing policy has not caught up with the huge growth in the desirability of lanes, both aesthetically, and in their provision of access to previously unused or little used small old buildings that only front laneways and their upper floors.

The policy classes lanes as 1, 2 and 3. The first two (33 on total) are all ‘through block’ lanes or connect to arcades providing through block access, though not every lane that does so is classed 1 or 2 – those in the now growing western end of the city are not included. Most of the stronger policy guidelines apply only to class 1 or 2 lanes.

The vast majority of CBD lanes (85%) are Class 3, essentially those that do not provide ‘through-block access’. Retention of these lanes is only ‘encouraged’. The policy characterises them as lanes that “provide vehicular access to the rear of buildings for loading and service requirements or access to car parking areas” and denies the rich aesthetic, cultural and artistic tradition that now inhabits them.

Many of the Class 3 lanes also provide the main access to smaller buildings facing laneways and to the upper floors of building facing main streets, where dozens of bars, studios small business are now located – they are clearly not merely vehicle access or service lanes any more.

These lanes are not protected. They can be ‘closed’ (or in other words sold) if they are not needed for access to a property (if a developer buys all the surrounding properties then it will not be) and if ‘a replacement lane that improves pedestrian amenity’ is provided.

This last point has however only been implemented in one case in the whole CBD in the last 20 years (Goldsborough Lane, which was a through lane with modern buildings either side, and is now an open shopping path that is part of a twin building development). Many other lanes have been lost with no ‘replacement lane’ provided.

Retention of bluestone block paving is only ‘encouraged’ outside heritage precincts, which is where the majority of lanes are. The policy can even be read to encourage laneway ‘upgrades’ that would result in the loss of characteristic and historic bluestone block paving. The City of Melbourne Infrastructure Manual provides standard design for bluestone lanes and kerb and guttering, rather than requiring exact replacement.

Finally, there are many lanes that are not classed at all, and some of the classed lanes are misnamed or incorrectly located on plans.

5.2 DDO 56 - CBD LANES –Class 1 and Class 2

This aspect of the planning scheme relates only the small number of Class 1 and 2 lanes, and concerns the scale of new development that might abut them.

The policy states that a new wall should be a maximum of 35m, then a setback the width of the lane. A height of 35m is about that of a 10 storey building. While some lanes already have tall buildings along their boundaries, many of the most characteristic do not. The lanes Melbournians would know and love are often lined with older 3 to 5 storey red brick warehouses or rears of older buildings at a much lower scale. To allow 10 storey walls to interrupt an existing characteristic ‘lanescape’ would allow an interruption that would destroy the ambience of the lane.
6. The way forward

Melbourne Heritage Action asserts that a new policy for Melbourne’s CBD laneways should be developed.

The first step is properly assessing all of Melbourne’s lanes looking at all the features that make them important.

All laneways should be assessed looking at the following characteristics:

* The historic laneway fabric itself including:
  Bluestone pitched paving, noting especially whether it is unchanged, has an unusual or complex pattern / arrangement, or whether re-set in last 20 years in a simpler form. Those with unusual original paving may be worthy of an Heritage Overlay on the fabric itself.

* Bluestone pitched paving kerb and channel and whether it is original

* Presence of and number of older (pre 1940) buildings that front only laneways, noting: Whether they are used, or have the potential to be used; Their intactness and character; Some post 1940 buildings may be of similar complementary character or have some other special architectural significance; Identify those that are worthy of an individual Heritage Overlay, noting that any building fronting only a laneway is of special significance to the CBD

* Identify laneways with characteristic historic ‘lanescapes’, eg older brick and stone walls, simple detailing, similar heights built to lane boundary. Some lanes may have a notable ‘lanescape’ only on one side, or for only part of the length.

* Identify individual rear and side wall facades facing lanes with strong historic character, even where the building does not already have a Heritage Overlay or is not within a precinct.

* Identify unusual or extensive laneways patterns or networks, eg. lanes running off lanes, complex doglegs.

* Identify special concentrations of lanes that may be worthy of becoming a Heritage Overlay precinct.

* Re-examine existing precincts to include lanes as features that are just as important as buildings. Some precincts may be extended to cover more lanes and laneway buildings.

* Identify laneways that are already have high pedestrian use and those that may in the future with new connections.