2026

POST-EVENT

COMMUNIQUÉ

RIGHT ANGLE

THE AGE

MELBOURNE ASSEMBLY

PRESENTED BY:

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

The first Melbourne Assembly unfolded last week, drawing hundreds together in the city centre across three spring days full of levity and eagerness. Presented by The Age and The University of Melbourne — and supported by a coalition of partners, with our team at Right Angle directing the curation, naming, and identity — the event was both shaped and then unwinded in a simple, fundamental truth: that great cities never happen by accident.

Instead — and especially in precarious times — they require proactive, collaborative and sometimes uneasy discussion. Across the program, local practitioners, global urbanists, journalists, and everyday citizens filled The Edge to interrogate the norms that govern our daily lives. From challenging our rigid planning frameworks and cultural character, to debating the merit of the unprofitable, a vital arena was opened up for shared, timely, fresh and exciting inquiry.

OPENING NIGHT

MONDAY OCTOBER 19
6–8PM

“Enjoy your three days and tread lightly.”

AUNTY DI KERR, ELDER OF THE WURUNDJERI PEOPLE

Melbourne Assembly began in what could be described as an atmosphere of urban optimism with over 300 people sitting together in one of the city’s most important gathering spaces on an almost alarmingly warm spring evening. Aunty Di Kerr’s toddler-age granddaughter made an impromptu trip to the stage during a moving Welcome to Country, delighting the audience, out-manoeuvring anyone trying to catch her and providing a poetic reminder that conversations, ideas and decisions made through the Assembly will be of greatest consequence to our young.

Professor Carolyn Evans, the newly-minted Vice Chancellor of The University of Melbourne was next to the stage with a starting premise that while “Melbourne is and should be good at lots of things, but it can only be great at a few”. To her mind the most ambitious future builds upon key strengths that the city already possesses; health and medicine, culture and sport, research and development.

After a fascinating insight into the darker machinations of Melbourne’s city-making through The Age’s investigative journalist Nick McKenzie, it was then turn for John Harnden, CEO of Melbourne Park, and Melbourne Assembly’s international speakers to join Professor Evans on stage. Bill de Blasio, the magnetic, two-term New York City Mayor and Carlos Moreno, the legendary urban scientist and forefather of the 15-minute city movement could not be more stylistically different, but philosophically aligned by belief that cities are fundamentally for people, and that whatever future we are moving to must address humanistic needs, will require constant co-operation and demand strong leadership over popularism.



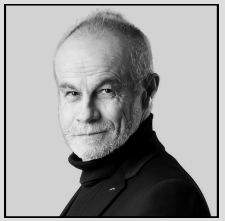
PROFESSOR CAROLYN EVANS
VICE-CHANCELLOR, THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

“Victoria will not be able to dig its future out of the ground – we need to pull it out of our brains.”



BILL DE BLASIO
FORMER MAYOR OF NEW YORK CITY

“If you knew there was something you could do to profoundly change your city but it was going to take culture change, it was going to take dealing with angry constituencies, it was going to take education and opening up peoples’ minds to what was possible, you would try to do it – but it wouldn’t be an easy path.”



PROFESSOR CARLOS MORENO
CO-FOUNDER AND SCIENTIFIC DIRECTOR OF ETI LAB

“The most important thing today to people in any city is their useful time.”



JOHN HARNDEN AM
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, MELBOURNE PARK

“Though it seems like we are at the top of our game in providing Melbourne experiences, this is the time to be doubling down.”

Presented by The University of Melbourne and in partnership with City of Melbourne and the Committee For Melbourne

SHAPING THE CITY

TUESDAY OCTOBER 20
9.00–12.30PM

"You have the tools to become one of the world's great cities, but you don't have time and you need the vision."

BILL DE BLASIO, FORMER MAYOR OF NEW YORK CITY

'What is the vision for the city and who gets to decide it?' That was the question at the very centre of Melbourne Assembly's first morning of conversation, as it was back when The Age and Right Angle first discussed the merit of a special event to enable crucial conversations about our future. While the session's speakers differed in their aspirations for the future, they unanimously supported the need for clear civic vision, developed consultatively and delivered by every level of government because that's what it takes to make a great city.

Reflecting on his experiences as two-term Mayor of New York, keynote speaker and urban optimist Bill de Blasio provided fascinating insights on the many complex challenges facing industrialised cities around the world including homelessness, density, the role of data centres, education and inclusivity. His response to the challenges: "The answer is always vision. First know what you want to be. Then be systematic and intentional in your efforts."

City visions are notoriously difficult to define and agree upon, especially in a fast-growing place like Melbourne with its diverse population and their varying needs. However, the same diversity is also a strength, and as the panel universally said, an intrinsic quality of Melbourne to be understood and harmonised into a sense of communal destiny.

PROVOCATIONS:

01.

Price the things that are genuinely scarce. For example, making people pay for on-street car parking and introducing road congestion taxes

02.

Daylight the waterways we have undergrounded to change the way we experience and understand Country.

03.

Centre our natural systems in the way we design our future city.



ARUNA SATHANAPALLY
CEO, GRATTAN INSTITUTE

"We need a broad-based and gentle density across the city."



PROFESSOR DAN HILL
DIRECTOR, MELBOURNE SCHOOL OF DESIGN, THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

"Think about housing as a human right. A lot of positive would flow from that."



SARAH LYNN REES
ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL, JACKSON CLEMENTS BURROWS ARCHITECTS

"[Do we] want to design apartments for the way we are now, not how we were in the Industrial Era?"



STEVE BRACKS, AC
CHANCELLOR, VICTORIA UNIVERSITY & CHAIR, MCG TRUST

"We need a hard full stop at the edge of our city to stop further sprawl."



NICHOLAS REECE
THE LORD MAYOR OF MELBOURNE

"We don't just want to be the best city. We want to be the best and fairest."

Presented by The University of Melbourne

INNOVATION & EDUCATION

TUESDAY OCTOBER 20
1:30–4.30PM

"[Discovery] requires risk and most risky ideas won't work. Some technologies will never reach the market and these so-called failures are not evidence that the system isn't working, that's just what innovation looks like."

PROFESSOR SHARON LEWIN, DIRECTOR, DOHERTY INSTITUTE, THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

A surprise Opening Address from Prime Minister Anthony Albanese set the tone for Tuesday afternoon. Beginning on a somber note, acknowledging MP Helen Haines — hospitalised Monday following an allegedly targeted attack — Albanese went on to commend and celebrate The Age's deep bond with Melbourne, describing the city as a cultural powerhouse, driven by "a people committed to building a shining, open future." After some scene-setting from The Age's Education Editor Alex Crowe, Professor Marek Tesar — Dean of Education at Melbourne University — delivered the first Keynote, urging the room to think about cities as places that can't just hold knowledge, but that must find a way to apply that knowledge ("learning cities"), staying curious and open to unimagined futures.

Professor Sharon Lewin then took the stage to champion the multicultural collaboration integral to research and discovery, citing the sundry team of international researchers that supported David Ho's HIV therapy breakthrough during her time at the Rockefeller Center in the 1990s, while reminding the room of one of the city's greatest challenges: a fear of failing.

Rounding out the warm and breezy afternoon, The Age World Editor Supratim Adhikari led the panel with Tesar, Lewin, Petra Andrén, Dr Andrew McLean, and Rohan Silva. They tackled all sorts; the tasks of fostering curiosity, securing targeted government funding, addressing Melbourne's lag behind Sydney in the realm of tech, and navigating the hard work of turning research into real and evident adaptability.

PROVOCATIONS:

01.

Melbourne needs to ask itself: is it applying what it knows across the entire city, or are we concentrating opportunity in places that already have it?

02.

True innovation and discovery requires a cultural shift towards taking risks and embracing the unknown.

03.

The city will be held back unless we do away with our competitive streak and begin sharing knowledge more freely.



ROHAN SILVA
MANAGING DIRECTOR, AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND, FACULTY AI

"It's a really crucial moment for Melbourne to claw back that lead that Sydney has established [in tech]."



PETRA ANDRÉN
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, QUANTUM

"We need to make sure children are exposed to different things so their curiosity is sparked. How can we be something we can't see?"



PROFESSOR SHARON LEWIN
DIRECTOR, DOHERTY INSTITUTE, THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

"When Suzanne Crawley and Gerry Adams began asking why cancer cells survive they couldn't possibly have promised a new drug. There was just a question, and someone was prepared to let brilliant people pursue it."



DR ANDREW MCLEAN
MANAGING PARTNER, TIN ALLEY VENTURES

"The Australian economy, in terms of its market structure, has been relatively stagnant in recent history — the same banks, same miners. And it's quite a fragile economy."



PROFESSOR MAREK TESAR
DEAN, FACULTY OF EDUCATION, THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

"What should concern us is not simply what the city knows, but what the city does with what it knows."

Presented by The University of Melbourne and in partnership with Bupa

HEALTHY PLACES & PEOPLE

WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 21
9.00-12.30PM

"A good city in the 21st century is not measured in kilometres, it is measured in useful time. Less traffic, more time, better life."

PROFESSOR CARLOS MORENO, CO-FOUNDER AND SCIENTIFIC DIRECTOR OF ETI LAB

What does population growth mean for civic health in a city like Melbourne? What does a future where more Melburnians reside in apartments than detached dwellings look like? How can we retain the qualities that make Melbourne so liveable as ? Will data centres destroy our way of life? Questions like these bounced around the Edge all morning as the Healthy Places & People session turned to the social, physical and environmental health of Greater Melbourne, underpinned by the eminent Professor Carlos Moreno's keynote speech on the concept (and now reality) that has defined his career: the 15-minute city.

Conversation focused on the health benefits of a polycentric city, and what Melbourne's growth projections could look like if the model were adopted. Kelvyn Lavelle, a self professed "Westie" purports the economic strength of Australia's fastest growing region – a part of Melbourne that by the middle of the 21st century will be the same size that Adelaide is today. In dialogue with Alison Leighton, CEO of the City of Melbourne, they discuss the ways the central city can support development corridors like the west and how they can work harmoniously.

Jess Miller was born in Frankston, a fact she wears as a badge of honour in a room of locals, but she's here today as a Sydney-sider and has plenty of lessons for Melbourne from the north. Sydney's strategic "three cities" framework has set up a brilliant model for moving beyond a single CBD, backed by massive investment in rail and transport nodes and the outcome is polycentricism that extends beyond economics into cultural, social and health outcomes.

PROVOCATIONS:

01.

The CBD as we know it may be dead. Urban sprawl, the need to embrace poly-centricism and a shift to working from home make traditional central business districts a 20th century relic that reinforce inequality.

02.

Infrastructure that increases social cohesion and urban health doesn't always have to be big. There can be huge ROI in doing small things and avoiding letting perfection get in the way of good.

03.

Increased density means new ways of designing healthy places. Transportation, services, jobs and public and private investment are the keys to a healthy future Melbourne.



KELVYN LAVELLE
BOARD MEMBER, WEST OF MELBOURNE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCE, (WOMEDA)

"I think we need to pivot investment to the western suburbs because I think that's where the future is."



JESS MILLER
DEPUTY LORD MAYOR, CITY OF SYDNEY

"We're willing to blow $70m on a playing field, so when people wake up they are looking at a park and not looking at a data centre."



DR NIC WOODS
CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER, BUPA

"In Australia we've a million people who are diabetic. If we can get people active we can invert that."



ALISON LEIGHTON
CEO, CITY OF MELBOURNE

"We need to be really particular and very considered in how we provide services to residents that live in apartments as that sector continues to grow."



THE HON. BEN CARROLL MP
PREMIER OF VICTORIA

"Having two mRNA facilities in one city is like having Apple and Google. Universities are incubators for new economies."

Presented by The University of Melbourne and in partnership with Melbourne Park

SPORT & THE ARTS

WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 21
1.30–5.00PM

"We don't have a word in any Aboriginal language for sport or for art — it is a given that the dancer sings, the singer paints, the painter tells stories."

DR TIRIKI ONUS, PRO VICE-CHANCELLOR (INDIGENOUS), HEAD OF THE WILIN CENTRE FOR INDIGENOUS ARTS AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Despite the fatigue after two days of hard thinking and question-asking, Melbourne Assembly's closing session, Sport & the Arts, was a bouncy, incisive finish. While it kicked off with a decidedly political edge — Jess Wilson, first woman to lead the Victorian Liberals addressed the upcoming election, sledged the current government, and talked casually about abolishing Treaty in both her Opening Address and in conversation with Chip LeGrand — it soon turned to more heartening matters.

Waleed Aly, as usual, proved his vital place in our media with springy ease, moderating a spirited and genial debate between Kelli Underwood and The Age's Karl Quinn, on whether sport or art is the more salient pastime of the city. Which he, of course, was forced to call a draw. Refuelled by scones, jam, and cream, the masses reassembled for the final panel. Aly then led the afternoon's panel through conversations around the walkability of Melbourne's cultural precinct and the threat of becoming passive consumers rather than active participants. Tiriki Onus — Pro-Vice Chancellor (Indigenous) at The University of Melbourne — pointed to the now-multi-level carpark across the road at 97 Flinders Street, once the Melbourne Workers Theatre where Uncle Jack Charles got his start, and a venue that eventually led to Moomba Festival. Highlighting how essential it is to nurture the incubators of history rather than judging arts, experimentation and contributions solely by their viability.

Editor of The Age Patrick Elliget then brought Bill de Blasio and Carlos Moreno back onto stage to wrap the day, with three final questions from the audience. Leaving the room energised, de Blasio urged us to act locally and swiftly: "This is the type of conversation I wish was happening in every corner of the world... whatever you are trying to do to better the world, do it fast."

PROVOCATIONS:

01.
If we want to nurture deep culture, we've got to honour grassroots spaces, storytelling and Australia's foundational history.

02.
Are we too precious about keeping suburbs like Fitzroy cool, or do we need to become okay with the changing postcodes of affordable, accessible spaces?

03.
Watching, consuming and gambling rather than playing, creating and volunteering threatens the health of both sport and the arts.



DR TIRIKI ONUS
PRO VICE-CHANCELLOR (INDIGENOUS), HEAD OF THE WILIN CENTRE FOR INDIGENOUS ARTS AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

"We are conditioned to see the arts as a childish thing we must put away at a certain point."



KIEREN PERKINS, OAM
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, AUSTRALIAN SPORTS COMMISSION & SWIMMING CHAMPION

"As we find ourselves more time poor, resource poor and with less places that make it simple and easy to connect and play... we're definitely struggling."



KATRINA SEDGWICK, OAM
DIRECTOR & CEO, MELBOURNE ARTS PRECINCT CORPORATION

"We need to explore things — the kooky and the experimental as well as these major events. It's that kind of ecology that we have to support."



JOHN HARNDEN
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, MELBOURNE PARK

"Change is constant, we need to be prepared to evolve."



KYLIE ROGERS
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, VICTORIA RACING CLUB

"If we just rest on our laurels, we're going to lose [our major events]."

THE AGE

MELBOURNE ASSEMBLY

PRESENTED BY:

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

MAJOR PARTNERS:

Bupa

MELBOURNE PARK

SUPPORTING:

BUREAU

CITY OF MELBOURNE

COMMITTEE FOR MELBOURNE

RIGHT ANGLE

EVENT PARTNERS:

future events lab

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THE LANGHAM MELBOURNE