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Civic pride

Maverick mayors and plucky planners are springing into action to make their cities greener and cleaner – and prepare them for the big bounce back.

Edited by Megan Gibson

I. Melbourne

DO IT BETTER LESSON: Have a plan – but move when opportunity strikes.

It's summer in Melbourne and Swanston Street is bustling as trams clatter by and people step in and out of shops. It's a welcome sight for a city that endured Australia's longest lockdown: 112 days. Standing by the Town Hall steps, lord mayor Sally Capp knows that the city still faces huge challenges but she's happy to be the one leading its recovery.

Capp, the first woman in 30 years to lead the city, won her second term at the end of last year. But she's not taking her victory for granted. "We



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(1) Skating in Market Street Park (2) Mayor Sally Capp outside Melbourne Town Hall (3) Southbank Boulevard redevelopment

need to assure people that this is a safe, attractive place to live and work," she says. Capp is working with businesses to encourage a safe return to offices. They are also relying on culture to aid the retail sector by supporting artists to produce installations and live performances to draw people to enlivened shops, streets and laneways. The hospitality sector, meanwhile, is enjoying a relaxation of the laws around liquor licensing, trading hours and alfresco dining.

But Capp also recognises that Melbourne's lockdown presented an opportunity: it enabled her team to expedite a number of sustainability projects that they were already working towards. By having an urban sustainability plan in place, Capp was

able to nimbly seize the chance to act when Melbourne went quiet. As Capp puts it, “We haven’t wasted time in making this a better and greener city.” — WH

In light of the pandemic and climate change, is there an opportunity to improve our cities? Coronavirus has enabled us to accelerate some of our ambitions relating to climate mitigation, urban forestry and transport strategies. A tree-planting programme that would have taken years to complete was done in six months. We have rolled out about 15km of protected bicycle lanes, made footpaths wider and turned streets into pedestrian zones. The city has been able to extend existing parks and create new urban ones.

Melburnians endured a strict and protracted lockdown. How hard was it on the city? Residents of Melbourne sacrificed personal freedoms for the good of the community – it was tough on everyone and especially businesses. There’s no doubt that it was a double-edged sword because responding to the health crisis in the way that we did meant that our city economy has been decimated. But we have figures from the University of Melbourne that show recovery in different cities and those that took the health crisis seriously have seen good economic recovery compared to those that didn’t.

Leadership is vital but how have citizens played a role? I’m seeing Melburnians bringing a wealth of creativity and ingenuity to the table. We’re seeing so many fresh ideas from people in business and the arts. We’ve seen new hospitality ventures: little bars, new pop-up shops and pocket parks where car spots once were. These ideas haven’t always been council-led – we’ve been inundated with ideas from the community about making better urban spaces. We can actually play a supporting role to make their ideas reality.



2. San Francisco

DO IT BETTER LESSON: Treat your city’s public-transit users to a smooth ride.

San Francisco has always prided itself on its countercultural attitude. Indeed, in a country where the car is king, its public transport woes are unique. “This isn’t something that’s true for many cities outside the Bay Area but people would say that we have too many transit districts that are unconnected when they reach downtown San Francisco,” says urbanist and planner Peter Albert.

Indeed, the nearly eight million people in the Bay Area – spread across San Francisco, Redwood City, Oakland, Berkeley, San Jose, Silicon Valley and surrounding counties – are served by more than two dozen transit agencies. Which means that if you’re travelling from, say, Oakland to Redwood City, you have to use multiple transit systems. In San Francisco alone there are intercity trains run by Amtrak; a region-wide subway, the Bay Area Rapid Transit; the commuter rail service Caltrain; buses arriving from other cities; and the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency’s streetcars, metro and buses. Until recently there was no place where they all connected, which is why, according to Albert, the opening of the Transit Center is so significant.

Now known as the Salesforce Transit Center (the technology company bought naming rights for 25 years), it’s a Pelli Clarke Pelli-designed building stretching across four city blocks. When it’s eventually running at full capacity, this five-level structure will be the meeting point of local, regional and statewide transit.

“Ideally, you’re shooting for a one-seat ride; you get on in Oakland or San Jose, find your seat, open your newspaper and then the next stop is the heart of downtown San Francisco,” says Albert. “And your transfer is right there or your final destination only a few blocks walk away.”



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(1) View of the park on top of San Francisco’s new Salesforce Transit Center
(2) Main concourse through the transportation hub

All of this is complemented by the two-hectare park on top of the building. Manicured lawns, a playground and lush gardens – with a water feature that shoots streams of spray into the air when buses move underneath it – are open to the public, providing a green oasis for residents and workers nearby. But that’s not to say that the park isn’t without its critics: while it’s accessible for all, the presence of security guards has prompted some to accuse it of exclusivity.

Yet this characterisation misses the point. The rooftop garden is a celebration of transit riders who no longer have to arrive at dreary locations on the periphery of the city before making several transfers to reach their destination. And it’s a benchmark for other US cities with confusing transit systems or an over-reliance on cars.

“There’s something symbolic about coming into a beautiful new facility with access to amenities. You can go out to the garden and get a coffee, you can listen to a DJ set [in the park] before your bus comes or you can take a walk after work, eight storeys up with an extraordinary view of downtown,” says Albert. “This neighbourhood is not just the domain of those living in the luxury high-rises; it’s for the transit riders too.”

The centre, then, has reshaped transit in the city, not just in terms of speed and timeliness but by elevating the transit riders’ experience – an admirable cause and one that cities and transit agencies everywhere should work harder to take up. — NM

“This neighbourhood is not just the domain of those living in the luxury high-rises; it’s for the transit riders too”

PHOTOGRAPHERS: Carlos Chazarría, Jo Duck

3. Taichung, Taiwan

DO IT BETTER LESSON: The need for a big investment – of time or money – shouldn’t stop ambitious plans



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Taichung is home to some 2.82 million people, the world’s largest bicycle manufacturer and alarming levels of air pollution. Which is why the Taiwanese city, on the island’s western coast, has welcomed the arrival of a sweeping new 67-hectare park – about the same size as Disneyland in California – on the site of a former airport. When Phase Shifts Park, also known as Taichung Central Park, opened in December tens of thousands attended the ceremony. And while the park’s unique design might not be magical enough to earn it the title “Happiest Place on Earth”, it is poised to transform the way residents use their city.

Through a mix of canny design and innovative technology, the park

combats the negative effects of pollution by offering cool spaces and cleaner air. While landscaped hills and valleys collect and channel rainwater, some 340,000 plants were carefully selected to remove contaminants from the air and water through a process called phytoremediation. Pockets of shade have been created by masses of trees with large foliage, which offer respite from the sun. The park is also entirely independent; its lighting is powered by solar panels.

Catherine Mosbach of French landscape architecture firm Mosbach Paysagistes, tem head of the project, says that part of the aim of the design was, in part, to honour “the spirit of Taiwan’s mood and not just import the international style you



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(1) Taichung Central Park (2) Walking along the park’s main aquaduct (3) Mosquito-repelling streetlamps (4) Interactive observation deck and picnic area in the park (5) Rush hour on Copenhagen’s newest cycle bridge



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find everywhere”. To that end, more than 80 per cent of the park’s trees are native species. Mosbach says that the team also carefully mapped out the location of the recreations areas to ensure that the playgrounds “are as far as possible from traffic and pollution”, while the various installations dotted throughout “are as much as possible in [shaded] conditions”.

Phase Shifts Park is a symbol of collaboration. With Mosbach working with Taiwanese architecture firm Ricky Liu & Associates and Swiss architect Philippe Rahm, the expansive park took almost a decade to complete – meaning that it also required political investment across the three mayoral administrations that governed the city in that time. (Current mayor Lu Shiow-Yen invited her two predecessors to the ribbon-cutting ceremony.)

But many seem to think that the wait was worth it. Since it opened, the park – already nicknamed the “lung of Taichung” – has become a thriving space in the heart of the city. — MJG



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4. Copenhagen

DO IT BETTER LESSON: Sustainable change can be difficult – so make it visible and attractive.



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Copenhagen appears to be sailing smoothly towards its 2025 goal of becoming the first national capital to achieve carbon neutrality. It has positioned itself as the paradigm-shift city, inspiring the world to get on bikes, convert to clean energy and recycle anything that sits still long enough.

It hasn’t been a process without hurdles. “In 2012, when we made the plan, it was impossible to forecast precisely where we would be in 2021,” says the city’s executive climate project director Jørgen Abildgaard.

One arguable misstep was the construction of the massive waste-to-energy plant, Amager Bakke (the one with the ski slope on the roof, also known as Copenhill), designed by Bjarke Ingels. He once boasted about the “mountains of trash” which would fuel the plant but the Danes are so good at recycling that they have had to ship in waste from other countries.

City architect Camilla van Deurs offers a defence of the plant. “One of our strengths is that we have been very visible with our climate projects, such as Amager Bakke, but also windmills that you see when you fly into the city and the harbour baths, which are a symbol of the approximately DKR2bn [€269m] we spent to clean up the water.” These kinds

of tangible benefits are crucial, she believes. “Saving thousands of tonnes of carbon dioxide – what does that mean? It’s difficult to make abstract choices attractive to people, so the key is making them visible.”

Both Van Deurs and Abildgaard agree that more progress needs to be made regarding Danes’ attachment to their cars. “We have to upgrade public spaces so that people see that the benefits outweigh the inconvenience,” says Van Deurs. “That’s where architecture can play a role.” Thirteen new pedestrian and cycle bridges have been built in the past seven years alone.

Cynics cry greenwashing over the fact that Copenhagen Airport (not technically within the city) and the operations of Maersk shipping are excluded from the CO₂ calculations. Others might wonder, with China still building coal-fuelled plants, what is the point of a small city pushing for carbon neutrality? But Copenhagen’s technical and environmental mayor, Ninna Hedeager Olsen, is defiant. “Cities often have the courage to do stuff that nations don’t,” she says.

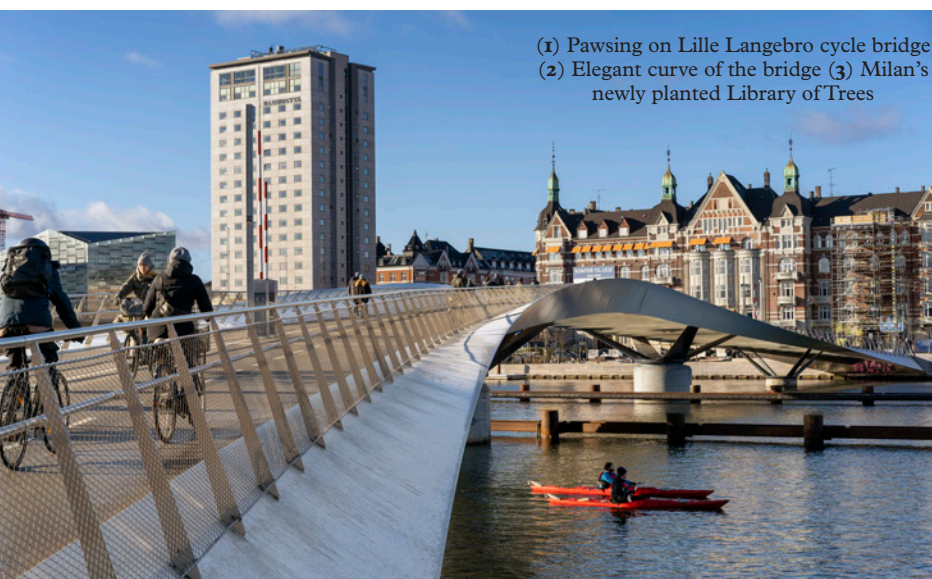
Hedeager Olsen argues that though national politicians have often curbed the city’s sustainability ambitions – a congestion-charge plan some years ago

failed to gain enough support – local politicians like her have a role in making brave and sometimes unpopular decisions. “We have to look at removing more parking spaces,” she says. “And encouraging even more cycle use, particularly from further out of the city.” The latter, combined with expanded light railways, is, she feels, preferable to building high in this still defiantly low-rise city.

Post-2025, Copenhagen will not be resting on its carbon-neutral laurels. In 2023 a new plan is likely to focus on emissions from construction and on the behaviour of Copenhageners themselves. It’s a delicate area, says Abildgaard. “But that’s the next step: to involve citizens so that they see the benefits.” — MB



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(1) Pawsing on Lille Langebro cycle bridge
(2) Elegant curve of the bridge (3) Milan’s newly planted Library of Trees

5. Milan

DO IT BETTER LESSON: Improve your environment, from air to access.



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Milan’s mayor, Giuseppe Sala, is thinking big. The city’s trajectory from dull and industrial to truly liveable has been fêted for several years – but the mayor says that the pandemic has allowed Milan to take stock. “Every time we had the opportunity to change, we changed,” he says. Now he wants to “offer a vision of the future”.

Lombardy’s air quality is among the worst in Western Europe. One way to combat the issue is by giving people incentives to leave their cars at home. Sala says that the idea of a “polycentric city” – a take on the “15-minute city” concept – is on its way to becoming reality. In Sala’s vision, anyone should be able to leave their home and within minutes reach a market, green space or any other essential of daily life.

Services in certain neighbourhoods will need to be improved; as will mobility. Sala has been tweaking what he calls the “timetable of the city”, an idea tested during the pandemic, which has tried to avoid, for example, schools and shops opening at the same time to reduce spikes in movement and improve flow.

There are also plans to extend metro and tram lines, to further prioritise cyclists and pedestrians, to switch to an all-electric bus fleet and to create several new parks. Seven railyards will be redeveloped in line with strict rules designating at least 50 per cent of each area as parkland and a third of new apartments as social housing.

Sala talks about a triumvirate of “urban development, mobility and the environment”. But with further plans to beautify squares and fixed timelines for dealing with abandoned buildings, it’s clear that thinking big starts close to home. — EJS