

CAIRNS CITY HEART

'Too derelict': Ambitious plans to transform 'unforgivable' state of CBD

YASHEE SHARMA

STREETS of vacant properties with months-old for-lease signs, derelict buildings, peestained pavements, crime and homelessness is all too familiar in our CBD, but there is hope it can be turned around.

Natural resources, proximity to Asia, growing population and enviable lifestyle offerings put Cairns in a position of strength for the future but the city needed to unlock the CBD's potential, Urbis director Kate Meyrick said.

One initiative slowly filling empty pockets is Renew Cairns but project manager Phil Druery says there is more participants willing than owners comfortable with allowing people to occupy space on a rolling 30-day tenure.

With six successful activations in 10 months, Mr Druery said one lease on a quiet corner of the Esplanade had turned into a long-term lease agreement between the occupant and owner.

However, he said this was just a "brick in the wall".

"I did an audit in May and there were 82 vacant ground-level spaces — from the Esplanade to Sheridan St and Aplin St to Spence St — and I did an audit in August and there were 81 vacant," he said.

"There's some places in town that are too derelict to activate, the old Mad Cow building in Spence St for example, it's a huge building but it's been left to rot. It's not unfortunate, it's unforgivable."



Office space for lease at the corner of Grafton and Shields streets.



A familiar sight on Lake St where for-lease signs abound.



Monica McLeod surveys a urine stained footpath in the CBD.

“When I came here 20 years ago it was thriving, there were people everywhere ... it was a family place.”

**THEO'S SHOE HOSPITAL OWNER
MONICA MCLEOD**

The former Mad Cow building is one of many in a string of abandoned properties around the Far North.

Managing director of CBRE Cairns Danny Betros attributed building abandonment to a changing retail industry, commercial inaction

and decreased demand.

"The properties that are vacant are owned by locals unfortunately, the condition of at least a dozen properties are a disgrace," he said.

"This was coming just before Covid but Covid exasperated the issue and drama."

The number of owners looking for CBD spaces had dropped due to more business operations moving to online, but things may be turning around soon, Mr Betros said.

"The CBD is coming to life again over the next 12 months," he said.

"It takes time to build up demand, business just doesn't bounce back in 24 hours."

To curb the negative effects of abandoned properties, Mr Druery said strategic placement of businesses and events would help foot traffic to permeate into the city to create a

bustling feel.

"One of the really important things is for CBDs to be vibrant they need people, and they need people living in CBD areas so all the benefits can flow from that," he said.

"The people who have survived ... Makin Whoopee and

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IS STILL FLATLINING



Theo's Shoe Hospital owner Monica McLeod says big shopping centres have had a detrimental effect on the city. Picture: Nuno Avendano

the Walk on Lake St, Oceana Arcade, ironically, they're the places that are really vibrant, they're people who are local, in the main, selling local products that a lot of the time they make themselves."

One of the survivors is Theo's Shoe Hospital which

has been a long-standing institution in Shields Street.

Owner Monica McLeod said big shopping centres were the "worst thing" to happen to the region, taking sole traders into an airconditioned building and out of city streets.

"When I came here 20

years ago it was thriving, there were people everywhere, there were children ... it was a family place," she said.

"We had butchers here, pet stores ... people like to be spoken to, our customers come in and they want to have a yarn. "We're old school."

Rubbish, urine and defecation, broken beer bottles and terrifying assaults has left Ms McLeod and family member Mick McLeod "devastated".

"People come into the store to get off the street," Mr McLeod said.

"Isn't this supposed to be a tourist town?"

There have been numerous attempts and ideas to improve Cairns' CBD and breathe new life into the precinct.

A radical plan to make Cairns a "hub like Los Angeles, a place people come to photo-



Frank Gasparin's concept design to transform Anzac Park near the Reef Hotel Casino. Picture: Supplied

graph" was mooted by property investor Frank Gasparin who envisioned a metropolitan retail and hospitality area fitted with its own water fountain on Abbott St.

However, smaller and more consistent activations were key for our city's future, according to Mr Druery and Cairns division five councillor Amy Eden.

"Activation of our city isn't just face painting and ponies we need to think broader than this. It's removing red tape and fees that hinder creatives, including our world class foodies, to deliver events and pop-ups that bring vibrancy and points of interest to our streets," Ms Eden said.

The planting of a 2050 tree, legislation better equipping police to keep the community safe, volunteer opportunities for residents to meet and greet visitors, a free city bus loop and rethinking CBD parking were on Ms Eden's list of improvements.

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