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How to clean up Cairns CBD which has vacant buildings for lease, crime and homelessness issues

Vacant properties with months-old for-lease signs, derelict buildings, pee-stained pavements, crime and homelessness are all too familiar in our CBD — but there is hope it can be turned around.

Yashee Sharma

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 @yasheexsharma  3 min read November 5, 2022 - 6:00AM The Cairns Post

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Streets of vacant properties with months-old for-lease signs, derelict buildings, [pee-stained 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.



Renew Cairns Project Manager Phil Druery says he’s excited so many entrepreneurs, CBD landlords and business owners are working positively and cohesively to generate results which benefit everyone involved. Picture: Alison Paterson

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”.

Do you think Cairns CBD has deteriorated?

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No

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“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.”





The former Mad Cow and Casbar nightclub on Spence Street. Picture: Brendan Radke

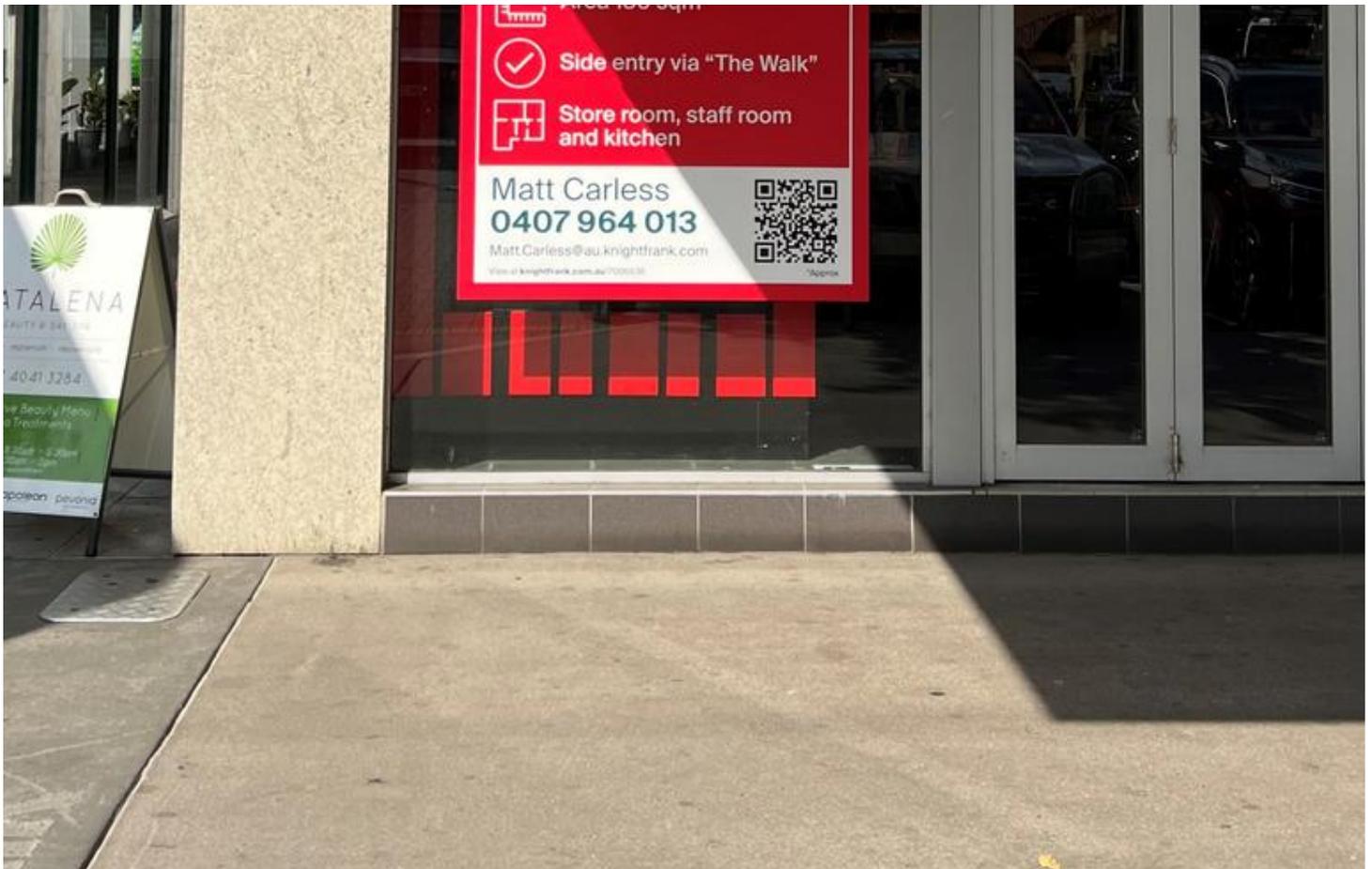
The former Mad Cow building is one of many in a string of abandoned properties around the Far North.

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.”





A familiar sight on Lake St, Cairns CBD are for-lease signs. Picture: Yashee Sharma





For-lease signs are dotted throughout the Cairns CBD and there are about 80 vacant ground-level premises. Picture: Yashee Sharma

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.”



A familiar sight at the corner of Shields and Grafton streets where the for-lease sign has been displayed for months. Picture: Yashee Sharma

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 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.”

The future of Cairns CBD

Collaboration is key, according to Cairns division five councillor Amy Eden, who laid out her plans to transform the CBD.

- **Integrating public and private spaces to foster community cohesion:**

"This could look like purchasing a roof top of a new building that could be hired out to community groups," Ms Eden said.

- **Green spaces to increase the ‘urban rainforest’ leaf index:**

"(It) will play an important role in cooling the city as we face the challenges of climate change in addition to soft and hard interventions to manage coastal hazards," Ms Eden said.

- **Public space art installations, both static and dynamic:**

"I personally would like to see an installation that is Instagramable, engaging and becomes iconic to Cairns, maybe something that reflects that we are the gateway to the Great Barrier Reef," Ms Eden said.

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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.



Theo’s Shoe Hospital owner Monica McLeod says shopping centres are popular options for shoppers due to their airconditioning.

“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 sleeping in the CBD is a common sight. Picture: Brendan Radke



The Cairns CBD's walkways are often stained. Picture: Yashee Sharma

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“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 photograph” was mooted by property investor Frank Gasparin [who envisioned a metropolitan retail and hospitality area](#) fitted with its own water fountain on Abbott St.



Property investor Frank Gasparin funded a new concept video and design to transform Abbott St in the Cairns CBD into a beautiful metropolitan retail and hospitality area. This shot shows a new proposed water fountain at Anzac Park near the Reef Hotel Casino. Picture: Supplied

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.

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Cairns Regional Council CBD activations

The CBD activations by Cairns Regional Council, according to division five councillor Amy Eden.

- **Reef Eye** – attracts consistent numbers and partners with other businesses for example, dine and ride
- **Renew Cairns** – activated 6 vacant shops in Shields St, increased foot traffic, events, sales and one business has signed a 6 month lease
- **Former Post Office site (Grafton St)** – 99 year lease to CQU expected \$500m economic injection into local economy
- **Esplanade Dining Precinct** – \$28M renewal fast-tracked

- **Cairns Galley Precinct** – linking the Esplanade with the city by transforming and connecting three heritage listed buildings (work in progress)
- **Redevelopment of Shields St Stage 2 (Abbott St end)** – with removal of some planter boxes, upgraded street lighting and installation of catenary lighting
- **Fairy lights** – on 8 large streets in Shields Street
- **Renewal of lighting** – in ANZAC Park, including fairy lights

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.

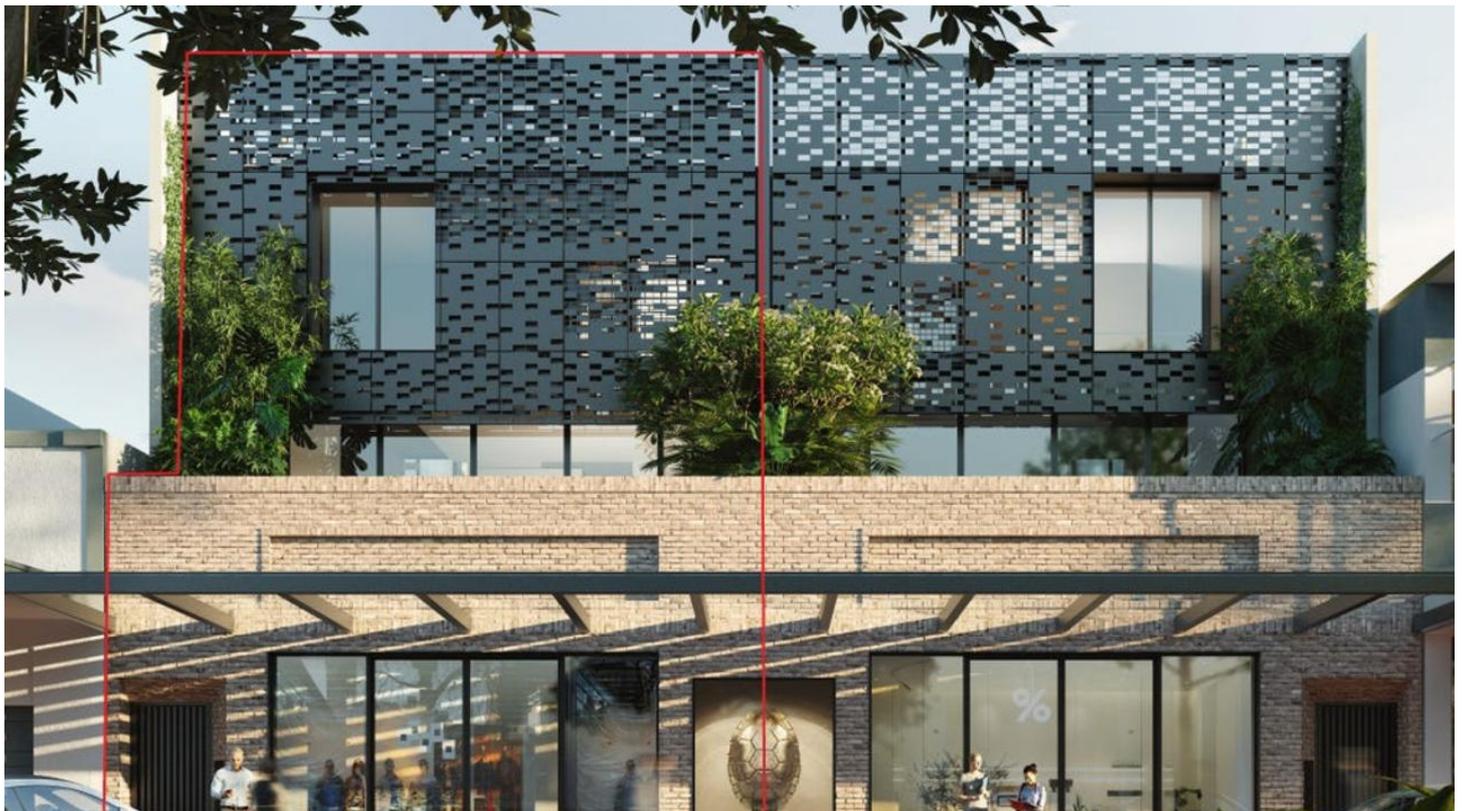
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