

4 ways our streets can rescue restaurants, bars and cafes after coronavirus

May 29 2020, by Thami Croeser



Credit: Mikhail Nilov from Pexels

As Australia re-opens, the bars, cafes and restaurants that give life to our streets face a tough ask: stay open and stay afloat with just a fraction of the customers.

From June 1 in Victoria, for example, the limit will be [20 patrons](#), with 1.5 metres between tables or four square metres per patron. If that goes well, it'll be 50 patrons from June 22—if they can be seated the required distance apart. Many smaller businesses won't be able to do that.

With the Jobkeeper package due to expire in September, the next couple of months is a critical window for traders to find new ways to seat patrons. Fortunately, [street](#) space can help a lot with this.

Here are four proven ways to quickly reconfigure street space. We might even find them nice enough to keep. Have your say in the poll at the end of this article.

Footpath trade

Footpath dining already gives many iconic streets their character. Even two or three tables outside a small bar in the evenings can give life to a street.

Putting out tables sounds simple, but the permit process is the real hurdle. It can take weeks or months of waiting and uncertainty while a small team assesses [a long list of details](#).

Councils could employ more assessors to fast-track the process, but there is another option. In the post-COVID environment, it may be time to trust traders and embrace more of the informality we see in [cities with great street food](#). Councils could trial a system where dining is permitted by default in front of each establishment, subject to a few simple rules.

Traders must understand that their permits depend on not blocking thoroughfare. Disability access in particular must be maintained.

However, many footpaths are wide and quiet enough that dining tables

could be up and working well in a matter of days.

Parklets

One roadside parking space in front of a café or bar might mean one or two customers—assuming they come to that business. A [car park](#) can instead become a "parklet" with space for six to eight people, while looking a lot more inviting. Put two or three parking spaces together and you've got a miniature dining area or a parklet.

The parklet idea came out of San Francisco. Examples from there show how diverse and successful these can be. From [weirdly sculptural](#) to [classically European](#) to [high-end and polished](#), they all add character to the places where they spring up.

In Melbourne, Moreland Council has one long-term parklet [in Brunswick](#). Its simple, neat design fits plenty of patrons and includes a bit of greenery. Perth and [Adelaide](#) have examples too, but the potential seems to be mostly untapped in Australian cities.

And the benefits are significant. A recent [parklet study](#) in Perth found a 20-35% increase in local footfall, and 89% community support.

Again, a bit of sanctioned informality may be the best way to get parklets working quickly. Each trader could be allowed to use, say, one or two parking spaces outside their business if some simple criteria are met.

If we decide the approach is worth keeping, San Francisco shows how to go from pop-ups to something bigger and better. The city's first parklet was a roll of astroturf, a park bench and a tree in a pot. It [lasted just two hours](#). Now there are [over 50](#) parklets, a ["how to" manual](#), a [clear application process](#) and [case studies](#) of the benefits.

Road closures

Roads are wide open spaces. Put bollards at the ends of a street that doesn't need full vehicle access, carry out tables and chairs, and you've got a huge new seating area. It has been done and works well.

Of course, closing a street permanently is quite a process. I worked with the community to pedestrianise a Melbourne laneway called [Meyers Place](#). Negotiating the legalities took about 18 months. Emergency, bin collection and disability access requirements had to be met.

The restaurants can now put tables on the former road space, surrounded by trees and murals under a [green wall](#). The thing is, we started out by closing the street for just two weeks. Businesses rolled out temporary tables and chairs, astroturf and potted plants. The lane went beserk with activity; we went from tentative support to heavy pressure for a permanent pedestrian space.

We took our inspiration from a much larger closure in Ballarat Street, Yarraville. It was also temporary and got removed, but was [brought back permanently with funding from traders](#) and overwhelming [community support](#).

Parking lot conversions

Outside our inner suburbs, the areas dedicated to parking get bigger. But Copenhagen offers an example of how big an opportunity a large car park can be.

In the city's former meatpacking district, you can find anything from high-end seafood to a craft beer pub that pumps heavy metal and barbecue smoke. The central car park serves as a giant dining

area—when the weather's good, chairs and benches come out and hundreds of locals turn up. This is super-simple stuff, mostly involving folding chairs and benches, plus lots of people. It's adaptable, fun and very popular.

The concept seems to work too in Melbourne too. "Welcome to Thornbury", a popular hub for food trucks and outdoor dining, used to be a car factory.

We can start right now (and probably should)

Community engagement with Melbourne's new [Transport Strategy 2030](#) indicates [broad support](#) for reallocating street space to people.

Now is the time to press ahead, because of what's at stake—not just jobs and profits, but our collective identity and sense of place. Food and drink are a big part of city life and how we spend our time. The places we gathered with friends, nurtured romances and celebrated milestones are where memories live. Doing nothing could mean these experiences are replaced by numbing "For Lease" signs.

Luckily, taking action isn't very risky. We can give our hospitality sector a boost right now by allowing businesses to trial a set of proven approaches. Everyone will then have a chance to experience the changes and decide what they'd like to keep.

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