

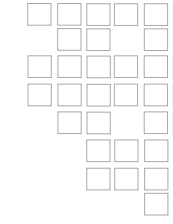
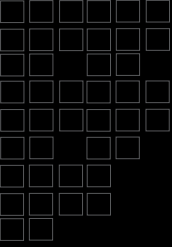
HIGH TIME: THE FUTURE OF OXFORD STREET

SYDNEY BUSINESS CHAMBER

+ HATCH ROBERTSDAY

NOVEMBER, 2020





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ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

*We acknowledge the Cadigal People of the Eora Nation as the
Traditional Custodians of the land. We would like to pay our
rEspects to the Elders both past and present of Oxford Street
and the surrounding area and extend that respect to other
Aborig nal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.*



Oxford Street, 1880s

Dear O,

It has been a while since I have seen you smile – your grin used to beam from end to end bringing a warmth to the hearts of many. Your corners and curves used to be filled with awe and wonder blossoming into memorable moments.

From dust to dawn your muru path was well trodden, by bare feet and boots, from the well healed to the high healed and from creaking wooden wheels to rattling iron rails.

I dream fondly of your return. To join you once again to gather and greet, trade and taste, converse and connect, craft, and create.

It is time. To breathe life back into your places, spaces and faces. To be highest of high streets, to be your history and your future.....to be envy of the world.

I wait in anticipation

Yours in love and devotion

A secret admirer

FOREWORD

Oxford Street, Sydney is one of Australia’s most renowned high streets. Few thoroughfares in this country can claim a story as colourful and captivating as that of Oxford Street. Since its origins as a sacred walking track for the Gadigal people, Oxford Street has long orientated the people who live in and visit our city.

Through the years it has carried horse and carts, trams, the earliest motorcars, and of course the famous annual Mardi Gras parade.

It is a street that resonates internationally, and its role as a destination for creativity, commerce, and self-expression must be retained.

It is no secret that, in recent decades, Oxford Street has begun to wither. Although retail, hospitality, and creative industries continue to thrive along its edges, it no longer the “gateway to the city” as had extolled many years ago.

No stranger to transformation, Oxford Street is once again poised for renewal, and to help it reach its potential Sydney Business Chamber has partnered with Hatch Roberts Day to propose a range of solutions. These ideas, or Big Moves as we like to call them, aim to push the boundaries of traditional incremental change. Oxford Street deserves more than that.

These ideas are presented to the Sydney City Council as part of their review to secure the precinct’s creative and cultural future. They are also provided to the NSW Government, businesses, and the community as they too play a critical role in the revival of this High Street.

This Report is firmly focused on re-establishing Oxford Street as a place. For each distinct neighbourhood along the Street

there are a range of interventions that seek to calm traffic and celebrate shopfronts, and prioritize people, place, and identity. It recognises that an emphasis on the street as an arterial roadway has long been to the detriment of its amenity, and it sets about re-establishing Oxford Street’s high street credentials.

Although Oxford Street is unique, the challenges it faces are not. Across New South Wales there are countless high streets struggling with declining amenity, vacant shopfronts, absent property owners, and new forms of competition. Online shopping, and more recently social distancing, present new obstacles to generating and maintaining vibrant high streets.

Sydney Business Chamber not only provides a way forward to secure the future of Oxford Street, but also challenges and encourages urban leaders across Sydney and New South Wales to take these ideas and apply them to high streets in their local communities.

Whether it is Leichhardt’s Norton Street, Goulburn’s Auburn Street, or Maitland’s High Street, our ‘main drags’ need and deserve fresh approaches that prioritize people, amenity, and experience.

Now is the time to back our High Streets and encourage big thinking and big action. By doing so we can secure the future of the streets that are the backbone of our communities – the Streets that we love.

K O'Regan

Katherine O'Regan
Executive Director
Sydney Business Chamber





Taylor Square, Oxford Street. Circa 1938.

INTRODUCTION

Sydney City Council's invitation to write a 'love letter' to Oxford Street accentuates the special place that this 4.3 kilometre stretch holds for so many Sydneysiders and visitors.

Whether it is visiting the Paddo Markets on a sunny Saturday, shopping with friends for 'that' formal dress, or dancing till dawn in a glitzy night club, everyone has a clear and present memory of their favourite place, and time, in Oxford Street.

While it is a Street that continues to hold a unique position in our hearts and minds, its current condition and circumstance leaves a lot to be desired. Many of the fashion outlets have moved elsewhere, the night life is subdued, and the pedestrian experience of the street is harsh and uninviting. Without some intervention, Oxford Street will fade in the memories of Sydneysiders and become a place that 'was'.

As a City, Sydney needs Oxford Street. From business, education, and tourism it brings economic prosperity and from a social perspective it brings a value as an intersection and symbol, of our cultural acceptance and diversity.

As the leading voice of Sydney as a prosperous global City there is a compelling imperative for the Sydney Business Chamber to write a Love Letter to Oxford Street.

This is not a Love Letter to the party street of the 1990's when it was Sydney's leading nightclub district and the high street of high fashion. Not to the street of the 1970s and 80's with its early activists, trendy op-shops and a nascent Mardi Gras. Nor to the Oxford Street of a century earlier, when it was a Street or rather the place to see people and be seen, a place high fashion that spawned household names, like Mark Foys, and attracted shoppers from across the colonies and the world.

This is Love Letter to a future Oxford Street, a Street that is the next iteration of a path well-trodden. An Oxford Street that is vibrant and interesting both by day and by night. An Oxford Street that provides a place to work, live, play and well simply be.

One where a Saturday of window shopping is seen as a fab day out and its nightlife is not only vibrant but is safe for both a parade and a pram. An Oxford Street that will furnish the next generation of Sydneysiders with fond memories to pass onto their children.

This Love Letter comes in the form of a Report that looks closely at the rise, fall, and rise again of one of Sydney's most important high streets. It defines a better future for the Street as a 'place' not a road. It outlines ideas and initiatives that build on its curious past to cultivate and curate its future.

Importantly, this Report articulates the key moves and interventions which City place makers need to consider to improve the economic and social function of this iconic Street so it can be the exemplar of high streets, so it can capture what matters most — so that it can be the envy of the world.

A LOVE LETTER TO OXFORD STREET

Right now, Oxford Street suffers from a confusion and conflict between its two primary roles. On the one hand Oxford Street functions as a road. A busy east-west transit corridor linking the Eastern Suburbs with the Sydney Central Business District and beyond.

The other role Oxford Street plays is as a place; a place to eat, drink and gather as well as to shop while promenading with friends. It has been a place to be seen and to see others. A place underpinned by a local economy based on commerce, the creative arts, and a nighttime economy.

To date these two roles have competed creating a conflict and tension that has only resulted in an neither being achieved in an optimal manner. If Oxford Street is to function well as a transit corridor, the resulting traffic and associated noise and pollution will continue to undermine the local amenity and the Streets role as a place. Too much traffic congestion means that the all-important life on the Street – or footpath - is diminished. The Street will simply stop being a destination and become a throughfare to somewhere else.

Likewise, if the Street operates well as a place, attracting visitors from across Sydney and the world, then its role as a road becomes secondary. This means that traffic slows giving priority to pedestrians, diners, socialisers and shoppers and these groups all then compete for space. In this scenario Oxford Street becomes a long commute for those seeking to pass through.

Sydney Business Chamber considers that the optimal, and dare we say, only, way Oxford Street can thrive is for it is relieved of its role as transit corridor. The development of the Sydney tunnel network and the expansion of public transport provide alternatives for those seeking access to the Sydney CBD and beyond.

On the Street this means as far as is practical, more lanes need to be repurposed away from cars and towards more economic, social and environment uses. Pedestrians should be prioritised over the car and street trees prioritised over traffic lanes. That amenity of the public footpath then becomes more important than the length of the commute.

With this goal in mind we are recommending some key moves State and local Government should take to reinforce the primary and optimal role of Oxford Street as a ‘place’.

While Oxford Street is a single Street, it is defined by distinct, though related, set of villages. Underpinned by a common rhythm each Village spills into the other to create a distinct difference between these Street subsections so form a localised identity and justify a tailored approach.

We have identified three distinct Villages in Oxford Street and these Villages have been specifically addressed in this Report

- Lower Oxford Street: Hyde Park to Taylor Square.
- The Barracks - South Dowling Street to Paddington Town Hall
- Paddo Village - Paddington Town Hall to Moore Park Road.





Shoppers gather outside a fruit shop in the 1940s.

OXFORD STREET THEN, NOW, TOMORROW

Oxford Street has always held a special place in the lives of Sydneysiders and in the life of Sydney. It started life as a major Aboriginal track, called Muru, running the breadth of Cadigal land.

With White settlement this track was quickly adopted as the main route to the all-important Light House at South Head. As the Colony grew the street was slowly populated with local businesses, selling their wares to the passing trade. By the 1880s, it had become Sydney's premier fashion boulevard, the place to see people and be seen.

Its success as place saw it soon overwhelmed with traffic as people converged on the streets new retail emporiums like Mark Foys, and McIlraths. To relieve this congestion, Oxford Street was progressively widened in 1908 to accommodate new electric trams and more space for the now ubiquitous private car. The widening required the removal of second floor balconies and a narrowing of the footpaths. In some cases, whole buildings were bulldozed to allow for more lanes of traffic.

Easing traffic however quickly undermined the local amenity as now six lanes of vehicles could move at speed along its route. It was no longer a place to promenade and window shop and the local retailers quickly relocated to better streets elsewhere in the City. Oxford Street quickly became the main road to the City central business district for the burgeoning Eastern Suburbs.

However, by the 1950's, even the widened Oxford Street could not cope with the growing Sydney traffic and congestion returned. As traffic slowed

to a crawl, life on the footpath slowly reemerged. New retailers opened, such as Zinc and Sons and Merivale, and the Streets role as a 'place' reemerged. It became a high street again with numerous fashion outlets, cafes, and bars.

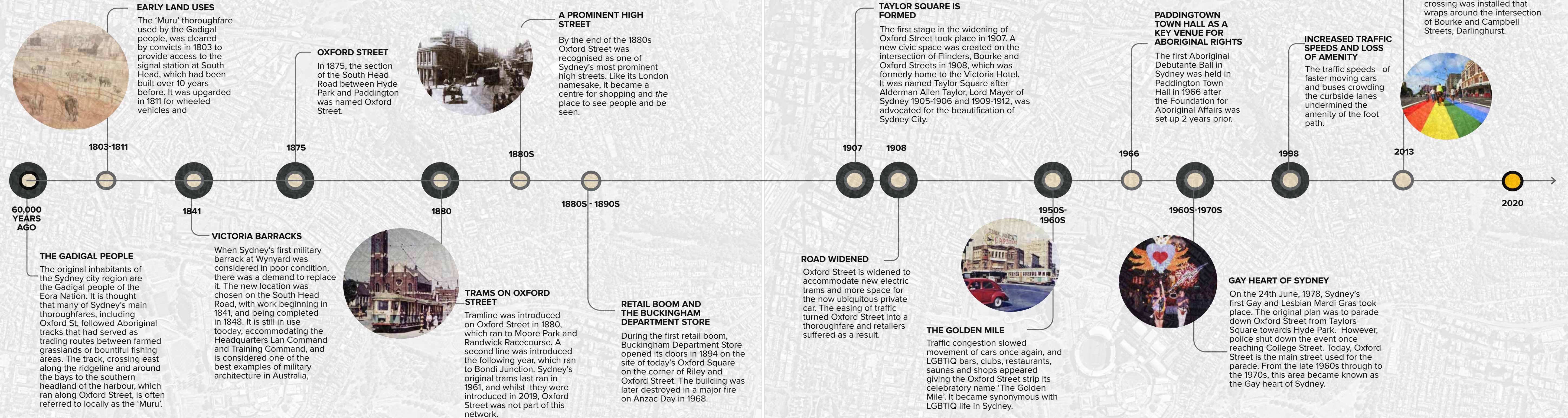
Over the next few decades new migrants gave colour to its complexion. These were joined by artists and activists and a growing gay community who repurposed old pubs into safe bars. By the 1980's it had a strong daytime economy based on clothing retail and vibrant nighttime economy based on live performance and nightclubs.

However, in 1998, the traffic speeds began to increase again. The opening of the Eastern Distributor removed some of the through traffic but left Oxford Street still with six lanes of cars with a destination mostly for elsewhere. At the same time demand for public transport exploded and Oxford Street became the busiest bus route in Australia. The combination of faster moving cars and buses crowding the curbside lanes undermined the amenity of the foot path. Gone was the nice place to meet friends, promenade up and down or to window shop. Restaurants and cafes slowly migrated to nearby streets like Crown Street and Five Ways. Retailers migrated to newer Malls and the nighttime economy based on bars and nightclubs slowly declined until the Lock-Out laws wiped them out completely.

Oxford Street's duel and competing roles of being a transit corridor for the Eastern Suburbs and as a place in its own right needs to be resolved – history has demonstrated it cannot be both a place with a vibrant local economy day and night and a major transit lane. When one triumphs the other simply fails.

Sydney Chamber seeks an end to this schizophrenia once and for all. It is time for Oxford Street to be a place for people – a high street that drives economic and asocial prosperity. It is a Street, not a road, after all.

OXFORD STREET ITS STORY



OXFORD STREET DISTINCT VILLAGES



THE BARRACKS

LOWER OXFORD ST



PADDO VILLAGE

LOWER OXFORD STREET

The eastern end of Oxford Street from Whitlam to Taylor Square is probably the most famous, or infamous, Village. It's iconic nightclubs and bars, the remnants of the gay scene from the 70's, 80's and 90's, as well as its annual Mardi Gras parade have a special resonance in the memory of Sydneysiders.

However, this section is struggling to function as place. The iconic intersection, Taylor Square, was once the main focus for both the day and nighttime economy of Oxford Street. However, it is now a mess of intersecting lanes as traffic from Anzac Parade merges with Oxford Street. The lack of amenity caused by traffic has driven much of the street life away or indoors. While there is mostly plenty of room for footway licenses and alfresco dining few of the venues take up the opportunity because most times of the day or night it is just not a pleasant place to sit let alone linger.

This area is also a very unbalanced 'square'. While many of buildings address the street, the Darlinghurst Courthouse sits behind an austere fence with a hedge preventing any prying eyes. Its historic forecourt is lifeless, and it acts as a barrier hiding the life and activity happening at the National Art School behind it. With only half of Taylor Square having any street life at all it is not surprising the place is struggling.



BIG MOVE 1: MAKE THE SQUARE WHOLE

- Reducing the volume of cars traversing the Square provides an opportunity to repurpose it as more people focused pedestrianised plaza.
- Moving the Courthouse elsewhere, would allow those heritage buildings to be repurposed as a venue, theatre, or art gallery. The forecourt could be activated with night markets, restaurants, and food trucks. A through-site link could be provided to connect the Art School with Oxford Street.
- With both sides of Taylor Square activated a scrambler crossing and a raised threshold would provide valuable connectivity and send a clear signal to through traffic that this is a people place.

THE BARRACKS

The section of Oxford Street provides a transition area between the nighttime economy of Taylor Square and Lower Oxford Street and the more traditional fashion high street to its east.

While the southern side of the street lacks activation because the sandstone wall of the barracks, the northern side has a fine grain of smaller shops, clothing retailers and cafes. This village feel is reinforced by the higher amenity of the side streets and laneway, in particular the network around the Glenmore Road intersection.

Yet the amenity and vibrancy of the northern side is undermined by the volume and speed of traffic, especially during the hours the clearway and bus lanes operate. There is also currently little economic activity apart from the clothing retailers and a few remaining bars and cafes.



BIG MOVE 2: JOBS FOR A VIBANT DAYTIME ECONOMY

- The clearways are removed, and the bus lane moved away from the curbside to allow permanent curbside parking and parklets to provide a buffer from the noise of passing traffic.
- Footpath are widened to encourage more alfresco dining and window shopping.
- Property owners are encouraged to restore the balconies which once overlooked the street prior it its widening in 1908. This would provide more activation and allow a great diversity of economic activity.
- Second floor premises are used as restaurants or maker spaces for textiles and the creative and visual arts.

PADDO VILLAGE

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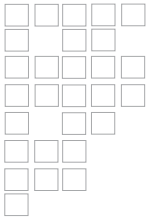
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BIG MOVE 3: CURB THE CLEARWAYS

- Removing the clearways and replacing them with wider footpaths, curbside parking and parklets would significantly improve the pedestrian amenity while also slowing the flow of traffic.
- New opportunities to cross, especially with mid-block crossings, unifies both sides of the Street. New through site links improve permeability and links the neighbouring street network with the high street.
- The six storey Telstra building is consistently beautified with street art through art programmes and becomes a defining landmark. Council encourages the activation of the ground plane with cafes and small retail outlets.



STRATEGIC BIG MOVES



1 CREATE ONE OXFORD

One of the problems which has stymied Oxford Street in the past, and clouds its future, is its disjointed ownership and governance. The Street straddles two Council's (Sydney City Council and Woollahra Municipal Council) and while they have for many years had a joint Oxford Street Taskforce, they often have different views on how it should be managed and what its future should look like. Furthermore, the Councils only have care and control up to the curb, the actual lanes of traffic are owned by Transport for NSW.

The lack of joined-up governance is one of the reasons why the Street has struggled to resolve the competition between its function as a transit corridor and as a place. Resolving the governance will go a long way to resolving its competing roles and functions.

For Oxford Street to be a true gateway to the City, the entirety of the Street between Centennial Park and Whitlam Square on both sides should be moved to Sydney City Local Government Area. This would allow a more holistic approach to its role and relevance in a changing City. It would also allow Woollahra Council to focus on developing and maintaining other High Street such Queen Street, Bay and Knox Streets.

Adjusting the Local Government boundaries would allow for a more consistent approach to public domain improvements, temporary activations and the development of a news nighttime offering within which all businesses are playing by the same rules.

2 CREATE A PLACE NOT A ROAD

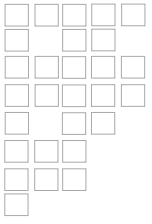
Transferring ownership and responsibility to a single Council is an important first step in making Oxford Street a place in its own right. To support this Oxford Street should be classified as a local road, as opposed to a regional or State Road giving the Council responsibility to manage the utility of this public space in line with the public interest. The movement of goods and people along Oxford Street is important so that its continued use for public transportation and other vehicles is important although priority should be given to pedestrians and those visiting the destination rather than passing through. A close collaboration with the State Government and neighbouring authorities to enable opportunities to divert traffic away from Oxford Street will be essential.

3 SLOW AND QUIETER

The recent decision by Sydney City and Transport for NSW to limit the speed limit to 40km per hour is a step in the right direction but speed really. It is time to make the speed limit 30km per hour for the whole street so that it becomes safe for cyclists and pedestrian alike. At 30 the amenity killing noise finally becomes acceptable for outdoor dining, public space activation and encourages people spurs economic activity by encouraging people to linger longer to enjoy what the Street has to offer.

The deployment of electric buses for the routes that traverse Oxford Street is a must. The recent decision by the NSW Government to enhance the bus fleet with electric buses that are much quieter and do not emit any noxious fumes means that there is a capacity to deliver. Given the economic value of Oxford Street to Sydney and the uplift that electric vehicles will provide through enhanced mean foot traffic and amenity of the public domain Oxford Street will provide the right return on investment.

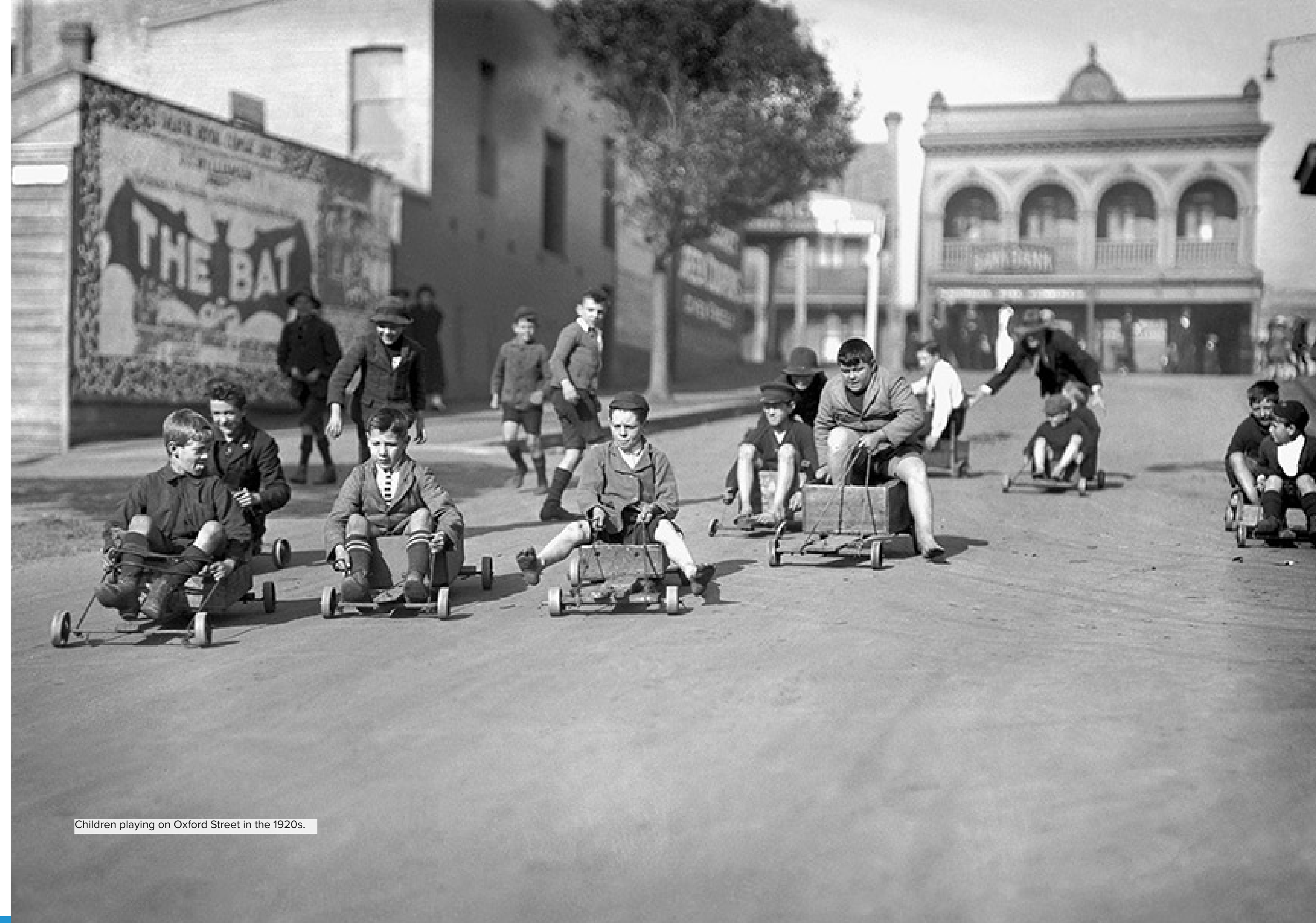




With thanks,

Great cities do not happen by chance - they require
inspiration, aspiration and hard work.
Sydney Business Chamber would like to thank Hatch Roberts
Day for their invaluable contribution to this Report.
We would also like to thank Woollahra Council as well as the
businesses and community members that have provided
critique, comments, contributions to this Report.
It truly has been a labour of love for a Street that we love.

Love your work!



Children playing on Oxford Street in the 1920s.