



UNIVERCITY
ACTION LAB

Australia

Good Practice Case Study

The Exchange at Knowledge Market

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PROJECT PARTNERS



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GENERAL INFORMATION

Title of the case	The Exchange at Knowledge Market		
Sales pitch	A unique interdisciplinary living lab and design research project that investigated the future of urban living, embedded in a multi-purpose space in Victoria Harbour – a major urban regeneration project at the edge of Melbourne’s central district.		
Organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia• Lendlease		
Country	Australia		
Authors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Associate Prof Shanti Sumartojo, Monash University• Associate Prof Ross McLeod, RMIT University• Associate Prof Charles Anderson, RMIT University• Sara Arko, PhD, IRI UL (Institute for Innovation and Development of University of Ljubljana)		
Nature of interaction	Urban living lab; design and ethnography research projects; university-industry (research) partnership; design teaching studios		
Level of mechanism	<input type="checkbox"/> Government policy (e.g. law, funding framework) <input type="checkbox"/> Organisational strategy (e.g. university/business/agency) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Structural element (e.g. centre, lab, office) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Operational level (e.g. activity or programme)		
Length of programme	Full year	Formality	Informal

Curricula-bound,
co or extra-
curricular?

Co-curricula	Level of initiative	Cross-disciplinary
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Summary

The Exchange at Knowledge Market (hereafter: The Exchange) was an 18-month research partnership between Lendlease and RMIT University based at Victoria Harbour in the Docklands, a major urban regeneration project at the edge of Melbourne's central district. It saw a team of designers, social scientists and students embedded in the site, leading a series of design studios, research projects and public engagement activities. As an urban living lab, it took advantage of a unique moment in the development of Victoria Harbour to investigate questions that apply to urban environments around the world. Design research topics focused on design-led community engagement, sociality and community, sustainable systems, digital infrastructures, urban spatial dynamics, and memory and imagination. The Exchange was also a prototype for community engagement for adaptation and use by governments, councils, developers and communities around the world.



CASE STUDY PROFILE

BACKGROUND

RMIT is a global university of technology, design and enterprise. The Exchange engaged the RMIT School of Architecture and Design, and the School of Media and Communication, involving researchers and students from multiple disciplines - Interior Design, Landscape Architecture, Fashion Design, Media and Communication, and RMIT's Master of Design Innovation and Technology.

Lendlease is a leading international property and infrastructure group, with approximately 13,000 employees across operations in Australia, Asia, Europe and the Americas, headquartered in Sydney, Australia. Lendlease had initially launched the Knowledge Market in 2016 as a dedicated learning hub for Melbourne's growing knowledge sector, connecting the precinct's residents, workers and visitors with global ideas and inspirational mentors, facilitators and experiences. The Exchange began in mid-2017.

Location (Victoria Harbour)

The area presented specific challenges: Melbourne's Docklands, in general, had long suffered a poor reputation as a place to visit, especially in the evenings and on the weekends, when it was perceived as lacking liveliness and character. Like many large-scale urban regeneration projects, the fine-grain built environment was relatively new and had not yet built up the layers of meaning that accumulate with time as people leave their marks on a place. Many of the residential buildings had indoor amenities - swimming pools, gyms, and resident lounges - that saw recreation and socialising take place in more private spaces. The corporate buildings were busy with workers during the weekdays, but fell quiet outside of working hours, as people returned home or went to the many bars, cafes and restaurants in the nearby CBD (Central Business District).

The Exchange was anchored in a relationship that began when Lendlease approached the RMIT School of Architecture and Design with a commission for a small-scale temporary public artwork project ([Frame Melbourne](#)). This initial project paved the way for a more ambitious shared endeavour, and the efforts to clarify terms and responsibilities on the smaller artwork project acted as the armature for drafting an agreement for The Exchange. As the initial collaborative projects wrapped up, they discussed potential future directions, including the idea of integrating design and ethnography in an industry partnered project. Accordingly, in early 2017, Lendlease asked RMIT whether they would be interested in taking over the Knowledge Market space at Victoria Harbour for a year, which was the beginning of The Exchange.

CONTEXT

The Exchange began in 2017 with a small team, an 80m² shopfront facing a local park, and year-long plans to populate the space with design teaching studios, host public talks and research the experiences of local people. It was envisioned as an attempt to draw people to Victoria Harbour by creating more activity at different times of day and night, and by offering an experience that did not replicate what was available elsewhere.

Victoria Harbour is characterised by its distinctive built form, which houses corporate headquarters and high-rise apartment complexes. These forms of contemporary architecture are defined by the creation of complete interior environments that provide a range of amenities within the building itself. This sets up a clearly defined barrier between the activities of the occupants within the buildings and their engagement with the surrounding street life. In practice, this meant that there was not an existing street culture that would help draw people to The Exchange events and activities. Moreover, research projects on public space had to account for the high amenity of private space and the preferences of residents to use those rather than shared public areas. This required targeted invitations to events, research techniques that reached into private, interior spaces, and public engagement that extended beyond the precinct, and that attracted people to it.

An early ethnographic project asked residents, workers and visitors how they perceived and understood the precinct, with particular attention to how they made use of and understood their relationship with its buildings and places. Some RMIT students were involved as research

participants at this stage, but not as researchers. In this way, the team was able to consider propositions for intervention or change that worked with what people were already doing or what they valued, rather than trying to impose completely new ways of behaving or unfamiliar understandings of the city.

The activation of the space included the development of a series of projects with undergraduate and postgraduate students from RMIT that investigated the cultural dynamics of Victoria Harbour and formulated design propositions based on social and environmental issues encountered within the district.

As it developed, The Exchange took shape as an **adaptable venue** that could cater for a multitude of events. At various times, the space was organised as a lecture theatre, a design studio or a gallery. The team developed a program of regular public talks, exhibitions of design projects and community workshops. It also ran as an open house where people could drop in to see what students and researchers were working on or take in the rotating exhibitions in the dedicated Side Gallery.

In the **design studios**, students from multiple disciplines produced projects that used the specifics of the Victoria Harbour site to design for urban futures more broadly. At the same time, because The Exchange was a studio teaching and display space, these students became central to the liveliness and activity in this part of Victoria Harbour.

The Exchange **engaged people** from the different communities that they were connected to (incl. public talks from engineering firm Aurecon, the City of Melbourne Smart City Office, the major Australian bank ANZ, a renowned large-scale urban lighting designer, and a sustainable food expert). They connected with various Melbourne cultural festivals and curated and hosted exhibitions and performances with Melbourne Design Week, the Sustainable Living Festival, Melbourne Knowledge Week, Melbourne Fashion Week.

The concluding event at the Exchange was the launch of the project's book and short film in June 2019. These outputs explain the project's living lab model for others to adopt and take forward.

OBJECTIVES AND MOTIVATIONS

The Exchange began with the goal to activate the site it occupied. Industry partner Lendlease wanted to draw people to the area, give them a reason to visit and explore, and do this with experiences that were not strictly transactional. They wanted to enliven the precinct in ways that extended beyond the existing retail and restaurant outlets, while still recognising this valuable aspect of what people could enjoy in Victoria Harbour.

RMIT saw a valuable opportunity to offer a unique, real-world learning experience for their students. It also wanted to bring design and ethnographic research about this area of Melbourne directly into design studio teaching that responded to the Victoria Harbour precinct.

- The two key partner organisations (RMIT and Lendlease) also shared an interest and orientation towards thinking about design as a way to shape ways of attuning to and

valuing urban space, which was based in their previous collaborative, smaller-scale projects.

STAKEHOLDERS

Victoria Harbour residents and visitors – these were key stakeholders within the Exchange. They participated in research projects, visited design studios and contributed to discussions at public events.

RMIT research & teaching staff – led research projects, undertook studio teaching, and generated new projects as the model developed.

RMIT students – participated in design studios, developed their work for public display, carried out research related to their studies.

Lendlease – provided the funding and space to enable the project, helped guide the public program and overall aims, supported publicity, marketing and creative production of events.

PROCESS

INPUT

- **Human resources**

Research & teaching staff from RMIT, students from RMIT and Melbourne University, Lendlease staff as part of the project's administrative committee.

- **Financial resources**

Lendlease funding supported the project's administrative and production team, events, materials and the production of the book and video. The project also received funding and in-kind support from RMIT University, including the salary costs of the three project leaders.

- **Physical resources**

The Knowledge Market site - an 80m² shopfront at Victoria Harbour, owned by Lendlease – was provided to the project for a two-year period. Additional workshop space and facilities were available for staff and students to use at RMIT University.

ACTIVITIES

The Exchange provided a unique opportunity for a broad discussion on the nature of a resilient urban condition, incorporating the perspectives of governments, developers, architects, designers and residents in a robust and timely exchange of ideas. It had three main components:

A full year of RMIT **student design studios** that investigated and designed for urban futures, using Victoria Harbour as a living lab for their work. This meant taking the learning and teaching process outside of the University lecture halls. The activities of a design school were “dropped” into the specific site, which allowed multi-disciplinary design teams to explore ideas around the district. In doing this, Victoria Harbour was treated as a site of sustainable urban systems, as a place of social diversity, as a network of digital infrastructures, and as a location rich with evocations of memory and imagination. Through design studio teaching these research themes were examined in different ways through the lens of architecture, landscape architecture, interior design, product design, service design, fashion design and design ethnography. Design studio teaching encouraged students to immerse themselves in the understanding of a situation or problem and to appreciate the wider context of an issue by examining historical and contemporary precedents and understanding its social and political underpinnings. In every studio, clients, industry specialists and associated academics were invited to attend the student presentations and contribute to the thinking around a subject matter. An example of a design studio is the “Phase Change 2.0”, in which issues of place, community, engagement, responsibility and personal accountability informed the design research and teaching approaches towards sustainable design. In ‘Phase Change 2.0’, a group of RMIT Master of Landscape Architecture students were led in an exploration of the systems of the city in relation to the changing nature of the environment and our understanding of it. Engaging directly with global warming and its impacts at a local and regional scale and working across a range of design disciplines and related practices, the studio envisioned scenarios for sustainable and resilient futures. Rethinking food, waste, water, ecological and social systems the studio explored propositions for the design of resilient high-density urban environments in a zero-carbon world. The ‘Resilient Floating Community’ design research team addressed these issues through the design of resilient floating units situated at the water’s edge that would protect the human residents from the effects of storm surges and create structures in which ecologies of flora, fauna and sea life would thrive. In a similar way, the ‘Bioland’ team explored biodiversity within the district through the creation of a local seed bank and a program of selective planting within the districts, parks and median strips. This scheme also proposed the installation of planter boxes on the balconies of Victoria Harbour’s high-rise apartments. The ‘Food Delta’ team extended the communities connection with the natural world by encouraging the growing of vegetables through the development of a planter box system that would allow for pop-up community gardens to be situated throughout the suburb, in both public spaces and within high-rise developments. The pop-up garden network would be enhanced by a local food market and a food supply and exchange system driven by a smartphone application that would allow subscribers to find the community gardens, meet their participants, buy or barter food and share knowledge and information.

A series of linked **design ethnography research projects** that focused on the view and aspirations of the local community. One of the first projects undertaken in The Exchange was an ethnography of how workers, residents and visitors experienced the precinct and what it meant to them. This in-depth work meant asking people to show the researchers their environments from the inside, finding out how their feelings about Victoria Harbour connected to aspects of its built environment. Another example was the Home Truths photographic project and exhibition. Over three days, residents and workers in Victoria Harbour agreed to be interviewed about what ‘home’ meant to them and to have their photographs taken by award-winning documentary photographer Nicholas Walton-Healey. Their answers drew together places, people, objects, food, words and rituals. Ethnography was also brought to student projects, helping them consider questions of sociality and community as central to design work. The Inner Worlds studio engaged a team of RMIT Interior Design students in an intensive design ethnography project that delved into the lived experiences of the workers and residents of

Victoria Harbour. With the permission of the building managers and residents, teams of students were assigned a building in which they attempted to capture the building's character and the interactions of its occupants. The students spent two weeks observing and recording the actions of people in and around the spaces and engaging them in conversation about the experience of living, working in and visiting buildings in Victoria Harbour.

A schedule of **public workshops**, forums and other events that engaged directly with the community, and that brought a range of experts to speak on some of the challenges facing cities today.



OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

OUTPUTS

There were 6 public talks, 12 studios and exhibitions, 2 community workshops and 3 special presentations organised at the Knowledge Market in the framework of The Exchange project.

- **Design ethnography research** informed the design of all activities, delivered at Exchange, which were thus based in the concrete lived experiences of people in Victoria Harbour.
- In every **studio**, clients, industry specialists and associated academics were invited to attend the student presentations and contribute to the discussion.
- Through the **public lecture series**, prominent design practitioners shared their insights with an audience made up of students, residents and professional practitioners.
- Through the **exhibition program**, associated with various Melbourne festivals, diverse crowds gathered at The Exchange and brought their unique outlook on ideas concerning the development of the city.
- **Publication:** *The Exchange at Knowledge Market: An Urban Living Lab* (Ross McLeod, Shanti Sumartojo, Charles Anderson, Natasha Sutula, Sean Hogan, 2019) illustrating the innovative research collaboration between RMIT University and Lendlease
- [Video](#) that explains the project and includes input from the key stakeholders and other corporate participants in the project.

IMPACTS

The Exchange activated the shopfront space and enlivened its immediate area, with benefits for nearby businesses. It drew together senior representatives from locally-based corporations at public events. For students, it was a unique learning opportunity. RMIT staff are currently developing new design projects in partnership with Lendlease. The project's impact was therefore also a strengthening of the existing university-industry partnership.

SUPPORTING MECHANISMS

The legal, marketing, human resources and industry partnership teams at RMIT provided vital support to negotiating, managing and publicising the partnership and its activities.

Regarding the monitoring and evaluation of the initiative, there was a 'research agreement' (a contract) between RMIT and Lendlease that specified the deliverables in terms of the number of events that would be organised in the project duration and that were successfully met. Teaching appraisals were done by RMIT staff in terms of the learning requirements and student accomplishments.

BARRIERS AND DRIVERS

BARRIERS

The Exchange was delivered on the basis of a contract between the university and industry partners and had a finite character with limited funding.

DRIVERS

Drivers to the project success include pre-existing relationships between the project leaders and industry partner; resource availability; strong and collaborative working relationships amongst the leadership team; openness to change, iteration and new, unforeseen activities as the project developed.



LESSONS LEARNED

CHALLENGES

Some differences in organisational cultures were an initial challenge. This particularly related to branding and messaging, for example on the project website, which was not able to function as the community engagement portal that the research team had initially envisioned.

With The Exchange now complete, there are no new plans for projects on a scale, although smaller collaborations are the subject of ongoing discussion between RMIT and Lendlease. Should new opportunities arise, the relationships are in place to progress them. Moreover, a version of the model could be taken forward with new or additional partners.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

Previous collaboration between the university (RMIT) and the industry partner (Lendlease): The initial artwork project (Frame Melbourne) paved the way in sorting out the complex contractual and legal issues involved when universities work with corporations. This then acted as the armature for the new contract for The Exchange. The institutional relationships that began with an earlier project created the conditions that allowed for new relationships to form that, in turn, gave rise to new possibilities.

Partnership based in collaborative relationships and development of trust: RMIT and Lendlease entered into a 'Research Collaboration Agreement', a partnership based on aligned interests in the future of urban living. The partnership was based on relationships between institutions and amongst individual researchers and their counterparts outside academia. Because the project had outcomes that were not necessarily predictable, it relied on the development of trust and a strong spirit of collaboration. This differs from more conventional ways of conducting 'commissioned' research, which often includes outcomes determined from the beginning of a contractual relationship.

Embedded and site-specific model: the research team was able to use the shopfront site very flexibly, turning it to many different uses. Basing students and research staff there also meant we were away from our usual university spaces, a form of immersion that allowed us to really understand the precinct as 'insiders'.

Interdisciplinarity: The project relied on close collaboration amongst project leaders with disciplinary strengths in design, creative practice and social science. We were able to attract teaching and support staff, guest speakers and a creative production team with additional and wide-ranging expertise. In combination, this led to a creative and innovation-oriented working culture where we all learned from and challenged each other, thereby pushing the project's outcomes far beyond what any of us could do alone.



FURTHER INFORMATION

AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

Finalist in the 2018 Melbourne Awards, in the category 'Sustainability Award – Corporation'.

TRANSFERABILITY

The Exchange is a transferable model of university/industry collaboration for innovative research, teaching and public engagement. Although it was unique in its embeddedness in a

precinct of Melbourne, Australia, a similar site-specific design-led living lab model could be transferred to a different environment with the involvement of committed partners.

PUBLICATIONS

[The Exchange at Knowledge Market: An Urban Living Lab](#) (Ross McLeod, Shanti Sumartojo, Charles Anderson, Natasha Sutula, Sean Hogan, 2019)

LINKS

The Exchange at Knowledge Market video (Sirap Motion Lab) <https://vimeo.com/317404597>

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