

# 27. Counter culture

The residents of a Melbourne suburb have helped this high street to thrive. Your city should do the same.

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Photography Tim O'Connor



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Hit play... STAKE OUT A NEW STREET

Winding its way through four suburbs in Melbourne's inner-north, High Street is a long shopping strip in a city with plenty of them. It offers something of a modern parable for the state of retail today: some parts are thriving, buoyed by eclectic shops, vibrant cafés and heavy footfall; the sections with more generic offerings and less of a community feel, however, are struggling.

At the Northcote end of High Street, a 1km-long strip starting in the Westgarth Village hums with life. There isn't a chain in sight, just independent grocers, restaurants, record shops, vintage shops and an art deco cinema (see more of Melbourne's cinemas on page 74) in weathered but charming Victorian and Federation-era buildings. It's an example of how a street can evolve while retaining its personality



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- (1) Terra Madre organic grocer
- (2) Doing the weekly shop
- (3) Tinker Café
- (4) Relaxing in Low Key bar
- (5) Zsa's owner Zowie Minchin
- (6) Digging at Rathdowne Records
- (7) Mid-century furniture at Grandfather's Axe



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(not to mention how the proportions of Victorian high streets work just as well as, if not better than, new builds). The planners and residents are now being duly rewarded: while the pandemic has seen a rise in the number of vacant shopfronts, occupancy rates on this street are among the city's highest. Bettina Tynan, co-owner of homeware shop Kathryn and the Bear, says that the sort of imperfection that newer developers tend to try to eradicate is exactly what draws people here. "It's popular because we're different," she says. "Most of the shops are independents and people discover things that they wouldn't find elsewhere." Her airy shop is busy with people admiring ceramics, Pollock-esque paintings and locally made jewellery – nearly everything on the shelves hails from creatives in Melbourne.

Equally busy is the nearby Terra Madre organic market, which is brimming with people carting boxes filled with vegetables. A nearby café space is peppered with diners devouring flat whites and poached eggs while checking performance times for the nearby theatre. Another key to the strip's success: people might come for breakfast but most stay to soak up other attractions.

Former resident Florencia Georgi is in the area to introduce her partner Max to her old stamping ground. "I had to

### How to revive a high street:

1. Independent shops and some characterful architecture give a sense of place and history; malls and new developments forget this and seem samey.
2. Gentrification has bad associations but that doesn't mean that things can't progress or be improved. If the neighbourhood needs a new bistro, build it.
3. Community spirit will buoy businesses and create something that visitors buy into.
4. Smaller spaces allow first-timers and small businesses to experiment without breaking the bank.
5. Good high streets manage the transition from day to night in a way that's respectful to residents: cafés for the morning segue into the shopping hours and end with a little fun after dark.



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“The shops are smaller so there are lower overheads than other shopping precincts. And we have an extremely loyal base”

show him Terra Madre and why I made this area my home,” she says. “It’s special because it’s a reflection of the people who live here; it’s a bit alternative.” Julian Pocock, a resident for about 30 years, has a similar affection for the high street. “I don’t really go anywhere else,” he says. “Everything is here and I like to support locals.” By spending his money here, Pocock is also supporting his neighbours: most owners call the suburb home.

Living in the area helped Zowie Minchin when she founded Zsa’s, an elegant all-day European bistro, bar and deli. “A lot of us owners live, work and play here, so we know what’s needed,” she says. Her faith in the community paid off: Zsa’s opened in July, near the height of Australia’s coronavirus outbreak, yet business has boomed. Joel Shortman, the



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owner of Rathdowne Records (who lives above the shop) has another theory for why starting a business on the strip is an attractive option. “The shops are smaller so there are lower overheads than other shopping precincts,” he says. “And we have an extremely loyal base.”

Come late afternoon the high street transforms into Melbourne’s live-music mecca, with venues such as the Wesley Anne and Northcote Social Club putting indie acts and big-name musicians of all genres on stage. Also of note is the dimly lit Open Studio: since 2006, jazz musicians have flocked to this unassuming bar and crêperie.

Ed Klein has run his High Street mid-century furniture shop Grandfather’s Axe since 2009 and been familiar with the suburb for even longer. “It has changed



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**Northcote High Street address book**

**Neighbourhood Books**  
A small shop with a special focus on Australian authors.  
[neighbourhoodbooks.com](http://neighbourhoodbooks.com)

**Kathryn and the Bear**  
Homeware shop supporting local artists. Also runs workshops in ceramics and candle-making among other crafts.  
[kathrynandthebear.com](http://kathrynandthebear.com)

**Barry**  
Contemporary café serving excellent flat whites and brunch.  
[barrycoffeeandfood.com](http://barrycoffeeandfood.com)

**Terra Madre**  
Cosy market selling organic groceries and products on the ground floor while upstairs is a wellness clinic.  
[terramadre.com.au](http://terramadre.com.au)

**Rathdowne Records**  
Record shop with an especially stellar collection of jazz.  
+61 (03) 9482 4213

**Zsa’s**  
Elegant European bistro, bar and deli. Perfect for any time of day.  
[Zsas.com.au](http://Zsas.com.au)

**The Phoenix and the Turtle**  
A great rack of men’s and women’s clothes from Australian designers as well as homewares.  
[phoenixandturtle.com.au](http://phoenixandturtle.com.au)

**Low Key**  
No fuss neighbourhood bar in a rambling old house. A DJ spins vinyl on weekends.  
[lowkeybar.myshopify.com](http://lowkeybar.myshopify.com)

**Open Studio**  
Dimly lit live music venue, bar and crêperie  
[openstudio.net.au](http://openstudio.net.au)

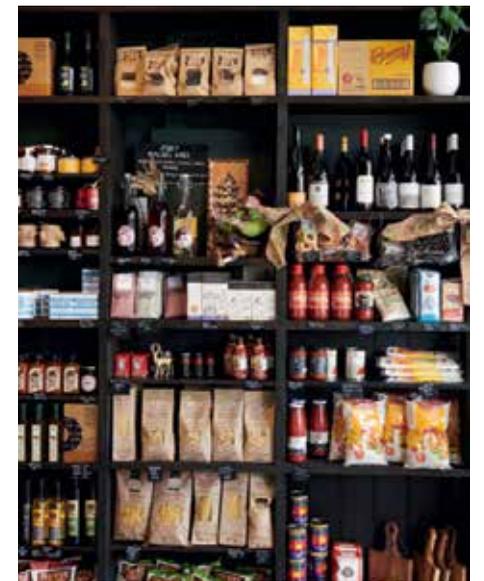
**Grandfather’s Axe**  
An elegant trove of mid-century modern furniture sourced from Scandinavia and beyond.  
[grandfathersaxe.com.au](http://grandfathersaxe.com.au)

**Vex**  
Neighbourhood restaurant run by three residents, serving excellent seasonal food and wine.  
[vexdining.com](http://vexdining.com)

**Fresh Flowers on High**  
Flowers, indoor plants and gifts.  
[fresh-flowers-on-high.business.site](http://fresh-flowers-on-high.business.site)



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but it has still retained some of its old-school charm,” he says when asked if all the attention has altered the area’s character.

At neighbourhood bar Low Key, owner Riccardo Rantino echoes Klein’s thoughts on the matter. “We have the balance right, people come here for the old reasons they came: the theatre, the market,” he says. “But they’re also coming for so many other businesses now. That hasn’t quite extended the full length of the street but right here, this is the sweet spot.” — (M)

(1) Your table awaits at Vex (2) Laura Ciurleo, neighbourhood florist (3) Grandfather’s Axe (4) Browsing at Neighbourhood Books (5) Time for another (6) Goods at Zsa’s (7) High Street tram (8) Daytrippers Florencia and Max