

SUBMISSION:

CITY OF MELBOURNE COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE PLAN

Prepared by: Geoffrey Lim

City of Melbourne's community infrastructure planning must explicitly designate and protect public spaces for grassroots cultural communities such as street dance to exist. Street dance is affordable, low-maintenance, highly activating, and demonstrably meets the City's criteria for equitable, adaptive, health-promoting and community-led infrastructure, yet it remains structurally excluded through lack of recognition and intentional space provision.

1. What is Street Dance

Street dance refers to a broad group of dance practices that originate from social, cultural and community contexts rather than formal studios or institutional settings. These practices developed through lived experience, shared cultural knowledge and peer exchange, often within marginalised or underrepresented communities.

Street dance includes, but is not limited to, the following forms:

- Hip hop (party dances and freestyle)
- Breaking
- Popping
- Locking
- Krump
- W*acking
- House
- Ballroom and vogue
- Litefeet
- and many more...

Each form has its own cultural lineage, music, values and social codes, yet they share common characteristics: they are community-led, participatory, improvisational, and deeply connected to identity, place and collective experience.

Street dance is best understood as community dance rather than institutional dance. Practice typically occurs through cyphers, open sessions, battles and informal training rather than ticketed performances or scheduled classes. Knowledge is passed laterally through observation, mentoring and participation, rather than hierarchically through formal instruction. This makes street dance highly accessible, culturally specific and responsive to the communities that practise it.

Street dance is also cultural dance. Many forms emerged as expressions of resistance, storytelling, survival and celebration within Black, Latinx, Asian, queer and diasporic communities. Participation is inseparable from cultural identity, belonging and intergenerational exchange. For many practitioners, street dance functions as a primary cultural practice rather than a recreational pastime.

Importantly, street dance is the most popular dance form in Australia. According to the National Arts Participation Survey (NAPS), street dance attracts higher participation rates than many traditional and contemporary dance forms, including ballet and other classical styles. It is particularly popular among young people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and urban populations.

Despite this high level of participation, street dance receives significantly less public funding, infrastructure support and policy recognition than traditional or contemporary dance forms. Investment in dance infrastructure has historically prioritised studio-based, institutionally recognised practices, resulting in a mismatch between where participation is occurring and where resources are allocated.

This disparity has direct implications for community infrastructure planning. While street dance engages large numbers of people and activates public space regularly, it is rarely planned for, designated or supported within civic infrastructure. Instead, communities rely on informal use of plazas, forecourts, undercrofts and other public spaces, often without security of tenure or basic amenities.

Recognising street dance as a legitimate and highly participated form of community and cultural dance is essential to ensuring that infrastructure planning reflects actual patterns of use, participation and need within the City of Melbourne.

2. Our Communities

Street dance communities in Australia are diverse, intersectional and predominantly made up of groups that are consistently identified by local governments as experiencing barriers to participation, access and wellbeing. National research conducted through Street Dance in Focus: Practices, communities and futures in Australia provides the most comprehensive picture to date of who participates in street dance and why these communities rely so heavily on public and community spaces.

The research shows that street dance communities are largely young, urban and culturally diverse. A significant proportion of participants are aged between 18 and 34, with many engaging in street dance during their formative years as students or early-career workers. The community includes a high number of people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, with many practitioners born overseas or having strong diasporic and migrant identities. Melbourne is identified as one of the key centres of street dance activity nationally.

Street dance communities also include a high representation of LGBTQIA+ practitioners, particularly within forms such as ballroom and vogue, waacking and house, where dance spaces function as culturally safe environments for queer and trans people of colour. These spaces often provide protection, affirmation and peer support that are not readily available elsewhere.

Importantly, Street Dance in Focus highlights that many street dancers experience financial precarity, are students, or balance multiple forms of work. This makes paid studio access, classes and formal venues financially inaccessible. As a result, public and community spaces are not supplementary — they are essential infrastructure.

These demographics sit squarely at the intersection of communities that local governments consistently prioritise through policy frameworks: young people, CALD communities, international students, LGBTQIA+ people, and people facing economic barriers. While councils often articulate strong commitments to supporting these groups, they frequently lack culturally relevant, trusted and accessible pathways to reach them.

Street dance provides one of those pathways.

Because street dance is community-led, culturally embedded and already widely practised, it functions as a natural point of engagement with communities that are otherwise hard to reach through traditional service models. Participation does not require prior knowledge, English fluency, formal enrolment or financial investment. Engagement is peer-driven, relationship-based and sustained through regular practice rather than one-off programs.

Supporting street dance therefore supports these communities directly. Designating and enabling spaces for street dance does not require councils to “create” new engagement models or impose external interventions. Instead, it involves recognising, legitimising and resourcing practices that communities are already using to support their own wellbeing, connection and cultural expression.

In this sense, street dance is not only a cultural activity, but also a delivery mechanism for equity, inclusion and participation objectives. Investing in street dance infrastructure is an efficient and culturally appropriate way for local government to reach multiple priority populations simultaneously, through a practice that is already trusted, valued and embedded in community life.

3. Wellbeing

Street dance plays a significant role in supporting physical, mental and social wellbeing, particularly for communities that experience barriers to accessing traditional health, sport and wellbeing services. Evidence from VicHealth’s rapid review *The Arts and Creative Industries in Health Promotion* demonstrates that participatory arts, and dance in particular, are effective tools for improving health outcomes among priority populations, including young people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, LGBTQIA+ people, refugees and people experiencing social isolation.

The VicHealth review identifies moderate to strong evidence that dance participation improves physical activity levels, cardiovascular health, balance, coordination and overall fitness. Importantly, dance also delivers mental health benefits, including improved mood, reduced stress and anxiety, increased confidence and self-esteem, and a stronger sense of purpose and belonging. These outcomes are particularly pronounced when dance is participatory, culturally relevant and socially embedded rather than performance-focused or clinical.

Street dance aligns closely with the conditions VicHealth identifies as critical for effective engagement with underserved communities. These include affordability, cultural relevance, accessibility, peer-led delivery, non-verbal participation and informal settings. Street dance does not rely on spoken language, formal enrolment or institutional familiarity, making it

especially effective for CALD communities, international students and people who may be hesitant to engage with formal services.

For many practitioners, street dance functions as a protective factor. Regular participation provides routine, social connection and a positive outlet for stress and emotion. In forms such as krump, ballroom and vogue, dance spaces also serve as culturally safe environments where participants can process lived experience, identity and trauma in supportive, community-controlled settings.

The Draft Community Infrastructure Plan explicitly recognises the importance of community infrastructure in supporting health and wellbeing, particularly through flexible spaces, unstructured recreation and access for young people and communities experiencing disadvantage. It also acknowledges increasing demand for informal physical activity and the role of community spaces in preventative health outcomes. Street dance directly meets these objectives, yet is not currently recognised within the Plan's health and wellbeing framing.

Designating and supporting spaces for street dance represents a low-cost, preventative health intervention. Small infrastructure investments — such as shelter, lighting, suitable surfaces and extended after-hours access — enable regular, sustained participation that delivers ongoing wellbeing benefits without the need for intensive service delivery or program funding.

By recognising street dance as part of the community infrastructure network, the City of Melbourne can advance its health, wellbeing and equity goals simultaneously. Supporting street dance is not only an investment in culture, but an investment in community resilience, mental health and social connection for populations that local government is actively seeking to support.

4. What happens with and without designated space

Street dance communities will always find space to practise. The question for cities is not whether street dance exists, but whether it is intentionally planned for or left to appropriate space informally. The following case studies demonstrate the difference between designated, supported spaces and informal, unsupported ones, and the impacts this has on community wellbeing, public safety and urban vibrancy.

a) Melbourne Museum Plaza (Melbourne)

Melbourne Museum Plaza currently functions as one of the most significant gathering points for Melbourne's street dance community. On most evenings, dancers congregate in the space to practise, train, exchange knowledge and socialise. The space is highly accessible, close to public transport, and already acts as a social and cultural node. Members of the public regularly stop to watch, creating



informal cultural exchange and activation of the precinct.

However, this use is entirely informal and undesignated. The space lacks access to water, toilets and clear permissions, and dancers are vulnerable to displacement at any time. Recent additions of large planter boxes have significantly reduced usable surface area, making it difficult or unsafe to practise.

Image Credit: The Fresh Collective

There has also been discussion of introducing a commercial outdoor stage in the plaza, raising concerns that community use will be further displaced in favour of programmed or ticketed activity.

If street dancers are displaced from Melbourne Museum Plaza, there is currently no alternative designated space nearby that meets the basic requirements for safe practice. This creates a cycle of displacement rather than resolution and undermines a community that already contributes to the vibrancy and safety of the area.

b) Dancers Alley (Sydney)

Sydney's Dancers Alley provides a contrasting example of what is possible when space is intentionally recognised and supported. Located in a central, high-traffic area, Dancer's Alley is a designated space where street dance is welcomed rather than tolerated. The space allows pedestrians to move through while also enjoying the presence of dancers, creating a shared civic experience.



Image Credit: Dion Georgopoulos

Importantly, Dancer's Alley has become a point of pride for Sydney. It contributes to the city's cultural identity, supports youth participation, and demonstrates how informal cultural practice can coexist with public movement when planned appropriately. The success of Dancer's Alley shows that designated street dance spaces do not detract from public life — they enhance it.

c) SCAPE Singapore: Purpose-Built Infrastructure for Youth-Led Culture

SCAPE is a national youth and culture hub in Singapore that was deliberately designed to support youth-led creative practices, including street dance, music, fashion and street culture. Following a major refresh, SCAPE has explicitly repositioned itself as a platform for youth ownership, informal participation and grassroots cultural development, rather than top-down programming.



The SCAPE model recognises that young people and street-based communities need space first. Rather than expecting communities to fit into formal programs, SCAPE provides accessible, visible and flexible environments where youth can gather, practise and express themselves on their own terms. Street dance is supported through open training areas, sheltered spaces, suitable surfaces and clear permission to use the site regularly, particularly in the evenings.

Image Credit: Vanessa Tang

What makes SCAPE effective is not heavy infrastructure investment, but intentional design and governance. The spaces are designed to be:

- highly accessible and centrally located
- well lit and sheltered
- flexible rather than single-purpose
- welcoming of informal, non-ticketed use
- supportive of peer-led activity rather than constant supervision

As a result, SCAPE has become a recognised cultural node where street dancers regularly train, exchange knowledge and build community without fear of displacement. Members of the public move through the space alongside dancers, creating a shared civic environment that feels safe, active and culturally alive.

Importantly, SCAPE demonstrates that when space is intentionally designated for youth-led culture, it reduces conflict rather than creates it. Clear expectations about use, circulation and shared access mean that dancers are not in competition with pedestrians or transport users. This contrasts strongly with situations where informal use emerges in spaces that were never planned to accommodate it.

d) Singapore MRT Linkways: When Informal Use Becomes a Public Safety Issue

A recent example from Singapore illustrates the risks of not proactively planning for street dance and other youth-led cultural practices. In several MRT linkways, dancers began practising in sheltered pedestrian corridors that offered lighting, smooth surfaces and protection from weather. These spaces met dancers' functional needs but were never intended or designed for this purpose.

As dance activity increased, complaints emerged from commuters who experienced congestion, obstruction and safety concerns while trying to access public transport. The issue quickly became polarising, with dancers defending their need for space and members of the public raising legitimate concerns about circulation and safety. Media commentary highlighted broader tensions around shared public space, youth visibility and informal cultural practice.

Importantly, this conflict did not arise because street dance is inherently problematic. It arose because demand was unmanaged and space was undesignated. With no alternative provided, dancers appropriated spaces that were operationally unsuitable, creating avoidable risk for both dancers and commuters.

This case demonstrates a critical lesson for cities. When informal cultural practices are ignored in infrastructure planning, they do not disappear, they relocate into spaces that may

be unsafe or disruptive. When space is intentionally designated, even with minimal infrastructure, tension is reduced and positive shared use is restored.

Proactive designation of street dance spaces is therefore not only a cultural or wellbeing intervention, but a risk management and public safety measure. Planning for street dance upfront avoids the need for reactive responses later and ensures that public space is shared safely, inclusively and intentionally.

e) The Skateboarding Parallel: From Conflict to Civic Pride

The current situation facing street dance communities closely mirrors the experience of skateboarding several decades ago. Prior to the development of designated skate infrastructure, skateboarders routinely practised in streets, car parks, plazas and pedestrian areas. This often led to conflict with other users, public safety concerns, damage to infrastructure and negative public perception.

These issues were caused by the absence of appropriate, designated spaces that met the community's needs. Skateboarding, like street dance, is an unstructured, youth-led, place-based practice that naturally gravitates towards flat, accessible and visible public spaces.

The City of Melbourne's Skate Melbourne Plan marked a significant shift in approach. Rather than treating skateboarding as a problem to be managed, the City recognised it as a legitimate form of recreation, culture and community infrastructure use. The Plan introduced long-term strategic planning, community consultation, clear policy guidance and the provision of appropriate spaces across the municipality.

Key elements of the Skate Melbourne approach included:

- formal recognition of skateboarding as a legitimate activity in public space
- mapping of existing informal use and community needs
- designating appropriate locations for skating
- creating purpose-built and shared-use skate spaces
- embedding skateboarding into broader public realm and infrastructure planning
- ongoing engagement with the skateboarding community through advisory mechanisms

The outcomes of this approach have been widely recognised. Melbourne is now regarded as one of the most skate-friendly cities in the world. Conflict between skateboarders and other users has reduced, public safety has improved, and skateboarding has become a celebrated part of the city's identity and public life.

Street dance is at an equivalent moment. Like skateboarding, it is widely practised, youth-led, culturally significant and reliant on public space. Without designated infrastructure, street dancers will continue to appropriate informal locations, which can lead to displacement, and safety issues.

The success of the Skate Melbourne Plan demonstrates that designation works. Applying similar principles to street dance such as recognition, planning, co-design and low-cost spatial provision, would not only address current challenges, but position Melbourne as a global leader in inclusive, community-led cultural infrastructure.

5. What Makes a Good Public Space for Street Dance Communities

Street dance communities only require simple, low cost, low maintenance public spaces, intentionally designated public spaces that align with how the practice actually functions. When these basic conditions are met, street dance can safely coexist with other public uses while delivering strong cultural, social and wellbeing outcomes.

A good public space for street dance should include the following elements:

Shelter: Street dance is practised year-round and predominantly in the evenings. Shelter from rain, wind and excessive sun is essential to enable consistent use and reduce reliance on unsuitable indoor or transport-adjacent spaces. Covered areas such as undercrofts, arcades or canopies are ideal and already exist across the city.

Appropriate Surface: A flat, durable, non-slip surface is essential to prevent injury and allow a wide range of dance styles to be practised safely. Smooth concrete, sealed timber or vinyl-style surfaces are suitable. Uneven paving, grass or rough textures significantly limit safe use.

Lighting: Adequate lighting is critical for safety, accessibility and night-time use. Well-lit spaces support visibility, reduce risk of injury and increase passive surveillance, benefiting both dancers and the broader public. Lighting should be consistent and designed to avoid glare or deep shadow.

Reflective Walls: Access to mirrors or reflective walls is a core functional need for street dance practice, enabling dancers to self-correct, train safely and develop technique. Permanent mirrors are not always required; polished surfaces, glass or reflective panels can serve this purpose at low cost.

Water Access: Access to drinking water is important, particularly for high-intensity styles such as krump and breaking. Proximity to water fountains or taps supports health and enables longer sessions without reliance on bottled water.

Toilet Access: Given that practice often occurs for extended periods in the evening, nearby public toilets are essential. Lack of toilet access is a common reason dancers are forced to leave otherwise suitable spaces.

Spatial Buffering: Street dance spaces should be visible but not obstructive. Ideal locations are close to pedestrian areas without being directly in the main flow of foot traffic. This allows public enjoyment and informal cultural exchange while avoiding congestion, conflict or safety issues. Setbacks from major roads also help manage noise and distraction.

6. Key Recommendations

1. Explicitly recognise street dance as a community infrastructure user group

The City of Melbourne should explicitly recognise street dance communities as legitimate users of community infrastructure across multiple categories, including Arts and Culture,

Unstructured Sport and Recreation, General Community, Health and Wellbeing and Open Space activation.

2. Designate and protect public spaces for street dance use

Identify, designate and protect a network of public and civic spaces suitable for street dance practice, particularly in the CBD, Parkville/City North and Southbank, where participation is already concentrated.

3. Prioritise low-cost, adaptive upgrades to existing spaces

Prioritise low-cost interventions such as shelter, lighting, appropriate surfaces, reflective elements, water access, toilets and extended opening hours to make existing spaces usable for street dance, particularly after 5pm.

4. Embed street dance into precinct planning and municipal initiatives

Ensure street dance communities are considered in relevant precinct plans and municipal initiatives, including the Civic Precinct (Rainbow Alley), Northern Undercroft, Melbourne Museum Plaza, and partnerships within the Hoddle Grid.

5. Leverage partnerships with institutions and asset owners

Use partnerships with universities, museums, cultural institutions, transport authorities and private landowners to formalise shared use of suitable spaces for street dance.

7. Long-Term Infrastructure Vision: A Dedicated Home for Street Dance

While this submission focuses on the urgent need to designate and support public and civic spaces for street dance practice, it is also important to articulate a longer-term infrastructure vision that reflects equity across Melbourne's dance ecology.

In Melbourne, traditional and contemporary dance forms benefit from significant, purpose-built or dedicated infrastructure. Organisations such as The Australian Ballet and Chunky Move are housed in large, multi-storey, publicly supported facilities that provide rehearsal, production, administration and community engagement space. These assets reflect a long-standing recognition of those artforms' cultural value and participation.

Street dance, despite being one of the most popular and widely participated dance forms in Australia, has no equivalent dedicated infrastructure. National participation data shows that street dance attracts more participants than many traditional and contemporary dance forms, yet it remains structurally unsupported in terms of long-term space, stability and development pathways.

Cypher Culture seeks to be considered, as part of future community infrastructure planning, for a dedicated home for street dance within the City of Melbourne. Such a space would function as:

- a hub for community practice and training
- a base for cultural exchange, mentoring and leadership development
- a centre for research, documentation and sector development
- a platform for international exchange and visibility



Importantly, this vision does not rely on new construction alone. It aligns with the Draft Community Infrastructure Plan's emphasis on adaptive reuse, partnerships and long-term planning. A dedicated street dance home could be realised through the repurposing of an existing government-owned asset, co-location within a community hub, or partnership with major institutions.

Supporting a dedicated home for street dance would position Melbourne as a global leader in street dance culture, much as it already is for ballet, contemporary dance and skateboarding. This would ensure that infrastructure investment reflects actual participation, diversity and cultural practice across the city.

About Cypher Culture

Cypher Culture is a City of Melbourne-based community organisation supporting street dance communities across Australia. Our work spans community development, youth engagement, cultural equity, wellbeing and advocacy for grassroots communities.

We work closely with CALD communities, international students, LGBTQIA+ dancers, and young people who experience barriers to accessing traditional arts, sport and wellbeing services. Cypher Culture has delivered nationally recognised research, public programs, workshops and partnerships with major cultural institutions, government bodies and community organisations. We also received a Green Room Award for contribution to sector and community.

We are uniquely positioned at the intersection of lived experience, research and policy advocacy for street dance communities.

We are keen for City of Melbourne to reach out to us to continue this discussion.

This submission was prepared by:

Geoffrey Lim,
Executive Director
Cypher Culture Inc
geoffrey@cypherculture.org.au
0423 082 111