

## COVER STORY



Andrew Stephens



# On the map



The world's best street directory has been telling Melburnians where to go since 1966.

**W**e all call it the Melways, don't we? Even pedants who insist, "Actually, it's the Melway" seem to struggle to not add an "s".

Singular or otherwise, though, the Melway is Melbourne. There, in about 1200 pages, majestically coloured and impossibly detailed, is our ever-evolving city in its most accurate, most reliable form.

Forget your Apple and Google maps: despite their market dominance, convenience and boring voices telling you to "turn right in 500 metres", they've got nothing on the Melway street directory as far as detail, accuracy, and local knowledge go. Not to mention personality.

The first Melway came out 50 years ago, in May 1966, with 188 pages. It was a huge hit even though it cost \$2.50 - twice as much as the competitors.

Merv Godfrey, who died three years ago, was the co-founder of Melway, as well as the Sydway

and Brisway street directories, all under the Ausway banner. For most of the company's history, clever data collection methods and sales figures have been kept close to the chest.

Compiling that first edition was an enormous task for him and business partner Iven Mackay: Godfrey - a cartographer - did the drawings and design in his home office while Mackay spent a good part of four years driving a total of 274,000 kilometres around every street of the metropolis, checking and double-checking details.

It was - and still is - an incredible amount of hard work.

The Melway is so embedded in Melbourne culture that even today, most local businesses, retailers and party-throwers still list their Melway reference when giving directions. It is a code (eg ref: 1B N7, or ref: 2B J9) that must be utterly enigmatic to non-Melburnians (who usually can't spell Melburnian correctly, either).

What is less mysterious is "Melways arm".

According to urban legend, it is a condition physiotherapists attribute to a strain developed by reaching over into the back of the car to get a Melway off the floor or from under a seat.

When the first edition was finally printed, amazingly in colour, it was much thinner than the soon-to-be-released 2016 edition. The entire thing was pen-and-ink drawn before it went to the typesetters (a hand-operated letterpress machine in Godfrey's garage).

Godfrey once quipped that "I have spent a lifetime telling people where to go!" but it was his wife Barbara who got the books onto the market. Many told her that because of the price, this street directory would never sell but she persisted. It took her six months to cover Melbourne, walking into a few newsagents each day to tout the directories.

She was not a born salesperson. On her first day, the story goes, she visited newsagents around Huntingdale and was so anxious she could barely speak. One shop-owner told her to



Melway director Murray Godfrey in the midst of Melbourne's road network. PHOTO CHRIS HOPKINS

“  
Our family members  
get asked ‘Do you  
know my street?’  
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”

MURRAY GODFREY

Today, in edition 43 (not every one of the past 50 years has seen a new edition), you can find streets such as Lamington Drive (Tarnet), AC/DC Lane (city), Sesame Street (Mount Waverley), Lois Lane (Dandenong), Sunset Boulevard (Jacana) and Quiet Drive (Bangholme) but there is no Melway Way to be found. How could our town planners not think of it?

When Barbara Godfrey was making her rounds and people began to buy the 1966 edition – whose design was then utterly groundbreaking for a street directory – those early Melway users couldn't have imagined that future generations would be using tiny mobile devices to get around. Nor would they have believed that we'd be trusting (or stupid) enough to let these satellite navigation systems send us on absurd detours or up one-way streets in the wrong direction. Or that we'd let ourselves be talked into driving into signal-less forests, creeks and onto train tracks or, in the most dire cases recorded, off bridge ramps or to dangle on cliff edges.

RMIT lecturer in geospatial sciences Gita Pupedis lauds the superiority and quality of the Melway. “I've looked at many, many street directories from around the world and I can't say I've seen one that is as well-designed as the Melways.”

Pupedis, who always introduces first-year cartography students to Melway history, says traditional map-reading is about getting the “big picture”.

“You get a wealth of detailed information from Melways that you cannot get from any of that online content, because none of them are on the ground here getting that information.”

And unlike a passenger with a Melway open on their lap, you can't argue with your GPS, even though you might direct very fruity language at it. Those irritatingly calm voices won't tell you furiously to “do your own navigating next time!” as did the woman in that old toothpaste ad, who explodes out of the car after being accused by her driver of having bad breath (and presumably poor navigation skills).

We've all got stories of being led astray by the sat nav. Topping them all is that infamous Brussels woman who left home for a local train station and ended up in Zagreb 1450 kilometres

(Top) Peter Atkins' *Melway Project* was commissioned by the City of Melbourne in 2009; the key map of Melbourne in the first edition lists 19 drive-in theatres.



later. But at the heart of all these frustrating technological letdowns is, as Pupedis says, a lack of intimate local knowledge.

In vast, sprawling Melbourne – one of the world's largest cities in terms of urban spread – that sort of knowledge is essential.

Very definitely on the ground here is Melway's Murray Godfrey, son of Merv and Barbara, who with his brothers Dean and David, helps run the business. Murray still spends vast amounts of time trawling the city and suburbs and noting down things such as street spellings, speed humps, stop signs, changed traffic conditions and other information. He used to do this with a Dictaphone, driving along and noting everything in sight.

Now, the field work is done less frequently – various government authorities exchange data with the Melway folk – but there is still a lot of driving around because the brothers have kept the company competitive: their on-the-ground research puts the Melway in a different league altogether to electronic competitors.

The Godfreys have grown up with all those Melway tints in their blood. Murray says that when people find out what he does for a living they observe that he must know the metropolis better than anyone.

“Generally, our family members get called ‘Mr Melway’ and get asked ‘Do you know my street?’ And generally I can picture it instantly and also generally know the Melway map reference,” he says. “But as time goes on, along with knowing most roads in Sydney also, I feel like my personal hard disk has filled and some information has been over-written.”

The Melway office is in a light-industrial street in Mount Waverley (ref: 70 F6, if you want to look it up) and in the foyer are display cases full of Melways paraphernalia. The aesthetic of a Melways directory is so distinctive that artists and designers have been captivated and you can buy a variety of teapots, mugs, cushion covers, T-shirts, clocks, coasters, placemats, jewellery and wrapping paper sporting the maps.

Visitors to Melbourne Town Hall who ascend the main central staircase, too, might have a sudden moment of recognition when looking at

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go back outside, take a few deep breaths and start again.

She did – and sold him a box of 36 street directories. Later, her husband would go into the shops and buy a couple – an old trick to get retailers to restock and build some buzz about the product.

Here it is, the reproduced 1966 commemorative edition, and it is glorious to behold. I turn straight to Map 16, site of my family's ancestral home, an orange-and-brown late-1960s number that was plonked on the edge of a new suburb with a creek, paddocks of scotch thistles, and lots of nothingness. It was frontier-land on that 1966 map; now it's almost an inner suburb.

More fun was to be had running a forefinger through the index at the back looking for funny street names or places. I always loved finding Paisley railway station near Altona on map 55 and was disappointed, on visiting (before it was closed), to discover an entirely grey place that did not live up to that swinging name.



## COVER STORY



From Page 9

the abstract paintings of artist Peter Atkins. Commissioned for the site by the City of Melbourne in 2009, the *Melway Project* works borrow richly from the directory covers.

Atkins says he loves images that trigger memories of locations or events – and the Melway directories can do that in so many ways: we might recall a particular family holiday, significant journey, image or event, something that happened or was said during a car trip.

Atkins began his project by searching libraries for Melway editions from 1966-2008. He was astonished at how the books are not only laden with historical references but act as reminders of “who we were and where we have come from”.

“There is certainly an element of collective ownership with the Melway,” Atkins says. “The covers themselves are a sort of group memory or nostalgia that we all share. I really love how they form a lovely, potted history of Melbourne; they are such wonderful time capsules.”

The paintings’ abstract nature means they are not immediately recognisable as referencing Melway covers – but Atkins has watched people go up or down that staircase, stop for a look and then have a trigger of recognition. “They suddenly know what they are.”

Writer/comedian Catherine Deveny is also ardent about Melway directories and has many tales of journeys across town using them, including the time she went to Sydney and, travelling in a car with locals, told them to “get out the Melways” (“No one in their right mind says Melway”) before being asked if she meant the Sydney.

Deveny fiercely rejects claims that young people are losing a part of their brain by submitting to the tyranny of what she calls “the nice lady” on GPS units. While the science is not yet conclusive about the effects on our brains, a wealth of research shows that the hippocampus in people such as London cab drivers (who have to learn the city’s streets by heart) is far more developed than other people’s.

And, research indicates, those important parts of the brain are far less active if we are simply following the verbal commands of a GPS rather than actually navigating ourselves.

“I don’t care if my kids can’t read a map, they can do all sorts of other things I couldn’t do,” Deveny says.

“Let’s free our brains up for more useful and useless stuff.”

Like many Melburnians who’ve stuck around, Deveny has spent most of her life on two pages of the Melways – maps 29 and 30 – because she was born in Preston and has lived in Reservoir, Fitzroy and Coburg. Getting her first Melway as a young person, she found it like “a bible, a comfort and a trusty navigator” all in one. “The Melways is a work of art and an institution, a rock,” she says.

Deveny recalls going across Melbourne in one of a small group of cars when the phone network went down. She arrived at the destination thanks to the 2008 edition of the Melway then in her car (back seat, of course) and when all the 19- and 20-year-olds arrived an

## THEN AND NOW



1966

- There were 106 maps in the first edition. This year, there are more than 500.
- The map key listed 25 symbols, compared with 76 in 2016.
- Schools were divided into “Specialist-Type, Non-Catholic and Catholic”.
- The edition marks “Public Telephones”, “Roads not fully trafficable” and “Migrant Hostels”.

hour later she asked them why they hadn’t just used the Melways. “The what?” they responded.

And that is the dilemma: smartphones and GPS rule, meaning fewer Melway directories are now found on back seats, though the Melway app is available for iPhone, and a Melway Android app is in development.

At Melway, the Godfreys say that with this formidable technological frontier well and truly crossed, they have had to evaluate how to compete and continue to play a useful role. The brothers say the originating philosophy of the company, “to offer the most up-to-date and informative maps” both shackles and defines Melway.

“Firstly, we are now competing against an expectation of ‘maps for free’ as portrayed by the internet and smart phone providers,” they say. “Secondly, our database, while spatially correct, is not suitable for making routing algorithms from, and would therefore require a re-compilation of existing mapping.” That would cost tens of millions of dollars. As they say, Google can afford that, but not Melway.

Instead, “the proven map display” readers are comfortable with allows iPhone users to zoom in and out so that at any readable scale – unlike GPS maps – you do not lose detail or textual information.

And that sort of context is crucial. As

1968

- The central City map was printed at a larger scale than the rest of the directory for the first time.
- “Alternate routes” were inserted.

1969

- Postcode boundaries and house numbers were introduced.

1970

- 21 drive-in theatres (2016 lists three).

1975

- Melway had to stop the presses when it was announced that the Healesville Freeway had not been approved. It was already on the press, so plates were swapped. A limited number of copies that made it through are now collectors’ gold.

1976

- Traffic lights introduced to maps.

1980

- Public transport section introduced.

1982

- A cartographer’s note saying “Looks Funny Eh?” (above left, inside the black buildings) – indicating the Tullamarine Airport terminal – made it through on 4000 copies.
- Bicycle tracks added.

2000

- An ant wandered onto the plate-making apparatus and has been forever enshrined on map 1A (below).

2003

- Federation Square appears for the first time.

2012

- Melway mApp iPhone app launched and eWay Electronic Melway Street Directory introduced.



Pupedis says, young people are growing up “just accepting whatever data is shot back out at them” from a GPS.

“In one way we have more access to more geographic data than ever before, but it is actually dumbing people down in that the synoptic overview is lost,” she says.

“For most people using a map such as Melways – it actually creates that geocentric mental map where you can put yourself outside the picture. Whereas most of us now have that egocentric view of the world where you are told by the little voice to take the trip from here to there with little concept of where they have driven.”

“That’s because you don’t have to think about it at all.”

Her current research compares groups of students in terms of their concepts of space, navigation and understanding basic ideas such as north and south. Her own students tend to be outside the norm – about 80-90 per cent of them own and use a Melway because they love real maps and navigating – but they are exceptional.

“We are allowing all this technology to do things for us and, yes, it makes life easier, but is it actually better for us?” she asks.

“It will be interesting to see what is the state of play in another 20 years but I certainly hope the Melways is still with us.”

“The Melways is a work of art and an institution, a rock.”

CATHERINE DEVENY

