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Mayor's silence on injecting room hurts CBD

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It sounds like an episode of Utopia.

Let's build a safe place for the most betrodde members of society. And let's put it where millions of passers-by will be exposed to the worst in human nature.

There are good ideas and bad ideas. Amid the creative, imaginative and innovative notions to rejuvenate the city is a plan to actively attract drug addicts to the busiest hub in town.

It's hard to identify a more unsuitable place for a safe injecting room in the CBD than Flinders St, across the road from the station.

Flinders St Station is already the Miss Havisham of Melbourne landmarks. Like the Dickens character, the station is wrapped in neglect and decay.

Its utility for passengers, especially at the Elizabeth St end, is one of the most visible examples of forgotten need of any Australian capital city. Upstairs, in what was once a grand ballroom, lurks a repository for termites and broken dreams.

The old lady, with its clocks, should be the gateway to city riches, such as Crown, Southbank, the aquarium and Federation Square. It should be celebrated, like Milano Centrale in Italy or Finland Station in St Petersburg.

Instead, Flinders St Station smells like a cattleyard. It may well be the world's biggest petri dish. The tiles at the western end, shrouded in more shadows than a creepy cemetery, appear to be coated in decades of grease and grime. Flinders St Station, as it is, is an emblem to low expectations.

Yet it serves vital purposes. More than 90,000 passengers a day, pre-COVID, went through Flinders St Station. Two of the city's busiest tram routes run along the road.

Commuters and tourists often have no choice. They must go through Flinders St Station.

The concept of a city injecting room has merit, given heroin deaths – about one a month – in the CBD over the past five years.

The Richmond injecting room, misplaced as it is near a primary school, has been found to “save” 21 lives.

But it has also coincided with increased local rates of robbery, harassment and stalking.

A proposed site near Queen Victoria Market, like most proposed sites for an injecting room, was universally condemned by vested parties. Their protests killed the project.

The same should happen with Flinders St.

Advocates describe its proximity to drug-taking and the homeless.

They overlook that Flinders St is also the backdrop for families, workers, tourists and happy snaps.

The proposed injecting room would nestle near a thriving laneway that drives tourism campaigns. The proposal plonks the needs of the few ahead of the demands of the many.

Where is Lord Mayor Sally Capp? Her virtual silence since the Herald Sun broke this story speaks more than the many photo-ops that she undertakes to promote the city.

Here is a question that affects most Melburnians, at a time when one in five retailers have been said to shut in the CBD because of the pandemic.

Capp should be nominating more suitable alternatives, not only because the planned Flinders St injecting room is awfully close to her “passion project”, a \$300 million “Greenline” walking path on the northern side of the Yarra River.

Doesn't Capp recall the mess in 2017, when homeless protesters set up camps on Flinders St, just as

the city was inundated with tourists for the Australian Open?

Multiply those numbers, and factor in recent and recurring drug use. The 2017 scenes of stand-offs and evictions would seem tranquil by comparison.

The lack of transparency over the decision-making process, and the absence of leadership, goes to the growing myth of community consultation.

No one appears to be owning this process. For now, as with hotel quarantine botching, the Andrews Government projects a craven reluctance to accept accountability.

Background chats about a “preferred option” have not been supported by government figures who stand up to sell the proposal and address the criticism.

Other CBD sites, dozens of them, seem more suitable for an injecting room.

Consider the eastern border of the CBD, near Parliament House.

It’s close to drug hotspots, transport and hospitals, but out of the way of tens of thousands of punters going about their business.

Better yet, state government ministers, bureaucrats and their “ideas people” could each day experience the virtues (and the vices) of their progressive approach.

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