

NEW
ACADEMIC
STREET
HEROES



"I am incredibly proud of everybody I've worked with on this project, I really am. That doesn't mean we haven't had difficult times, but I think it is really important to acknowledge nothing happens in a vacuum. It happens because we all work together, we all support each other."

Dominique Comber-Sticca
Project Officer Retail Leasing
Property Services



Dominique Comber-Sticca took on the challenging role of developing the new retail precinct in the NAS Project. Despite RMIT's tricky CBD location, Dominique has found a way to engage RMIT with the outside world.

"We've taken quite a brave approach to retail," says Dominique Comber-Sticca, the Project Officer of Retail Leasing at Property Services who has led a detailed consultation process across RMIT that will "change the way the community engages in retail."

The exciting new retail precinct, which will start opening in stages from late-April, was conceived during the pre-New Academic Street (NAS) consolidation project phase that saw the old cafeteria in Building 8 level 4 close and a host of smaller traders and coffee carts start trading in the City campus.

"Part of the ideology behind NAS was to break away from this interior-facing presentation of the architecture. It was no longer about this brutalist concrete block barricade that was there along Swanston Street."

Dominique believes that universities have a responsibility to their staff and students to be groundbreaking. While many universities in Melbourne reflect the 60s and 70s, the era in which many were either expanded or built, the NAS precinct brings RMIT smack-bang into the mid-21st Century.

"Regardless of what level you look at, we have completely reinvigorated our approach to media and broadcast capabilities, library resourcing and student service engagement... and retail had a responsibility to match that level of commitment and level of engagement. It really had to lift its game."

Dominique thinks RMIT's retail precinct should be no different – it's paramount to evolve and offer alternatives, so that the university is competing with the CBD's extensive retail options.

"It's no secret that we're surrounded by some very good shopping centres - Melbourne Central, QV and the Emporium are all draw cards. We had to find a niche market that complemented the University as a whole but also its place in the CBD," says Dominique.

Retail Therapy

Early in 2015, Dominique conducted focus group sessions, researching what students wanted from a retail offering on campus. She found that students would like a cheap price point, value for money, healthier options, various cuisine choices and plenty of seating space. Students also responded overwhelmingly positively to pop-up space suggestions, noting that food and beverage offerings could be seasonal – soup in winter and ice-cream in summer.

While retail bids were being evaluated, Dominique brought in all of the potential tenants who were pitching for a spot to showcase their offering. RMIT staff and students were invited along and asked to vote for the types of traders they would like to see in the City campus. More than 2000 staff and students turned out for what was an extraordinarily successful event and that really hit home with just how important food is to a thriving campus.

"Space isn't just space. It is an area where people engage and where they interact... they may be there for a good eight to ten hours a day. You want to give them something that's going to improve that time."

Sixteen new retail outlets will be delivered across four floors of the retail precinct. With a diverse mixture of dine-in and grab-and-go options – coffee, burgers, pizza, dumplings, doughnuts, gelato – students will have plenty of opportunities to savour a delicious range of food and drinks.

Of course, there have been a few bumps in the road.

"Has it been easy? No. Has there been headbutting? Of course. You don't deliver a \$220 million dollar project without headbutting, but the engagement and the processes always come out with a positive at the end of it. It's focused on getting a positive outcome."

Dominique is proud of everyone working on the project, especially the Property Services team and credits their dedication, resilience and willingness to put in the effort required to deliver such a large-scale project.

"It happens because we all work together, we all support each other, we all pick up the phone and ask, 'what can I do to make things easier? What am I doing that might make things harder? If I do this, how does it affect you?'... none of this could have been provided, none of this could have gotten as far as it had, regardless of what avenue you look at, had it not been for the outstanding intent that we had."