

The Birth of South Bank

(or, why one should always read the legislation)

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This article speaks only of the modern history of the area now known as South Bank. The author respectfully acknowledges the Yuggera and Turrbal people, who first occupied the lands now constituting South Bank.

As we press towards 2020, it has become difficult to imagine a Brisbane without the South Bank parklands. The parklands have become the city's playground; a garden and exercise space; a space for public performance; an important restaurant quarter; and an urban beach for a city which has ideal beach weather, but which lacks a Bondi or a St Kilda.

With the release of the 1988 Queensland cabinet papers, it has become possible to take a deeper look at the genesis of this key feature of modern Brisbane. In reality, South Bank began with three key events which live in Brisbane's historical memory: the 1974 floods, the 1982 Commonwealth Games, and the 1988 World Expo.

Early history

For much of its early European history, the southern side of the Brisbane River's city reach was a commercial hub. The interstate railway terminal was located adjacent to where the South Brisbane railway station still stands, and the southern side of the city had wharves, and warehouses, and the infrastructure which went along to support them, including some of the less legitimate types of business: "Between the wharves and the interstate railway station built in the 1880s, were streets of sly grog and loose women, dance halls and theatres, a place where local mixed with foreign."²

In the years after the second world war, however, the area fell into something of a decline.³ By the later 1960s, there were plans to redevelop part of the area into a cultural precinct. The Exhibition Building on Gregory Terrace, which housed the Queensland Art Gallery and the Queensland Museum, had been well and truly outgrown, and was damaged by winds in Brisbane's 1974 flood crisis. The South Brisbane site was purchased in 1969, and the Art Gallery opened there in 1982.⁴ The

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² Noble L (2001) South Bank Dreaming, *Architecture Australia*, quoted in Ganis et al (2014) pp. 501-502.

³ Although this should not be overstated. The area genuinely *was* in decline, but this is not an excuse for demonising its inhabitants, who were often guilty of nothing worse than poverty, and who were ultimately displaced from their homes with little or nothing to assist them on their way. Smith and Mair (undated) make this point.

⁴ Queensland Art Gallery, www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/about/our-story/timeline, viewed 22 October 2018.

Queensland Performing Arts Centre followed in 1985, the Queensland Museum in 1986, and the State Library of Queensland in 1988. The latest addition, the Gallery of Modern Art, opened in 2006.

During the era of the cultural centre's development, the South Brisbane area lost its centrality as a transport hub, when the interstate rail terminus shifted to the Roma St Transit Centre in 1986.

To make matters worse, South Brisbane was inundated by the cataclysmic Brisbane River flood in 1974. Following the flood, it was clear that some form of redevelopment was going to be necessary in the South Brisbane area, well beyond the cultural centre.

In 1982, Brisbane hosted the Commonwealth Games, a major international event which began the city's transition into a modern, world city. One of the defining moments of the Commonwealth Games was the victory, in the Marathon, of Australia's Robert de Castella. The marathon began and ended on what is now South Bank, in the shadow of the cultural centre.⁵ Almost immediately after the Commonwealth Games, bolstered by the confidence engendered by the games itself, planning began in earnest for the World Exposition – Expo.

Expo

The Queensland Parliament passed the *Expo '88 Act 1984*, which created the Expo Authority, properly titled the "Brisbane Exposition and South Bank Redevelopment Authority" although virtually everyone, it seems, immediately forgot the second half of the title. The authority, under the leadership of former Liberal leader Sir Llewellyn Edwards, had extensive powers to enable the Expo to be undertaken, including the power to resume land. Many of those who were moved on for the purpose of Expo were essentially voiceless, however close to the opening of Expo, the *Courier Mail* newspaper gave attention to renters in the surrounding areas of South Brisbane and West End, who were being squeezed out of rental markets by demand from, for instance, delegation staff from overseas.⁶

Section 30 of the *Expo '88 Act 1984* gave the Expo Authority the power to dispose of the lands resumed for the purpose of Expo. During initial planning for the Expo, these land sales were expected to form a substantial proportion of the income which would make Expo financially viable, hence the requirement that the Expo authority "secure for itself the maximum return that is reasonable to expect at the material time."⁷

⁵ Several archived recordings of this race, and the ABC highlights packages from it, can be found online. These give a real sense of what Brisbane as a whole, and the South Bank area in particular, looked like prior to the commencement of Expo development.

⁶ The most the state government could come up with was a grant of just over \$26,000 to a family care organisation to provide advice and nonfinancial support to those displaced: "Expo rent victims to be helped on their way" *Courier Mail* 17 March 1988.

⁷ *Expo '88 Act 1984* (Qld) s.30.

Even in the immediate leadup to Expo, there was widespread concern about its potential success or failure. It was, however, a triumph, and a halcyon moment for the city. Its success appeared to occur at two levels: as a purely commercial venture it was successful, both in its own terms and in terms of generating longer-term investment; but at a social level, Expo became a place to meet and socialise, particularly for the many thousands of Brisbane residents who had purchased season passes. Somewhere along the line, Queenslanders became proprietorial about Expo itself, and there was a substantial public desire to retain something of the spirit of what had become, in essence, an open and beloved public space.

Cabinet's approach to redevelopment

At this point, we turn to the Cabinet documents, and things become somewhat odd. In 1986, expressions of interest were invited for the redevelopment of the site by private development consortia.⁸ Based on the *Expo '88 Act 1984*, one would have expected those expressions of interest to have been assessed by the Expo Authority, most likely with input from the Brisbane City Council.⁹ However *Cabinet* called for these expressions of interest – it is not clear by what authority – and Cabinet established a committee to evaluate those proposals and to report back to Cabinet. The Committee was chaired by the Director General of the Premier's Department, and included the Under Treasurer, the Chairman of the Expo Authority, and the Town Clerk of the Brisbane City Council.

It is worth noting, as an aside, that the Council's concerns were quite different from those of the Expo authority. Had South Bank become a rival commercial precinct across the river from the Brisbane CBD, there was the possibility of massive reductions in the commercial viability of office space in the CBD. The Council's later push for open public space may therefore not have been entirely altruistic.

The fact that Cabinet had absolutely no authority to call for, or assess these tenders, and that the Expo Authority had the right, if it wished, to simply proceed with the disposition of the land, does not seem to have occurred to anybody. Indeed the legislation itself is not mentioned anywhere in the Cabinet submission.

Four submissions were shortlisted by the committee and considered by Cabinet: they were offered by the Kern Corporation, the CM Group, the World City 2000 Consortium, and the River City consortium. Cabinet considered the pros and cons of each submission, but it was always clear that budget considerations would take priority. At this stage (February 1988) it was not yet known whether Expo would be a success, and budgeting for the event required site sales of \$150 Million in order for Expo to break even.

Ultimately Cabinet settled on the proposal by River City 2000 consortium. The consortium included the Roma Street Development Group, Kern Corporation (which

⁸ Cabinet Decision 50206, 17 November 1986.

⁹ Section 30 of the *Expo '88 Act 1984* required the Expo authority to work within Brisbane City Council standards for works.

had also put in a separate bid), and the Conrad Hilton/Conrad Jupiters Group. The net present value of the offer was \$136.83 Million, to be made as \$200 Million in staged payments between 1989 and 1995.

The general proposal was for two harbours and a substantial canal to be cut into the foreshore at South Bank, and the spill to be used to create a large island, to be called Endeavour Island, on the southern side of the river. Endeavour Island was to be dominated by an exhibition and convention centre, a hotel, a casino, and a proposed World Trade Centre. The shore-side of the canal was to include further office buildings, and the southern end was to include residential complexes.

There were three immediate complications with this proposal. First, there were reservations expressed by the Brisbane City Council about the total amount of commercial and office floor space which was proposed by the River City consortium.

Second, Cabinet had no capacity to influence the location of a World Trade Centre in the city. The World Trade Centres Association had granted to a company called the Fricker company the exclusive right to develop a world trade centre in Brisbane. Fricker was examining a number of sites in the Brisbane CBD and on Kangaroo Point. Cabinet could (and did) encourage the Fricker company "to examine the possibility of developing [a] World Trade Centre or associated facilities on the Expo site"¹⁰ but that was as far as Cabinet could go.

Third, there was little appetite in the conservative Cabinet for a new casino. The Jupiters Casino had opened on the Gold Coast in 1985, and held a guarantee that no other casino would be developed in south-east Queensland until at least 1992 (although this may not have been insisted on since Conrad Jupiters were part of the River City consortium). Instead, Cabinet decided:

That no action be taken at this time to enter into any arrangement with the "preferred developer" for granting a casino licence for the site, but that the "preferred developer" be required to [include] provision for a casino facility within the site, at a location and under conditions acceptable to the Government.

That the Under Treasurer be asked to investigate all aspects of the granting of a casino licence for the site and report back to Cabinet through the Cabinet Budget Committee.

Public reaction to the proposal was swift and negative. Neither the committee proposal nor the cabinet process had included any public consultation at all; the Endeavour Island concept failed to capture the public imagination; and the *Courier*

¹⁰ Cabinet Decision 53399, 1 February 1988.

Mail newspaper¹¹ led a campaign sharply critical of the proposal. The title of its editorial said it all: *South Bank – selling the city's birthright*.¹²

Sir Llew Edwards tried to distance the Expo Authority from the decision, but the *Courier Mail* was having none of it – and clearly journalist Don Petersen had read the legislation:

*The seven-member board of the Expo Authority meets today to vote on the State Government's preferred developer for the post-Expo site ... Authority Chairman Sir Llew Edwards said last week the vote was not necessary because responsibility for the decision rested with the Governor in Council. This is strange since the Expo 88 Act of 1984 specifically charges the authority with "disposing" of the land in an endeavour to gain the best possible price that might reasonably be expected.*¹³

Public reaction became even more important after Expo commenced at the end of April 1988. As noted above, Expo exceeded all possible expectations, and despite its entry fees, the expo park became in essence a *public* space, with the many season pass holders making repeated visits. The lack of public input into the plan was a decisive aspect of its eventual downfall.

The other key feature was the conduct of the River City consortium itself. Despite section 30, Cabinet continued to be the lead agency on behalf of government, and the River City consortium began immediately to push for government commitments in relation to both the World Trade Centre and the casino. Just a week after the initial decision, Cabinet made a curious decision, on the basis of an oral submission by the Premier, that the initial cabinet decision "be confirmed" and that "the River City 2000 Consortium be advised accordingly."¹⁴ One can only surmise that Cabinet had been asked to review its earlier decision, Cabinet not being in the habit of routinely reaffirming earlier decisions.

Initially, Cabinet had set a deadline of 18 February 1988 to finalise agreement with the River City Consortium on outstanding issues. On that date, a two week extension was granted.¹⁵ A further extension was granted on 29 February 1988, setting the deadline at 8 April,¹⁶ and when it became clear that this deadline, too, would be missed, the Premier returned to Cabinet with a substantive report. Unsurprisingly, two of the three outstanding matters were:

¹¹ The *Courier Mail* was at the height of its powers in 1988, in terms of public influence: it had helped bring about the Fitzgerald Inquiry, it had seen off its greatest competition in the Brisbane *Telegraph*, which folded in February 1988, and the days of substantial online news were still a decade away.

¹² *Courier Mail*, 3 February 1988

¹³ "People kept in the Dark" *Courier Mail*, 23 February 1988.

¹⁴ Cabinet Decision 53511, 8 February 1988.

¹⁵ Cabinet Decision 53575, 18 February 1988.

¹⁶ Cabinet Decision 63653, 29 February 1988.

- (ii) negotiations with Fricker Developments regarding a World Trade Centre or a component thereof on the site;
- (iii) the interpretation of Cabinet's decision regarding a Casino facility on the Expo site.¹⁷

The Premier asked for the timing of negotiations to be left to his discretion "in view of my continuing personal involvement in the negotiations, which I consider is necessary now."¹⁸

The fall of River City and the birth of the South Bank Development Corporation

The Premier's involvement turned out to be decisive. Somewhere along the line, after the Premier became personally involved, someone finally seems to have fully grasped the importance of section 30 of the Expo '88 Act. The Premier met with Sir Llew Edwards, and then returned to Cabinet to sound the death knell for River City 2000:

Arising from my detailed involvement in the negotiations, I have become very much aware of the legislative requirements regarding the disposal of the Expo site. These requirements, in effect, are that the Expo authority shall dispose of the site in a way which will achieve a net financial result that will not impose a burden of cost on the Government of Queensland ... in dealing with these details, I questioned why the Government is, in fact, embroiled in much of this public debate and criticism, when in fact most of the matters should be negotiated between the Expo Authority, Brisbane City Council, and the preferred developer, for submission in due course to the Government.¹⁹

Cabinet decided to withdraw preferred developer status from River City 2000, and to instruct the Expo Authority to commence the tender process all over again. This second process was to be based on the clear understanding that the Government had no capacity to influence the location of a World Trade Centre, and that any question of a casino licence would be completely divorced from South Bank redevelopment.

This approach relieved pressure on the government in terms of the casino and World Trade Centre, but there remained the issue of public expectations. By this stage, Expo was well underway, and the enthusiasm of the people of Brisbane was a key element in its success. Expo forecasts required approximately 8 million visitors through the gate in order to meet its budget; it quickly became apparent that this number would be comprehensively surpassed. In the end, more than 18 million

¹⁷ Cabinet Decision 53963, 5 April 1988.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Cabinet Decision 54470, 7 June 1988.

visitors passed through the gates. This, in turn, relieved financial pressure on the sale of the site. Thus the people themselves, in the process of falling in love with Expo, had helped to create the economic circumstances which allowed the government to seek a path other than a real estate fire sale.

After the Expo Authority took responsibility for the tender process, it "subsequently became apparent that under this [tender] approach, it would be very difficult to meet public expectations for significant open space on the site with minimal commercial development together with the need for a financial return sufficient to enable the Expo Authority to break even."²⁰

Instead, at the end of June 1988, the Premier joined with the Expo Authority Chairman and the Lord Mayor of Brisbane to announce the formation of the South Bank Development Corporation, which would take possession of both the assets and the liabilities of the Expo authority, including the land space, and which could then develop the site. Having learned from the first process, the Expo Authority produced a:

Statement of Development Principles for the South Bank together with some graphics showing the conceptual proposal for development of the main Expo site plus a land use proposal for the broader area. This material together with further graphics will be presented to the public as a set of eighteen display panels of which it is proposed that ten such displays be manned at various centres throughout Brisbane for a month within which the public will have the opportunity of commenting on the proposals. A press and media campaign will complement the static displays.

The public reception on this second occasion was far more positive, and the following year, Ahern introduced the South Bank Corporation Bill. In his second reading speech, he stated that the Act:

provides the necessary statutory foundation from which the Expo South Bank area in particular, as well as the surrounding area, can be developed to produce a result of outstanding merit. Such a result will bring benefits not only to the City but to the State as a whole through tourism and its ability to identify Queensland to the World.²¹

It need hardly be stated that this was far from the end of the South Bank story. The legislation has been repeatedly amended, and South Bank itself has continued to evolve in the three decades since its foundation. It is, however, well to remember the fact that the site was very nearly sold to private developers, and that the South

²⁰ Cabinet Decision 55547, 14 November 1988.

²¹ Hon M. Ahern, Premier of Queensland, *Legislative Debates*, 13 April 1989, pp. 4672-4673.

Bank of today exists in its current form only because some anonymous angel on Ahern's staff remembered to read the relevant legislation, and discovered section 30 of the Expo Act.

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