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‘Out of the Shadow of Brisbane’: CBD Development and Local Identity

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The story of the shopping centre and CBD redevelopment in the regional Queensland city of Ipswich provides a cautionary tale for local politicians and regional civic developers. Indeed, the fact that this history is so bound up in ‘stories’ is a key part of the lessons to be learned. The Ipswich Centre Shopping Plaza was used as a key reference point for the creation of myths shaping a particular ‘Ipswich’ identity in local discourses such as newspaper reports, planning policy documents and promotional material. These discourses suggest that lessons from the decline of a retail complex may not merely relate to recognising failures in spatial planning or strict economics. The lessons may also relate to how we talk about the built environment and how this impacts on the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, that is, how we fashion our own sense of cultural identity.

Why should so much of our sense of a local cultural identity hinge on a shopping centre? The answer is, of course, that it does not. The shopping centre is, in a sense, expedient. A general feature of any discourse is its fluidity, yet discourses propagating myths of identity attempt to fix upon a basic set of relatively stable points of reference. National identities revolve around simplistic shared concepts such as mateship, Manifest Destiny, or *Volk*. At the local level, the development of the built environment goes hand in hand with identity formation, and identity can often be linked to monolithic landmarks as stable, unshifting reference points. Stability in a landmark is reliant, however, on the discourse that attributes to it its significance. I used to wonder at a sign by the road that winds through Cunningham’s Gap. The sign reads ‘Historic Site: 400 metres’ and, sure enough, as you round a bend 400 metres away, you encounter yet another sign on a tree reading ‘Historic Site.’ Not having anywhere on the tight road to stop and discern what sets this tree or its location apart from the thousands of trees surrounding it, one has to take the sign’s word for it.

The distinction between a landmark and just any old lump of rock is thus a tenuous one. What gives to the landmark its relative stability as a point of reference is not its physical structure or location; rather, it is the discourse itself. To make this point clearer, I will refer to what Rob Shields in *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (1991) described as a distinction between ‘space’ and ‘place.’ Space is the relative locations of things, divisions of land, paths between locations and such. ‘Placeness’ involves attributing to local sites ‘central social myths which underwrite ideological divisions’ (47) thus producing a formation that is ‘half topology, half metaphor ... an emotive ordering or *coded geography*’ (265). Landmark status given to locations, sites or structures is fundamental to the process of transforming mere space into place. Landmarks carve the otherwise slippery ‘place’ codes in stone.

The story of the Ipswich Centre Plaza is a history of the attempts by the locals to define the coded geography of Ipswich. An early contender for the capital of Queensland, Ipswich has long since struggled to overcome the fact of its proximity to that other city which was given the title. In 1967, the Ipswich City Council proposed that all future planning should revolve

around a coherent broad-based scheme designed to promote development across the whole of the city. By 1971, a Town Planning Branch had been formed with the explicit purpose of drafting such a plan, and by 1976 the resulting policy plan had been formally gazetted. Key elements of the plan had been in currency for up to twelve months prior to this in the form of Council development submissions and elements of the plan had been incorporated in the Council's *Statement of Policy 1975-1985*. The policy opens with a clear statement of what is needed for Ipswich to grow in line with the vision of 1967:

The relation and increasing importance of Ipswich City to the Moreton Region becomes apparent when it is realised that ...the Ipswich City Centre is located within a radius of 30 kilometres from the Brisbane City Centre.

This one factor together with the potentially ideal communications link that already exists between the two cities, indicates that Ipswich must grow and strengthen, not as a suburb of Brisbane, but as an individual City, with its own identity and characteristics. (8)

Plans for the development of the city are tied directly here to identity formation, cast here in opposition to the burgeoning Brisbane. As the *Statement of Policy* unfolds its vision for the future, it becomes apparent that Ipswich is seen as having been threatened with an ancillary status because of the drawing power of Brisbane's commercial centres. Accordingly, major developments are planned to improve the retail options for shoppers throughout the service area overseen by the council. Commercial centres are planned for development at several 'strategic locations' (13), the current sites of Booval Fair, a shopping complex in Bundamba, Redbank Plaza, Redbank Plains Shopping Village, and the St.Ives complex in Goodna.

The location of these developments is strategically calculated to promote the emergence of a number of 'commercial nodes' (13-14) to halt leakage of trade to Brisbane. The use of this term 'node' suggests that the plan was drafted according to the principles of the 'node-path' paradigm popular at the time in town planning theory. As Eugene Franckowiak explains in *Location Perception and the Hierarchical Structure of Retail Centres* (1978), commuters or pedestrians make decisions about directional travel based on cognitive maps, in which core associations are made between 'nodes' (landmarks, buildings, centres) and 'paths' (major arterials, connector roads, railways). Franckowiak's extensive study combined psychology with geography to investigate the orientational influence of arterials, shopping centres, and the CBD on shopper location choices. The goal of the planned developments from Booval to Goodna is clear: provide enough commercial 'nodes' accessible by prominent 'paths' to render Brisbane redundant as a shopper location choice for residents of Ipswich suburbs.

Yet over and above the development of these strategic commercial nodes, the *Statement of Policy* outlined as a priority a series of steps planned to 'provide a City Centre that will work efficiently, be a delight to those who use it, and which will be equipped to draw trade from the entirety (sic) of its service area' (17). An appended report entitled 'Ipswich Plaza' outlined in more detail the need for the proposed steps to proceed as follows:

1. Construction of an office complex on Bell Street;
2. Upgrading of the railway station opposite the office complex;
3. Construction of a modern shopping plaza over the railway station;
4. Electrification of the rail service;
5. Development of a pedestrian mall.

The *Statement of Policy* stresses the importance of coordinating the various improvements, and concludes that ‘the upgrading of the railway would not have the same result for Ipswich without the improved City centre shopping and office facilities’ (22-23).

That the railway should be considered important to the proposed redevelopment is significant. Ipswich Station was, until 1993, the terminal site on one branch of the Brisbane Metropolitan Railway network. It is difficult to think of any other fact that could have contributed more to a perception that Ipswich was an outpost of the greater Brisbane metropolis. According to node-path reasoning, the rail link also provides the greatest threat to local trade, since the dominant commercial node (Brisbane CBD) is located directly at the core of the transit system (Central Station). More important than establishing a sprinkling of viable commercial nodes along the major arterials between Ipswich and Brisbane, then, the priority in halting leakage of trade to Brisbane is to plug the leak at its source. Establishing a viable CBD around the railway station is thus intended to dissuade Ipswich residents from commuting to Brisbane, and should draw shoppers from along the Ipswich rail line toward a different ‘central’ station.

The priority given to the railway development (and, we may assume, to the order of steps for proposed CBD development) was demonstrated in March 1976 with Council announcing that plans for the development of the Nicholas Street Mall were to be deferred to avoid restricting access to the Cribb & Foote car park, required during the redevelopment of the railway station (‘Mall Scheme ...’ 7). The new station and adjoining SGIO (State Government Insurance Office) complex were made operational in July and August of 1978. The line at this stage had yet to be converted for electrification, a process that would not be completed until 1980. Still, after just two steps of the proposed development editorial commentaries in local newspapers and business outlook reports in the City yearbook listed the new developments as significant contributions to a local building revival in 1978.

At this stage, the Ipswich Plaza remained an empty two-level shell awaiting finalisation of the letting arrangements. According to a press release by the Ipswich Chamber of Commerce, the letting did not pan out as confidently as expected. The statement, released less than a week before opening, it was revealed that ‘too many loose ends in the letting details’ had mitigated against involvement by local businesses and threatened the continued viability of the project (‘Centre Loses Its Friends!’ 9). Despite these initial problems, 23 leases were secured in time for the opening of Stage One (the main complex on top of the railway station) on 28 November 1978, in time for peak Christmas shopping.

As if to combat the doomsayers from the Chamber of Commerce, the Council gave extensive promotional exposure to the opening in the *Queensland Times*, with full-page advertisements appearing regularly and finally a full 16-page feature included on the day. Although planned under the name of ‘Ipswich Plaza,’ the complex had been given the name ‘Ipswich Centre’ prior to opening, which seems consistent with the commercial node-path logic that had been employed in the initial proposal. Nearby Redbank would have its own ‘plaza’ but the CBD complex in Ipswich was to be the ‘centre.’ Items in the *Ipswich Centre Opening Feature* emphasised local businesses and personalities, and ensured local readers that, during construction of the centre,

Maximum usage was made at all times of Ipswich components, manpower, and facilities, e.g. all the concrete was supplied locally. More than 200 men, including builders, labourers, and so on, have been engaged on the project.

Most of them have been from the local area. ('Building the Complex Wasn't Easy!' 9)

The promotional feature is an explicit effort at 'placing' the complex as central to the local area and this claim that construction was supported by local labour and materials intersects with existing local myths to propagate this sense of a place. Even as it promotes the centre as an important commercial site, this claim also ties in with the image of the Ipswich local as a labourer. Significantly, this image supports the 'placing' of the centre by generating the idea that the site is a concrete *product* of the local labour force, rather than merely being a site for *consumption*.

I have noted that the development of the mall was being held over until after completion of the first four steps outlined in the CBD development proposal. The Ipswich Centre was built in two stages: the first was above the redeveloped railway station; the second was opposite Stage One, on the other side of Bell Street. An item in the Ipswich Centre Opening Feature foreshadowed the completion of Stage Two in short time, informing readers that it was due to open 'late February, 1979 (in time for Easter) increasing the number of retail outlets to around 50' ('Stage One Opens Today 10). In view of the letting problems that had troubled Stage One, the confidence exuded by this claim is worth noting, and is a sign of the Council's desire to present a positive spin on the harsh realities projected by the Chamber of Commerce in the days leading up to the opening of Stage One.

If the letting problems of Stage One had seemed to have been overcome by the eleventh hour efforts of the letting authority, these same problems were inherited by the Stage Two development. When the complex finally opened on 23 April 1979—two months late—nine vacancies remained to be filled in Stage Two ('Retail Trade Is Growing' 31) and two of the stores in Stage One complex had already closed. Redoubled efforts by letting authorities saw all but one vacancy filled within a year, although there was a regular turnover in leases throughout the complex over the next decade. Although no authoritative figures on leases has been acquired, my abiding memory of the centre in these years is that the majority of outlets closed within two or three years of taking on a lease. Nevertheless, most leases were usually filled at any given time for much of the 1980s. When the end came, it was relatively swift.

This brings me to consider the impact of the mall development, the fifth step in the Council's overall plan for developing a CBD capable of supporting a specifically local identity, apart from the nearby spectre of the Brisbane CBD. Development of a mall had been touted for a number of years prior to the release of the *Statement of Policy* in 1976, with the most likely candidates being Bell and Nicholas Streets, flanking the Cribb & Foote department store. In the plan set out by Council in 1976, the mall development was to be held over until all four prior developments had been completed. By 1980, these steps had been completed, but the mall development remained stalled until at least 1982. It was in this year that the Brisbane City Council announced plans for the closure of Queen Street.

In the same year, Bernard Clark carried out a 'policy delphi' survey of Ipswich residents, in which he asked locals to rate the importance or priority of a variety of Town Planning policy directives. Most directives were taken from the Council's planning documents from the past decade, although several additional items were included by the compiler in an effort to gauge public concern in areas not already covered by Council policy. The final results show a strong

level of public agreement with the priorities established in the policy plan of 1976. The three highest priorities identified by Ipswich residents were:

1. Create a Pedestrian Mall;
2. Attract Commercial Development;
3. Revitalise the CBD. (Clark 152)

Beyond simple agreement, however, these results suggest a number of issues. First, it should be remembered that this survey was conducted after completion of the first four steps of the proposed CBD redevelopment, and yet public opinion reflected a continued concern that the CBD was in need of revitalisation. Also, it is worth noting that the survey was conducted in four rounds, with the results being compiled in aggregate after each round and then averaged out against the figures produced in previous rounds. The directive to create a pedestrian mall ranked much lower in the first round of results and Clark notes that the sharp rise in interest for the mall development coincides with the announcement of the decision to proceed with construction of the Brisbane mall (152). This sudden rise in public concern about the lack of a pedestrian mall suggests, therefore, that Ipswich residents were not concerned so much with the Council proposals of 1976 as they were with the fact that Brisbane was about to beat them to the punch on yet another thing. In this regard, local public opinion reflected the spirit of the *Statement of Policy* if not its actual content.

Despite the renewed urgency over the mall proposal, organisational and economic problems slowed efforts to proceed with the closure of Nicholas Street for another three years. Then, in 1985, the Kern Corporation approached council with a proposal for the redevelopment of the City Centre, with plans to further upgrade the existing redevelopments and proceed with the construction of a mall. On 22 May 1985, Mayor Des Freedman announced immediate action toward the redevelopment would be authorised to proceed without an economic impact study (Toon 3). This announcement flew in the face of State Government legislation that had been put into effect five years earlier. At that time, Brisbane City Council policy had operated in favour of widespread unimpeded shopping centre development, on the basis that Council policy could 'not be used to protect the income or standard of living of shopkeepers' against development (*Brisbane City Council Policy Statement 2.1.1* cited in Kiel and Wadley 5). Responding to complaints by members of the food retailing industry over saturation of the market by shopping centres, the State Government produced four amended Acts governing development of shopping centres: the *City of Brisbane Town Planning Act 1964-80*, the *City of Brisbane Act 1924-80*, the *Local Government Act 1936-80*, and the *Valuation of Land Act 1944-80*. All of these Acts stated that no new development could proceed without provision of a detailed economic impact assessment.

It is possible that the decision to bypass legislated requirements was made on the basis of an assumption that the legislation had been formulated in response to complaints by retailers in the Brisbane CBD alone. Yet I suspect the decision to override legislation was based on the suggestion that it only applied to 'new' developments. While Kern Corporation's proposal was a new one, Ipswich City Council may have reckoned that the proposal merely extended the plans they had already been implementing since 1976. In any case, progress on the mall development continued to be hampered by a variety of problems. Most significant of these problems was the blaze which destroyed the Reids department store (formerly the Cribb & Foote store) on the night of 18 April 1985. This building had been an integral component in the Kern Corporation's plans and the damage led to a major delay.

Throughout this delay, the Ipswich CBD underwent a period of decline. Once again, it was the Chamber of Commerce, in conjunction with Ipswich Central City Traders', who stated the obvious (Graham 1). According to these reports, costs for the Kern proposal had escalated from \$85 million to around \$140 million, the Corporation delayed submission to Council of a formal application or any firm plans, and more than 25 central city businesses had closed since the Reids fire (some of them evicted after Kern purchased the site). Yet it would seem that too much had been invested by Council (both financially and conceptually) in the prospect of a mall development to force a strategic withdrawal. I suggest that instead of staying true to the original *Statement of Policy*, however, renewed efforts to promote the mall undermined the existing developments.

How did this happen? First, we can note that the Kern Corporation proposal was taken on board as a CBD redevelopment plan revolving around the development of an 'Ipswich City Square' on the shell of the old Reids store. The Stage One complex operating as the Ipswich Centre was renamed the 'Ipswich Centre Plaza,' a name that no longer suggested this site represented *the* centre. Instead, the Stage One complex was now merely a component of the centre, and a peripheral one at that, since it was now across the road from the main focus of activity. Indeed, this very phrase, had been used in the *Ipswich Centre Opening Feature* as a description for the central stairwell in the Stage One complex, and it was now adopted in the promotional materials used for the mall—for example, in an *Ipswich/West Moreton Touring Guide* circulated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, an item is entitled 'Mall is the Focus of Activity').

Other promotional materials for the new development used ideas that had previously been used to promote the Stage One and Stage Two developments of the Ipswich Centre Plaza, concepts such as modernity, style, and facility. These are the sorts of concepts commonly associated with shopping centre developments and which, as Meaghan Morris notes, are 'layout and design principles [that] ensure that all centres are minimally readable to anyone literate in their use' ('Things to do ...' 194). In other words, we *expect* shopping centres or malls to be promoted in terms of their modernity, style, and facility. Where I think the promotions for the new Ipswich City Square and mall development become a little insidious is in the fact that they do not at the same time iterate the association of these concepts with the existing complex.

What I am suggesting, then, is that in circulating a discourse intended to promote the new development, the Council (perhaps unwittingly) had leeches the associations formerly used for the Ipswich Centre. As a result, the way in which locals would have previously 'placed' the Ipswich Centre as a fundamental CBD landmark was now the way in which they placed the Ipswich City Square and the mall development as its *replacement*, not its complement. To compound the situation, an additional set of associations began to circulate at this time, providing extra weight to the notion that the new CBD developments fitted more neatly into local myths of identity than had its predecessor.

When the mall development was still in its planning phase, the question of the 'historicity' of the site became a regular issue in discussions and promotions. For example, the Ipswich City Council published a photograph taken in 1917 to make comparisons with the current landscape, supposedly enabling the 'council planners to judge the historical significance of several landmarks in the area' ('Old Photograph ...' 3). Further, chief town planner John Brannock told the press that this photograph 'was a boost for the council in its attempts to retain the identity of the street.' The appeals to historicity as a key marker of 'identity'

enable the mall to be associated with the one concept which, at the time, was on the verge of being ‘discovered’ as *the* defining identity marker of the Ipswich region: its heritage.

While it is difficult in retrospect to pinpoint the exact moment when somebody first got the idea to identify Ipswich with its heritage, I suspect that the mall development was a pivotal moment in the history of this association. Certainly, in the early 1990s, the term ‘heritage’ begins to appear in numerous places in association with the city, and the phrase ‘Heritage City’ has subsequently been adopted as a promotional name for the region. In 1991, there were efforts to revive the city’s annual festival which had for decades been failing to draw crowds or trade, and this failure was often attributed to the inability of festival organisers to pinpoint the ‘true’ identity of the locale. As a promotional item for the 1991 festival notes, ‘Ipswich has an identity problem because the city has a festival problem’ (‘A City With A Festival Problem’ 15). To resolve this problem, festival organisers arranged for their event to coincide with Queensland Heritage Week, labelling the local festival ‘Heritage Funfest.’ The promoters bragged that ‘this year’s festival may have found the town’s true identity on which it can build future festivals, future tourism, future individual glory, out of the shadow of Brisbane—its heritage’ (15).

Here the old bugbear of Brisbane rears its head once more, but the tone is decidedly more optimistic than the Council had been in the *Statement of Policy* some 15 years earlier. In the notion of ‘heritage,’ the festival promoters believed they had uncovered a distinct marker of local identity that could be used not only to focus on past glories—after all, the city had once upon a time challenged Brisbane for the capital of Queensland—but also to provide a focus for future opportunities in tourism and entertainment. The festival proved to be a success and this may have been the catalyst for the Council to adopt the term in just about every possible forum during the next year. As examples, the Heritage Funfest was retained during the early 1990s, ‘Heritage Property Incentives’ were established, ‘Heritage Walks’ became available as a tourist attraction, a ‘Heritage Hotline’ was set up for locals, and ‘Heritage City Living’ notices started appearing weekly in the *Queensland Times*.

Yet, as I have suggested, the Council may have already stumbled on the idea of using the past as a positive identity marker when they began promoting the mall development site in terms of its historicity. When the mall was opened in 1988, the site was marked by an obelisk at the Brisbane Street end. This obelisk had been sculpted by Tom Farrell specifically to function as a ‘historic’ landmark, engraved with images of local events and industries of the past. When the *Ipswich/West Moreton Touring Guide* was put into circulation soon afterwards, the mall was listed as a ‘focus of activity,’ as we have seen, but the obelisk was listed also under a separate entry in an item entitled ‘History is Everywhere.’ The item lists mostly buildings and sites developed in the Nineteenth Century, yet the obelisk is listed because it ‘shows scenes and industries important to Ipswich, from the earliest days to the present.’

The earliest days to the present—the obelisk functions, then, not only as a physical marker in ‘space’ but as a pivot for the intersection of heritage and modernity in ‘place,’ a connection that had been lacking in earlier attempts to promote the Ipswich Centre development. This, I suggest, was a precipitating factor in the rapid decline of the Stage One complex. While it is certainly true that the number of occupied shop sites in the Stage One complex evaporated at the same time that the so-called ‘boom of the 1980s’ came to an end (Condon 29), we should not forget that, at the same time, both the mall and the Ipswich City Square sites were well supported. Whereas the mall development had initially been conceived as the completion of

developments beginning with the Ipswich Centre, the two complexes finished up operating as direct competitors by the time the Ipswich City Square development was completed.

It is easy to imagine that an economic impact assessment might have identified the problem in advance, prompting the Council to make forward thinking decisions about the fate of the Ipswich Centre Plaza prior to its decline. As I have suggested, however, there remained a significant conceptual investment in the *Statement of Policy*, its ten year plan, and the node-path paradigm on which the plan was based. The decision to hand the Stage One complex to the West Moreton Regional Health Authority in 1992 marked the end of this investment. In the 1990s, as we have seen, the spirit of the *Statement of Policy* was well and truly replaced by the new found myth of identity built around the notion of 'heritage.'

Yet the Ipswich City Council has wisely resisted resting on its laurels on the success of this heritage mania. The latests *Statement of Proposals* demonstrates that the lessons of the past have also been learned. Of course, the latest proposals make no explicit mention of the 1976 planning document, but the relevant sections of the *Statement of Proposals* on development in urban areas in the key elements of 'Business and Industry Land' and 'Centres' contain a good many indirect references to the earlier plans and their limitations.

The lesson here is significant. Ipswich needs to be different from Brisbane, but this need not extend to ignoring fundamental government planning practices that just happen to have been legislated with Brisbane in mind. Indeed, nowhere in the *Statement of Proposals* is any use made of reference to Brisbane at all. There is no better way to come out from the shadow of Brisbane than to cast the light entirely on Ipswich itself. The blindspot covering Brisbane in this document even extends to a refusal to consider the proximity of the Brisbane CBD as a threat to local business. Instead, the new plans commit to ensuring that the existing centres at Booval, Redbank, and so on, be maintained only in so far as they accommodate the 'main service and comparison shopping needs of designated population catchments' (9) and that a series of new centres and neighbourhood complexes will be developed to service the growth areas across the region. These centres will be encouraged to generally provide only 'lower order professional office, business, financial and personal services with entertainment and recreation functions being of a local nature' (10).

For all major services and entertainment and recreation functions, priority remains with the Ipswich City CBD, designated in the new document as the 'Key Regional Centre' (9). The new proposal also specifies that preference should be given to plans aimed at 'consolidating or redeveloping existing centres or developing planned new centres rather than developing unplanned new centres' (11). The Ipswich City Square had not been foreseen in the policy plans for 1975-1985, yet this unplanned new centre had been taken on board by council on the basis that it had formed a key part of the Kern Corporation's plans to develop the mall, which Council *had* included as a planned new centre. Lesson learned, it seems.

Finally, the proposal includes one significant statement in regards to any new development, planned or unplanned:

Recognise that Centres, and the retail industry in particular, are dynamic in nature. Accordingly, the Centres Strategy should be implemented in a flexible manner which is able to accommodate innovative and emerging activities which are able to demonstrate community benefits. (12)

Flexibility is one quality that had not been inscribed in the policy plans for 1975-1985, and I have suggested here that the unbending commitment to implementing a five-step plan which culminated in a major new development (a mall) was unwittingly responsible for the failure of the Ipswich Centre Plaza. It remains to be seen now whether flexibility in implementation of city planning will extend beyond a node-path mode of thinking to cover the fluid ways in which myths of identity are negotiated over and above the retail function of these sites.

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