

Civic:
Brisbane's
DNA

an Insight by Don Marshall
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Brisbane is at a critical point in its development. Its physical growth in the last fifty years has not been as controlled as it might have been, threatening the city's long-term sustainability.

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At the 6th World Congress of the Council for Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, held in Melbourne some years ago, Deyjan Sudjic, architecture critic for London's newspaper *The Age*, spoke of 'reconstructing the urban fabric'. In a wide-ranging and eloquent discourse, made extraordinary by its ability to capture the audience without visual aids, Sudjic traced over issues affecting cities in the 21st century and posed the question: What is it that defines a city?

That every city possesses a unique character, or even personality, is difficult to dispute, but what is it that defines that character? What makes some

cities more memorable than others? Are residents of Brisbane the best qualified to define the character of our home town and if so, what do we do about it? Is it really important? In the past, the preferred catch phrase defining the Queensland capital was that of an 'overgrown country town'. This may have been accurate in the 1950s, but it is not any longer. Brisbane is a sizable, young, modern city in one of the fastest growing regions in Australia. It is located in a geographically benign environment but is in danger of growing from brash adolescence into maladjusted maturity.

Sudjic coined the term 'urban DNA' to describe a city's character, and explained how the history of authoritarian plans for Paris have provided that city with its unique urban structure. He questioned the lack of history or collective psychology in the new Asian megacities that are progressing from drawing board to reality at breakneck speed. A city's soul, he argued, develops with time. Sudjic also spoke of the segregation and alienation of cities like Berlin and Los Angeles – the former divided by a wall and political doctrine, the latter by social stratification. Los Angeles, one of the world's pre-eminent examples of urban sprawl, continues to grow and divide simultaneously – its physical growth is accompanied by 'psychic atrophy'. Like the self,

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Sudjic concluded, the city was everything – a collision of geography, history, sociology, psychology and construction.

Another important element of Sudjic's presentation was the concept of visual maps and overlapping existences. Each of us carries a visual map of the city in our head. This map will differ according to our experience. It is not unusual for someone raised on the northside of Brisbane to feel slightly alien on the southside, and vice versa. There are, however, elements of the city which are common to the divergent experiences of its inhabitants, and it is these elements that form the city's DNA.



So what are the elements that compose Brisbane's DNA? Let's look first at the physical realm, as it is in this context that the psyche of the city is expressed. The history and built form of the city are inextricably linked to its geography. Brisbane's most powerful geographical element is the river. The containment of the CBD within the peninsula between the Botanical Gardens and Wickham Terrace provides it with a unique urban scale and character. This is the historical heart of the city. The vertical expansion into high rise office towers since the 60s speaks of the city's adolescent years and commercial growth, just as the more recent preponderance of high rise inner city apartments possibly reflects the changing demographics and work practices of the 21st century.

Another powerful geographic element of our city is the Mt Cootha (Taylor) range. This forms a natural boundary to the west of the city and serves as a visual orientation cue. Unfortunately, no similar natural boundaries exist to the north and south, and it is in these directions that our city is succumbing to the inertia of anonymous sprawl. The failure to control the city's growth to the north and south could do more to harm its character and long-term sustainability than any other factor, but that debate is for another day. Suffice it to say that expanding highways to the coasts, and encouraging further development of low-density suburban subdivisions alongside them, will only exacerbate the congestion and pollution that threaten our long-term quality of life.

What are some of the other key physical elements that define Brisbane? The list is not exhaustive, and certainly debatable, but surely it would include the Mount Cootha TV towers, the Kangaroo Point cliffs, the CBD street grid, the Botanic Gardens, the Story Bridge, Fortitude Valley and dare we say it, the Riverside Expressway. Some of these are beautiful, some are downright ugly, but they are to varying degrees iconic, if not intrinsic. On a different scale, Anzac Square, Parliament House, City Hall, King George Square, the Suncorp building, the Queen Street Mall, the Gabba, Suncorp Stadium, Queensland University and the Southbank Cultural Centre are among the significant urban elements that form the physical and spiritual core of our city.

Two significant sites not mentioned above are Southbank and the Roma Street Parklands. These deserve special mention as sites of great strategic importance. Both have played a significant role in the city's history, and both are important in defining the physical and psychological boundaries of the CBD. The built fabric of what is now known as Southbank was erased to make way for Expo 88, and the site remains in transition between world fair amusement park and an

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uncertain future. The new City Plan reinforces the push for this area to become a vibrant mixed-use precinct, a cultural and recreational hub with higher density residential and commercial development along Grey Street, but the scale of new development is at odds with the fine historical grain of neighbouring South Brisbane and West End. Links between these suburbs and Southbank need to be improved. The Urban Renewal Taskforce have been charged with shaping the future of West End and Woolloongabba. Proposals for a bridge linking Hale Street on the northside to Merivale and Cordelia Streets on the southside have generated considerable angst among the local community, and potentially raise additional challenges to the reintegration of Southbank into the neighbourhood.

The Roma Street site has always been one of enormous potential and challenge. As long ago as 1984, design ideas competitions were held for development of the site. Located as it is at the junction of the CBD, Petrie Terrace, the Normanby fiveways and Spring Hill, the site is the gateway to the CBD from the north. Proposed pedestrian connections from the Parklands to Petrie Terrace, Caxon Street and Suncorp Stadium will unlock this somewhat isolated public green space.

Brisbane is at a critical point in its development. Its physical growth in the last fifty years has not been as controlled as it might have been. Continuing sprawl threatens the city's long-term sustainability, with the development of more 'dormitory suburbs' placing further financial and environmental strain on an overburdened infrastructure. According to Barry Geyt, Project Manager for the Brisbane Busways Project, use of public transport was down to 7% in 2001, from over 40% in the 1950s, while private car use continues to increase. This trend has to be reversed if we value our environment and lifestyle. There have been encouraging signs of increasing bus patronage, but there is still a

long way to go. Brisbane's history of unrestrained growth could ultimately be its downfall. Our patterns of growth have to be reassessed if the character and soul of our city is not to be buried in the anonymity of uncontrolled urban sprawl.

Brisbane's DNA may be damaged, but remains largely intact. Key elements of the geographical, historical and sociological essence of our city remain. It is our collective challenge to ensure that we preserve and enhance their physical manifestations and control Brisbane's growth, so that our city's unique personality as a young, relaxed and unpretentious subtropical city is maintained.

References:

- Brisbane City Council, 2000, City Plan, Brisbane: BCC.
- Sudjic, Deyjan, 2001, Reconstructing the Urban Fabric, Paper presented to 6th World Congress of the Council for Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, Melbourne.

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