

SOUTH BANK BRISBANE'S BACKYARD

There was always a lot riding on South Bank. Once the commercial and industrial heart of Brisbane, and a landing point for many new arrivals, the place has a long history and rich heritage. A riverfront site with a north-easterly aspect facing what is now the CBD, this is prime real estate by today's standards. And, of course, the land was no less significant to its original inhabitants, the Turrbal and Yuggera people. Many of their descendants continue to live in the area today.

At times rough and seedy, yet always colourful and lively, Brisbane's roots have long run deep in South Bank. The area has always been an edgy, diverse and authentic part of the city. But when the site was chosen to host Brisbane's World Expo in 1988, it secured a place in the hearts and minds of its public like no other.

Unlike many other Expos, Brisbane's winning bid aimed not just to stage a successful six-month event. It also sought to serve as a catalyst for something of an extreme makeover on an important but somewhat neglected part of the city. Brisbane's World Exposition is still widely regarded as one of the most successful ever held, with more than 18 million visitors passing through the gates throughout the six months it ran. At the time, the national population was around 16 million.

Brisbane got Expo right, and Expo transformed Brisbane. It was a social and cultural epiphany that put the city on the map and brought the place to life like never before. It changed the way the country thought about its third-largest city — until that point regarded as 'a big country town'. And it changed the way Brisbane people thought about themselves, their home and their river. Prior to Expo, there was little appreciation of the value of the rich and varied public spaces that a subtropical city afforded.

When the lights went out on Expo, and the crowds went back to wherever it was they all came from, a pall fell over the city. A hole was left in Brisbane's colourful new social and cultural fabric. When the sails and pavilions of Expo came down, there was also a sizeable hole left in the south bank of the river city. While the Queensland government had intended to sell South Bank for commercial development after Expo 88, public lobbying saw it remain as a parkland. South Bank Corporation,

a Queensland government statutory authority, was formed in 1989 to oversee the development and management of a new South Bank.

An international competition was held to find an innovative plan for its development. The South Bank Parklands opened in 1992, featuring a man-made beach and lagoon, a bridged canal, garden and rainforest walks, picnic and barbecue areas, numerous restaurants and cafes, and several paid tourist attractions. More than six million people visited South Bank in its first year.

'Expo is generally credited as marking the birth of the new boom city,' says South Bank Corporation Chairman, Steve Wilson. 'South Bank emerged out of the excitement of Expo and filled the gap that Expo left behind. Symbolic of the place and what it came to mean to Brisbane, South Bank evolved to provide a diverse and vibrant range of attractions and experiences for a wide range of people.'

Expo was a catalyst for the redevelopment and reinvention of this part of Brisbane. It was not only a coming of age, but also a recognition and celebration of the unique attributes of the city. The South Bank Parklands became the reincarnation of the space and spirit that was Expo. Although the World Expo, by its nature, appealed to an international audience, it also had to show the locals a good time. And local appeal, the South Bank Chairman says, had to be the starting point for South Bank:

The essence of Expo was about locals getting out and having a great time and enjoying the best things that Brisbane and Queensland had to offer. It was one big celebration of our lifestyle, landscape and culture. And that's what we've tried to recreate with South Bank. It's about the locals going out and enjoying themselves. The most sustainable thing you can do is create a place that the locals enjoy. Make it work for locals, the visitors will follow.

South Bank's dynamic urban park drew people in and brought them together. It celebrated the city's greatest natural asset. It extended and balanced the adjacent cultural institutions. It fostered a social connection with the CBD, and forged a physical connection with the south-side fringe.

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But it wasn't always plain sailing. Presented with the simultaneous opportunity and challenge of starting with a virtually clear site and clean slate, the development of South Bank had its fair share of teething problems. According to Wilson, South Bank was something of a problem child:

In the early days, visitor numbers were falling, property developers weren't interested and the leftover excitement around Expo was in decline. There were many competing ideas about what the Parklands should be and who they should be for. Many said South Bank didn't know what it wanted to be — it was criticised for trying to be all things to all people. We didn't accept that. We always believed that you can provide a diverse, eclectic, complex offering. You don't need to be just one thing to one group of people. We wanted South Bank to be as inviting and welcoming as the beach — a free, egalitarian public place, where all people can feel welcome. That melting pot is what we were trying to achieve.

Construction on the first master plan concept had already begun in 1996 when South Bank Corporation made the bold decision to abandon the scheme, re-evaluate and rethink. The 1997 master plan redevelopment took a broader analysis of the factors informing the shape of South Bank, and how it could be woven into the existing fabric of the city. The Corporation addressed issues such as access, connectivity and permeability, as well as strengthening the precinct's identity, diversity and amenity.

New thoroughfares were created. The canal was replaced with the harbour. River access was improved. The adjacent Grey Street was realigned and redeveloped into a vibrant retail and commercial strip. A busy bus way was relocated and the traditional street grid of South Brisbane was re-established. The Goodwill Bridge created a dedicated pedestrian and cycle link between South Bank and the city. Developing the Queensland College of Art, a cinema complex and underground car park was the final piece in the redevelopment plan.

For Wilson, connectivity was a solution as well as an objective:

We sought to connect, physically and emotionally, West End, South Brisbane and the city. A major achievement was getting rid of the bus lanes, opening the streets to the people. Good public transport, pedestrian and cycle access enhanced the area. Once the connectivity was right at a physical level, it was much easier to attract people and create a permanent emotional bond with the place. We've made it a culturally diverse experience and a people place. Expo was a celebration of many cultures and people, and so is South Bank.

We also made it a safe and attractive place to visit, and the more people visited, the safer it became. It's now seen as being the safest public space in inner Brisbane. We just don't have the problems that exist in the inner city. And yet South Bank is not suburban, it's an urban place. With the exception of the inner-city apartment towers, it's the closest residential area to the CBD, so it has higher density, and it has diversity. South Bank is not exclusive.

Urban renewal within the South Bank precinct continued over the following decade, with the development of hotels and apartments, the Queensland Conservatorium and the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre. This has culminated in recent years with the expansion of the Cultural Centre to comprise the bold new Gallery of Modern Art and the State Library. The attractions and appeal of the Parklands have continued to evolve with the addition of new elements, like the interactive aquatic playground, 'Aquativity'. Plans are now in place for the last two remaining development sites. Whereas South Bank once struggled to secure private investment, developers are now scrambling for a piece of the action.

South Bank has been shaped and driven by a clear, uncompromising vision of what the precinct could be. This has been sustained through changes of government and boards to create something that is unique physically as well as socially.

This search for authenticity in creating the public place draws not upon what other places do, but on what is characteristic about Brisbane and about this particular part of Brisbane. South Bank isn't a clone of someplace else, nor a grab bag of misappropriated ideas. Rather, it is a precinct that amplifies Brisbane's quintessential qualities of climate, landscape, character and lifestyle. South Bank has succeeded in capturing a sense of place and creating a distinctive experience.

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For Steve Wilson, there's no place in the world like South Bank:

And of course there shouldn't be. South Bank is unique. That's how places should be. We're not trying to be somewhere else. We obviously look to other places and learn the lessons of good design. But the real challenge is to understand how we want this place to be associated with Brisbane — where it is in the global environment and what it is that we want to nurture. In the global environment, many experiences the world over become the same. Many public places tend to look and feel the same. We've worked hard to emphasise authenticity and differentiation.

A key challenge for South Bank Corporation CEO Malcolm Snow has been what he calls an evolutionary shift in the maturation of the Parklands:

The organisation was in the critical phase of moving from place making (the design and development stage), to what is arguably the more complete task of place management, that is the post-design phase. It's been through the progression from making a good place, to making it work well as a truly and wholly sustainable place. In essence, this is about

nurturing a public environment that offers diversity of experience and creates multiple opportunities for people to engage with each other and prosper. This, after all, is what cities were created for.

The South Bank CEO sees place management, in practice, as not one thing or task, but a jigsaw of complementary pieces or actions. Applied in the right way, they combine to get the best out of the mix of public and private assets. The key point is that there are many players, each responsible for a piece of the puzzle, yet all sharing a common understanding of the desirable qualities of a successful place. Discreet security, attentive maintenance, creative marketing, effective urban design, imaginative public realm activation and strong relationships are the key elements. He explains:

We've restructured our approach to ensure that we maximise the return on our public infrastructure investment. The trick is to stimulate the authentic and spontaneous experiences that, for me, are the hallmark of places that continue to work well long after the designers have left. The all too common problem in many urban renewal precincts, here and internationally, is that award-winning buildings and public spaces are left to somehow look after themselves. Now that we have the spaces and buildings in place, the challenge ahead is to infuse them with dynamic uses and activities.

I think a lot of what people like about South Bank is the result of the priority we've placed on the qualities we want the public environment to have. Many precincts believe they will achieve those qualities by focusing almost exclusively on design. Good design is just the beginning of creating successful public spaces. The ongoing challenge is how to make those spaces work. Successful public spaces are measured by what is happening in them. We think there is a lot of untapped potential in our public spaces, so the challenge now is one of place management: how we play with all of the elements at our disposal, and bring them together to create a truly memorable experience for our visitors.

Sustaining successful places to attract locals and return visitors requires ongoing care and thoughtful attention, and South Bank seems to be doing it well. Market research in 2007 revealed that more than 80 per cent of people in the greater

Brisbane area had visited South Bank in the past six months.

For governments to invest in public places, they seek a return by way of private-sector investment. One of South Bank's success stories is the public-private alliances that have evolved in creating this integrated precinct. These partnerships began in the early, post-Expo planning days. They have continued to be aided by a developer-friendly leasehold system and a separate but highly facilitative planning regime.

Enthusiastic private investment and healthy public returns have, in turn, financed reinvestment in new community infrastructure that would not have been possible through government investment alone.

However, Snow says the precinct's quest for authenticity has taken some time to yield returns:

It's taken us some time to get to the point where we can say we're approaching the qualities that marked the pre-Expo South Bank — the stories, experiences and associations that created such a strong sense of place originally. And so, as South Bank matures, it's critical that we continue to encourage authenticity and encourage the local community to engage and be part of the process.

For Snow, the task of urban renewal and developing sustainable precincts should embrace 'multiple sustainability', giving equal weight to environmental, economic, social and cultural dimensions.

What's important to our understanding of sustainability is that it has many dimensions, and that each works together to create a place that looks good, functions well and is financially viable. I think of sustainability as a bundle that covers everything that enhances our quality of life and the surrounding natural landscape: our relationship to the external environment, our relationship with each other, and how cities function, not as machines, but as organisms. Sustainability is, therefore, an overarching concept with environmental, economic, social and cultural dimensions.

Just as our places must respect the natural environment, they should also emphasise social services and avoid social

exclusion, ensure access to financial opportunities for all groups, encourage cultural diversity and freedom of expression, and respect the distinctiveness and identity of a place through its heritage as well as its modern forms. Only then will we be able to say that the exercise has been successful and truly sustainable. Such sustainability creates the capacity for a city to be self supporting, flexible and responsive to rapidly changing circumstances.

Perhaps the greatest challenge, and opportunity, for South Bank is to ride the wave of the region's unrivalled economic growth, and to play a part in positively managing unprecedented population growth. The South Bank peninsula is at the epicentre of this boom, with its population expected to more than double to 40,000 residents by 2026. Demographic research suggests that the local region will become one of the densest residential areas in Australia.

Urban consolidation on this scale poses big questions and challenges. South Bank must reflect on the role it can play in urban transformation, working with local government to avoid the pitfalls of gentrification, and appreciating what the precinct can offer its new residents. Above all, it can offer public open space in an area with precious little of it. As balconies replace backyards, the availability and quality of public spaces in our cities become critical. South Bank faces the challenge of not just managing its existing public realm to accommodate this shift, but also creating more flexible, user-responsive open space.

South Bank's name and vision no longer simply address the 17 hectares of its Parklands. Rather, they now encompass the far broader scope of the 150 hectares across the river from Brisbane's CBD. This precinct, says Malcolm Snow, will be the envy of many other cities — not just because of its prime location, but also for its extraordinary mix of uses and facilities. These, through a combination of premeditated and fortuitous planning, have been clustered together to cross-pollinate and bear creative fruit.

For the many and varied partnerships, places and experiences that make up South Bank, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. South Bank's unabashed aspiration is to establish an internationally-recognised cultural district. Its local economy



will be fuelled by its appeal to new knowledge workers, and by its capacity to generate ideas and information — critical determinants in the increasingly cut-throat marketplace in which cities operate and trade. Snow explains further:

In the mind of the public, the name 'South Bank' today encompasses much more than is, technically, part of the Corporation's lot. Through a combination of good planning and fortunate accidents, a collection of major cultural and social attractions has come together in what most of us think of as South Bank. From the Gallery of Modern Art in Kurilpa Point down Grey Street to the Queensland College of Art on Vulture Street, we have this wonderful opportunity to create a single South Bank precinct. This already exists in the minds of the public. The sum-of-the-parts idea is hitting home, and we're beginning to realise the potential of forming collaborations and partnerships rather than operating in isolation.

There are many different audiences for our public spaces. We have the responsibility of ensuring that South Bank remains relevant, accessible and stimulating — whether you're a local resident and you see it as your local park, or you're an international visitor who wants to understand the landscape of Brisbane. We need to ensure that we create and manage those environments in such a way that people find meaning in what they see and the way they use it. The challenge from a design point of view is not to make these environments too dense and prescriptive.

The story of South Bank is one of evolution and reflecting upon how the South Bank model will stand the test of time and respond to all the forces that shape cities. Brisbane is in a massive cycle of development and change, and the demographics of the city have changed dramatically. But I think the South Bank model, with ongoing reviews and

interrogations, has resulted in a very robust plan that's very flexible and enables us to respond to changes now and in the future. We can accommodate those shifting patterns of use, and people's ability to embrace and integrate the use of these spaces in their lives in ways that previously weren't possible.

We think of South Bank as Brisbane's backyard. That democratic quality of our public spaces is fundamental. In a society where increasingly there's greater alienation, through globalisation and technology, it's essential that we continue to nurture good, sustainable public space, so that we support the opportunities for social exchange.

For many Brisbane people today, South Bank's bougainvillea-clad Arbour is the highlight of the Parklands. The serpentine floral spine is a striking, kilometre-long sheltered walkway that meanders from one end of the Parklands to the other. But when the framework for the Arbour first went in, with hundreds of towering steel tentacles lunging up out of the ground, many had their reservations.

As a functional device, the Arbour helps people read and understand South Bank and then move through it. It is one of the three organising spines of the Parklands, with the river on one side and Grey Street on the other. And, like the Parklands as a whole, it contributes to both the functionality and amenity of the place, easing the journey and pleasing the eye.

The Arbour can be seen as symbolic of the development of South Bank as a whole, and of its evolution as Brisbane's most celebrated and debated public space.

South Bank Corporation
www.south-bank.net.au