

Wednesday, 24 September 2008

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Dear Sir

I response to your call for public comment on the out comes of the EBD, the findings and other information on the proposal for works in the North Bank area, I would like to make the following comments. I do so as a member of the Architectural and Urban Design Profession, a Contributor to the North Bank EBD, and as concerned citizen of Brisbane and Queensland.

The proposals proffered by Government to undertake a significant upgrade of the North Bank is both laudable and problematic. The efforts by them to re open the debate in the EBD process is brave and timely and shows the commitment to open discussion and public transparency to what is arguably the most important urban renewal project in Brisbane in recent times. I appreciate that we are once again able to make comment on the proposed development of North Bank

The Government should be commended for its efforts to undertake to make, this important area of Queensland's History, a showcase of our communities proud recognition of our heritage, a place for visitors and tourists to Brisbane to find the memories and spirits of our proud past, and through the demonstration of the urban architecture educate and lead a new generation of Queenslanders to a future of compassion and empathy with our natural, and built environment.

But the proposal as submitted by developers and officers of the crown, the terms of reference provided to the enquirers, the EBD outcomes and the information offered to the public underline the problematic situation for a considered design response.

As a contributor and a proponent of the EBD process I appreciate that the schemes/scenarios can and do provide information that may be used to better understand how buildings may be built in the river, along the edge and within the urban precinct defined for the study. And for me, the role of the Riverside Expressway was made abundantly clear, particularly the recognition that the Riverside Expressway is no less manmade than any other architectural proposal which our civilization may deem and no less fragile. It became personally clear that it may well be able to be redesigned, removed, or adapted in the future.

Yes, clearly there are a great many things that the EBD was able to clarify, but many more that remain left unclear and masked in the morass of the EBD process and findings.

And in that thought, I am concerned that the final report refers to guidelines that the Government may follow in respect to redeveloping the North Bank. For my mind, to say that they are guidelines stretches the imagination.

They are clearly not guidelines. They are findings based on scenarios, (and I might add a fairly limited number of scenarios). They are test results. The fact that you can put a building in the river and not significantly affect the afflux is not a reason why you should. There is a disingenuous implication that building might be acceptable in the river if the guideline is followed.

The EBD showed the government a possible path on its current trajectory, but also raised serious concerns about that trajectory, both of which are important and valid findings of the EBD.

Not least of these is the intimidating and vexed question of the use, longevity, and propriety of the Riverside Expressway. In every comment or notion, response or idea, the Riverside Expressway has drawn its mark and sculpted the partialised answers to innumerable questions that form in the mist of the vision asked by many ...” what should become of North Bank”.

And I have no answer, just a concern that developing in this area with significant buildings in this Reach of the Brisbane River, at this time and in this generation will forestall future possibilities.

My reasons have to do less with flooding, though I recognise the power and untamed fury that nature might turn on us if we unwisely build at the river edge, as with the response the new works must have to the Riverside Expressway.

The architectural consequence is that the Riverside Expressway separates any proposed building in the river zone from the city frame. A city frame which we intuitively and intellectually understand nurtures its architecture within the grid defined by the city fathers. A building beyond the Riverside Expressway is a bastard child that necessarily and intrinsically responds to the freeway rather than its city mother.

Another reason of my concern that the current proposal and many of the guidelines that define the ability of planners to delve into the mud beyond the Riverside Expressway carries with them the genes of failure. Fundamentally that is that there is no trustee of the River and more problematically, no coherent plan for how to deal with the development of the river course in its entirety. It is true of the current proposal and the EBD outcomes that they all have the same narrow response to a flawed brief that may result in a vexatious intervention.

And on the vision of redefining the river. Well, I do not believe we are culturally ready for it yet. I would rather leave it to a more mature city to make the decision about building into the river. Brisbane is a young city, and there are less sensitive sites than this one that could be developed for the public good. We all recognise that with a different design, or a removed Riverside Expressway the site will be less constrained and the opportunities of future generation should not be stifled by the poor guardianship of the Baby Boomer powerbrokers.

Basically I am afraid that our culture (the rhetorical, consumerist, carbon eating, inequitable and monetarist self aggrandizing one) will get it wrong. The current Reach of the Brisbane River has a modest and informal sense of place which harks of its pre European and early and twentieth century historical form, and which is easily understood and despite some formal interventions along south bank it retains a relaxed naturality reminiscent of the best aspects of a Queensland sense of cultural beauty.

As we now see it the North Bank infrastructure is adhoc, utilitarian, understated and neglected which gives a sense of left overness. In a bizarre twist it owes it's relatively underdevelopedness because of the freeway. It's worst historical blight. It reminds me of those great tracts of land like Tin Can Bay which the navy use shore gunnery practice, yet in spite of their destructive trusteeship the heritage has been in the main essence preserved.

I would prefer that a different generation take the blame for such a fundamental change in our river edge. We see with tears, the lost opportunities, the mistakes that are sometimes made by our previous forebears, like those who put the Riverside Expressway there in the first place. I am a person who is has lived a life too close to the spirit of the natural river. And though I know our city grows and changes; though I know that there are issues of safety and amenity that a burgeoning and consolidating city must make, my heart wants to keep it as it is, and ultimately return it to what it once was.

But be that as it may, and in the face of inevitable changes, we, as a culture, as designers and good citizens we should strive to understand the nature of this place, so as not to make the same mistake of our colonial and progressive ancestors; that of denying the spirit of the place in an effort to maximize the aggrandisement on behalf of a powerful few or a generation defined by its own gregarious consumption.

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John Clarke
Architect