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The Premier who mistook a river for a vacant lot.

You can be forgiven for missing the low-key announcement, but in November Premier Bligh ‘gave the green light’ for a private property developer to build \$1.7 billion worth of office and apartment buildings in the Brisbane River in front of the CBD. Five speculative towers, 50 to 60 metres long and 19 to 46 stories high, are to be built in a line alongside the Riverside Expressway, blocking current views over the river valley to the mountains. Another row of four apartment buildings, of 8 to 11 storeys, will extend even further across the river.

The historic William Street precinct currently seen from South Bank will be almost entirely concealed by this wall of developer architecture. To support their nine buildings, Multiplex will need to build a huge concrete platform, extending out more than 80 metres from the river’s edge, and covering 4.13 Hectares (10 acres) of the river. This plinth of 100 house lots extends more than 30 per cent of the way to the opposite shore. Rather than being on the ‘bank’ of the river, the new walkway lies closer to the centre of the river.

Why has this happened? Why has Multiplex been allowed to treat our river as vacant real estate? The state government has vigorously championed Multiplex’s proposal, but where is the public benefit? The rationale for the project evolved from a proposal by South Bank in 2001, to seek to embrace this key reach of the Brisbane River. In 2002, Hassel and Lend Lease proposed four quite diverse development options that somehow led to the adoption of a ‘Preferred Strategic Plan’ in 2005.

The four objectives of the Strategic plan are to retain the Riverside Expressway, to be environmentally responsible, to involve the private sector, and to provide maximum public benefit. Multiplex have clearly retained the expressway and offer highly enthusiastic private involvement. The decision to construct a huge piers platform far into the course of a river with a history of devastating floods, surely can’t be described as environmentally responsible in this time of increasingly unpredictable weather events. The net public benefit of the scheme is also highly dubious.

We must start with the very significant negative impacts that stem from the loss of access to the water, the loss of recreational river width, the loss of views out or views into the historic precinct, the loss of a distinctive dynamic arrival in the city and the insertion of thousands of unwanted car-parks between the city and the river. The unique public benefits that the river-top scheme provides - a new swimming pool, an artwork and an unneeded pedestrian bridge – seem insufficient to bring public benefit back up to a break-even point, let alone to maximise it.

Nor does the project attain some of the strategic plan’s key aims. It is true that, like any reasonable redevelopment in this area, the Multiplex proposal does ‘connect with the Brisbane City Council’s riverwalk...’, ‘create additional public places along the waterfront’, ‘work ... to create a critical mass for retail and entertainment’, and it does ‘create a major new public place extending over the ... Expressway.’ Equally clearly, though, it is difficult to see how the scheme forges ‘a strong link from the river to the heart of the CBD’ when much public circulation wends through 1700 unneeded car parks and service roads, nor how elevating the new walkway 4.6m above the water provides ‘a safe and vibrant continuous public river edge’.

If the proposal does indeed ‘celebrate the heritage precinct on Queens Wharf Road’ this is clearly a very private and muted celebration, and one to which Brisbane’s historians have collectively sent

apologies. But the saddest claim is the aim to ‘reinforce this reach of the river as an events and entertainment precinct’. Sadly, the only thing reinforced here is the concrete.

If the Multiplex proposal does not result from the strategic plan where does it come from? Brisbane’s Riverside Expressway and associated highway works were opened in the 1970s. With hindsight this was clearly a dreadful planning decision, and to many people the expressway structure remains an eyesore. However, there are no serious plans to replace it and for more than a generation citizens have come to appreciate to this somewhat dramatic approach to the CBD.

The zone beneath and behind the expressway at Queens Wharf Road is undoubtedly a disgustingly neglected, unsafe and unappealing entry to the city. It is so only because of a decade of neglect by State and City officials. It is the State that has utilised this prime riverfront land as low-rent car-parking for ten years, it is the State that has created the barbed wire and chainmesh muggers’ alley between the Gardens Point ferry stop and Parliament House, and it is the City that has turned a blind eye to ramshackle stair systems that fail to comply with the most basic safety requirements. Rather than upgrading these ferry stops and walkways to the standard expected elsewhere in this city; rather than undertaking simple, basic landscaping in this tourist entry to the subtropical city; rather than reinvesting a fraction of Casino gambling revenues into this supportive tourism infrastructure, the Smart State cried poor, and appealed to passing developers to help them out of this most dreadful fix.

Unsurprisingly, even the most ‘preferred’ of developers will seek to maximize their return when offered a property project. With no concomitant public financing it must be very difficult for the government to rein back an ambitious partner to the task at hand. This is sad, because with only a modest and justifiable public investment the land under and behind the expressway could be reshaped into a very pleasant public realm. The freeway structure could be re-envisioned as a two-kilometre undulating urban artwork. It could be environmentally reborn as a vine-covered subtropical trellis. It could serve as a welcoming verandah roof over lively recreational and entertainment functions, in simple structures on the riverbank or in more elaborate moored venues in the water. These approaches would be simple, distinctive and effective and significantly, would not increase up-stream flood damage.

It would seem that for want of a nail the horse is lost. Multiplex seemingly argues that because building in the river is so very expensive, they will need to do an awful lot of building in the river just to make a profit. To put their bid in perspective, it would cost something like four times the GDP of East Timor. Of course, they hope the project will make them rich as Croesus, and unfortunately, yes, the citizens will lose a fair slice of river. I know we’ve a reputation for this sort of thing in Queensland, but I’m still shocked when the government chooses to ask a private property developer what should happen to a treasured public asset, rather than the public.

Peter Skinner FRAIA is Associate Professor and former Head of Architecture at the University of Queensland, where he teaches architectural and urban design. In 2007 he was RAIA State Awards Jury Director. He remembers as a student surveying flooded houses in 1974 and witnessing the midnight demolition of the Bellevue Hotel. He retains a faith that we can learn from the mistakes of our past.