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Brisbane, Australia's New World City: The Making of Public and Institutional Spaces in South Bank from Expo '88 to the G20

In 1988 Brisbane hosted the Expo as part of its Australian Bicentenary celebrations. Organised at South Bank, it was an international event that proved a turning point in the city's development. Positioned on the Brisbane River, in front of the CBD and next to the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, the area became an urban experiment, testing how Brisbane would respond to a central area dedicated to recreation and mass consumption. South Bank Parklands has grown in concert with the adjacent institutional precinct of South Brisbane dominated by the Queensland Cultural Centre, to an extent that today the two areas are recognised under the unifying name of South Bank. Its complexity is generated by the alternation of institutional buildings, leisure structures and public spaces aligned along the river with excellent infrastructure connections. For its catalytic urban role, South Bank has become the incubator of Brisbane's change. Its history becomes even more relevant if one considers that South Bank is about to undergo a phase of urban renewal as part of the Cultural Centre Precinct Master Plan presented by the Queensland Government in 2014. In the same year, the G20 was held in South Bank's Convention and Exhibition Centre, confirming the area's strategic role for the city and for the nation. This paper aims to explore the history of South Bank from Expo '88 to the present, identifying its development as a crucial moment for contemporary Brisbane. The paper will refer to those precedents that have informed South Bank's urban scheme and architectural solutions, such as the 1951 South Bank exhibition in London, the more recent leisure precinct of Darling Harbour in Sydney and the Oakland Museum of California.

In 1988 Brisbane hosted the Expo as part of its Australian Bicentenary celebrations. Organised in the inner-city area of South Bank, it was an international event that proved a turning point in Brisbane's destiny. Positioned on the Brisbane River, in front of the CBD and next to the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC), the area became an urban experiment. As its predecessor, the 1951 Festival of Britain in London's South Bank,¹ Expo '88 was built in the heart of the city. The Festival of Britain and Brisbane Expo were significant in that they reconfigured a large section of their respective cities.² But if in London this happened through the construction of buildings that became the event's tangible legacy to the city, in Brisbane Expo '88 left an urban void. After its conclusion, Expo '88 was dismantled and became a construction site, seeding city growth around the southern bank of the river.³ This is a rare condition if one considers that after the end of expos, vast parts of the cities usually end up in a state of neglect – this was the case of Montreal Expo '67 and Seville Expo '92, which remain largely derelict to this day. On the contrary, with the removal of the pavilions of Brisbane's Expo, conceived as temporary re-usable structures, the site provided the city with a great opportunity to re-structure a major part of its inner core – a critical move in the city's international push. Hence, Expo '88 was an incubator for testing how the city might respond to the presence of an area dedicated to recreation and mass consumption – a sort of Australian Coney Island.⁴

“Brisbane is the new cosmopolitan city of Australia”

The case study of South Bank makes evident how, over the last three decades, the post-Expo '88 strategy has had a significant urban and architectural impact on the development of Brisbane's city centre, whose functioning, structure and image has significantly changed by the turn of the twenty-first century. Major urban renewal projects, infrastructure, institutional and civil buildings have been built relatively quickly, revealing Brisbane as a fast growing, dynamic city. Despite this acceleration in the economic sector, especially at national level, Brisbane has been struggling in consolidating the perception of its change of strategy and its boom in the building industry. And yet today's reality is that Brisbane can no longer be considered a 'localised place', a peripheral city of Australia or the gateway to the tropical North, as Brisbane now aligns itself with a globalised agenda.

In 2014 Brisbane hosted the Summit Meeting of the Group of Twenty (G20) to which Australia belongs. The choice of Brisbane as host city was recognition of its advanced economic position and its reputation as a cosmopolitan Australian city. “Brisbane c'est la nouvelle ville cosmopolite d'Australie” (Brisbane is the new cosmopolitan city of Australia): read the advertising material for the G20 in Paris, complemented by an image representing the political leaders of the most influential countries (among them, Angela Merkel and Barack Obama) tied to the city through the G20 event. The capital of Queensland was thus presented to the contemporary world as a vital and advanced urban reality.⁵ In the wake of the G20, in July 2015 Brisbane hosted The Asia Pacific Cities Summit (APCS) and Mayors' Forum, pursuing the intention of taking part in an international debate about economics, market and the growth of the city.

Becoming self-conscious of its regional sensibility⁶ and its marginality in respect to other Australian cities, since the 1980s Brisbane has developed an up-to-date image of itself to sell beyond its boundaries – an image with strong economic implications. Such an achievement has been possible not only for the economic performance recently achieved by Queensland but also for its urban, civic and infrastructural advancement. For its size and its relatively short history, Brisbane possesses a considerable number of contemporary institutional, civic and cultural buildings, elements of transport infrastructure, public space and urban renewal, whose impact as a whole is yet to be recognised. In 2008, the launch of HEAT by Lindy Johnson⁷ and the exhibition Place Makers: Contemporary Queensland Architects organised at GoMA pointed out the existence of a substantial body of Queensland contemporary architecture appreciated internationally.⁸

Backstory: World Expo '88

After an initial idea to locate Expo '88 in Kangaroo Point, for which there was a design proposal in 1976,⁹ James McCormick, the architect of the Australian pavilion at the Expo '67 in Montreal and at the Expo '70 in Osaka, suggested the area of South Bank as the most suitable to boost Brisbane's international image. In the nineteenth century, what is known today as 'South Bank' was an industrial wharf that had gradually lost its productive role after World War II. The south shore of the Brisbane River was thus taken into consideration for Expo '88 because it was a run-down area, at the same time, a strategic location in the inner city. Brisbane 'pre-Expo' did not consider its river as a public urban asset being used mainly for industrial purposes: apart from the City Botanic Gardens and Riverside, no other significant amenities or leisure structures existed along its shores. The idea of an expo on the south shore of the Brisbane River was approved in 1983. This event was preceded by another successful international celebration: the XII Commonwealth Games organised in Brisbane in 1982.¹⁰

The south bank of the Brisbane River began its revitalisation after the construction of Riverside Expressway on the North bank (1968-75) and the Victoria Bridge (1969), with the 1974 flood making it possible for the government resumption of low lying land. The construction of the Queensland Art Gallery, Queensland Performing Arts Centre and State Library of Queensland designed by Robin Gibson and Partners between 1975 and 1988, with their public character and human scale,¹¹ set the spine of South Bank that preceded and survived Expo '88. Gibson's cultural complex refers to the Oakland Museum of California (1961-68) designed by Kevin Roche for its asymmetrical scheme, the high permeability between indoor and outdoor spaces, the well-studied articulation of the pathways (pedestrian streets), the use of concrete and the low impact on the surrounding environment.¹²

In 1986-87, the area between the river and railway was cleared in order to host Expo '88. The State government resumed 42 hectares of land with one kilometre of riverfront under the 1984 Expo '88 Act,¹³ and a process of construction was enacted that has not yet completed, altering the image of the city radically. With the South Bank's industrial waterfront buildings were demolished and a giant void was created to build an international stage representing the city and the State.

From April to October 1988, Brisbane hosted the World Expo '88 in the area of South Bank. The official theme was “Leisure in the Age of Technology” and its major purpose was to promote Australia as a tourist destination, using the concept of leisure and recreation as leverage.¹⁴ From a larger perspective Expo '88, which attracted more than 18 million visitors, constituted a lesson of optimism, opportunity and radical reinvention of a decayed urban area and, at the same time, represented the ideal occasion to launch a new phase of Brisbane and Queensland politics after the murky days of the Fitzgerald Inquiry (1987-89).¹⁵ Expo '88 proved a real turning point in the destiny of the city. “The event was an outstanding success, not that very much of the world travelled to Brisbane, but an astonishing number of Queenslanders travelled to the South Bank of the Brisbane River to discover the world.”¹⁶ According to the memories of its participants, the drowsy tropical city suddenly “awoke” – disturbing a view cultivated both locally and nationally that would never be the same again.

The exhibition site, whose master-plan was designed by Bligh McCormick '88 (Graham Bligh and McCormick joint venture), was sprinkled with temporary structures. Michael Keniger observed that Expo '88 had no presumption of physical permanence or enduring cultural value but it contributed to a growing sense of urbanity in the city.¹⁷ With its demountable tent-structures and box pavilions, the role of architecture was a resource rather than as an exhibit in its own right.¹⁸ For instance, the “Pavilion of Promise” was given to the Queensland Maritime Museum (1971) at the very end of the precinct and used as a museum hall¹⁹ and the “Control tower of the Expo river stage” has been remounted at Stradbroke Island ferry terminal in Cleveland as a coastal lookout. The absence of ‘white elephants’ – the usual bequeathal of an expo – to which the hosting city has to find a remedy, provided the opportunity to quickly convert the area into a new urban environment without having it compromised by an existing plan of different functional nature.

South Bank: a new direction in Brisbane's urban strategy

Since 1989, after the conclusion of Expo '88, South Bank Parklands has grown in concert with the adjacent institutional precinct of South Brisbane dominated by the Queensland Cultural Centre, to an extent that today the two areas are recognised under the unifying name of South Bank. Its complexity is generated by the alternation of institutional buildings, leisure structures and public spaces aligned along the river with excellent infrastructure connections.²⁰ In May 1989 the South Bank Development Corporation was founded with the goal to plan the new layout of the area. The objectives were to achieve an appropriate balance between the Corporation's commercial and non-commercial functions; ensure that the Corporation area would complement, rather than duplicate, other public use sites in Brisbane's inner city area and provide for a diverse range of recreational, cultural and educational pursuits for local, regional and international visitors.²¹ The competition of the same year for the design of the overall master plan was won by Desmond Brooks' Media Five-Australia, the Gold Coast-based firm specialised in both domestic and international resort projects.²² According to Brooks' vision: “Life is indeed a stage and the locations and buildings are the theatre and sets. They should enhance our lives and contribute beauty and balance.”²³ Brooks' master-plan, a green public area where people of different social

classes could gather, was the exaltation of Brisbane's subtropical natural environment, with its artificial canal and lagoon surrounded by a sample of tropical forest. As Guy M. Robinson has pointed out, its development followed the trend toward the creation of an urban spectacle.²⁴

All in all, Brooks' idea of South Bank Parklands as a theatre stage for the city's urban life was a smart interpretation of the spirit of the moment left by events of the 1980s. Brooks was able to capture and embody the ephemeral excitement generated by the Expo '88 in his idea for South Bank. The pavilions disappeared as soon as the fair was over and that extreme sense of possibility would have vanished if not fixed into the hedonistic colours and shapes of the lagoon and forest of South Bank. Also the harbour, covered in a luxurious purple bougainvillea, is reminiscent of that euphoria.

South Bank Parklands was opened in 1992, provoking contrasting reactions: on the one hand, the population welcomed very positively the opportunity of having a collective big "backyard"²⁵ where people could enjoy quintessential activities of the private sphere, such as gathering with friends, barbecuing and relaxing at the pool; at the same time this domestic side to South Bank made some people doubt it was well intentioned use of the land, even considering the initiative a lost occasion for the city. In the 1990s, just after the opening of South Bank Parklands, John Macarthur observed that South Bank was "a dream" and wondered if it was "a vision of new form of public space, or a palliative for the loss of this possibility?"²⁶, whereas Catherin Bull stated that the precinct was "a garden ... a miniature world in totality."²⁷ However, over the last three decades South Bank has turned out to be an urban success, with millions of local, national and international visitors per year. In 1994, Bull also stated: "The most obvious thing about Southbank is that there seems so little of Brisbane, or even Queensland".²⁸ On the one hand, the resort-like sample of rain forest and the shallow beach lagoon were perceived as fake if not kitsch interpretations of the natural features of Queensland – something outrageous that the public should be embarrassed about. On the contrary, the artificiality of subtropical natural fragments was the effective attempt to transform this corner of Brisbane city centre into a leisure precinct, appealing to a wider range of visitors. In point of fact, the loss of authenticity, somehow understood as

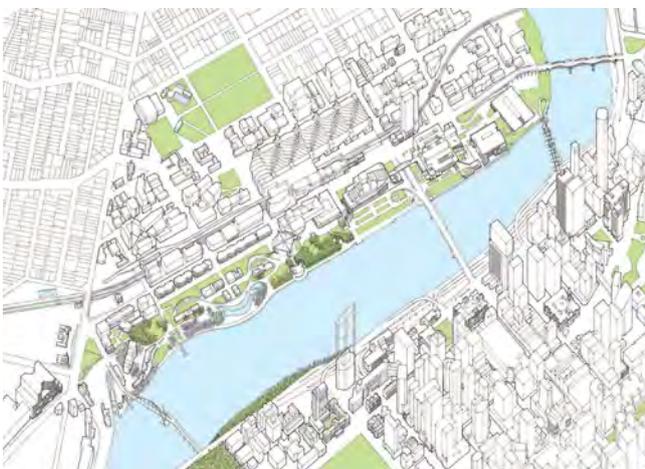


Fig. 1 South Bank's green areas.
Drawing by Elliot Harvie, 2015.

the betrayal of the state identity, became the ironic means to enhance new urban strategies and offer an alternative to the more conventional city-model based on Brisbane's binomial scheme of high-rise CBD and low-rise suburbia.

In order to increase the residential and commercial component of South Bank and reinvigorate the adjacent suburbs, in 1997 Denton Corker Marshall was asked to elaborate a new master plan for South Bank Parklands, focusing on the permeability and readability of the site.²⁹ The Energex arbour (1997-2000) is a one-kilometre long urban device that guides pedestrians through the precinct, from the Griffith Film School to QPAC. At the same time it is a recognisable architectural structure connecting the buildings scattered through the area. The other axis of DCM's master plan was Grey Street, envisaged as an avenue accommodating apartments and retail.

As Macarthur observed, South Bank does not have any "large clear areas where an angry crowd could form, grow and burst from".³⁰ The Courier Mail Piazza (earlier known as Suncorp Piazza and then South Bank Piazza) designed by John Simpson, was a freestanding steel structure with a sculptural roof shell. And yet, it would rather be used as a venue for concerts or for watching Australian football matches and State of Origin on the screen than accommodating large masses of people inflamed by political ideals. The structure of South Bank's outdoor public spaces is indeed formed by walkways parallel to the road (Grey Street), the railway and the river. They are promenades enriched by different activities along the way. They also offer places to rest, but usually they are small areas for families or groups of friends.

South Bank's connectivity to the city

In 2014, a series of master plans for the redevelopment of inner-city areas has made evident the urban mutation triggered by South Bank that Brisbane is undergoing. On Monday 22 December 2014, an integrated resort development in the Queen's Wharf Brisbane precinct in the CBD was unveiled, including the refurbishment of the casino, the adjacent construction of a resort and the creation of a large number of public spaces, with two bidders competing for the winning project.³¹ Through the relocation of the existing casino, the construction of a hospitality school and new hotels, the two proposals for the Queen's Wharf aim to convert this under-utilised area of the CBD into a new waterfront, opening up the river's edge and making it accessible to the city. The numbers of visitors envisaged – over a million tourists per year – speaks of the dimensions and vision of both proposals, revealing unprecedented strategies in the history of Brisbane's CBD.

In a way, the Queen's Wharf projects stand out as an intensification of the results achieved with the Riverside Centre (1983-86) designed by Harry Seidler & Associates, the very first attempt to establish a relationship between the CBD and the Brisbane river. In its original form, Riverside Centre is one-tower that works as an urban attractor along the river. By contrast, the Queen's Wharf projects count several towers, occupy a vast area of the city-centre and in one of the proposals, the entire complex gravitates around a highly iconic

semi-circular building that connects some of the high-rises. The arrangement of this master-plan and its architectural solution embodies a vision that is not familiar to Brisbane, and ultimately Australian, urbanism – indeed the iconic semi-circular building is strongly reminiscent of the integrated resort Marina Bay Sands (2006-10) in Singapore, built by Las Vegas Sands Corporation. These urban proposals will not be analysed in detail, as they are not the object of this paper. Nevertheless, they are instrumental to analyse, by contrast, the urban principles that have informed the making of South Bank on the other side of the Brisbane River.

South Bank is an urban leisure and cultural precinct, where refined and base enjoyments are mixed together³² and integrated with representative institutions. Positioned in front of the CBD, South Bank represents its opposite in terms of urban strategy. Whereas the high-rises of the CBD are the objectification of individualistic principles – according to Rem Koolhaas' reading of Manhattan³³ – the area of South Bank is organised along a horizontal spine and structured as a continuous urban promenade, which runs in parallel to the river, from the GoMA up to the Goodwill Bridge, the Maritime Museum and the beginning of the Kangaroo Point cliffs walk. Against the CBD's high construction density, South Bank green areas provide a balanced relationship between the built environment and urban voids.



Fig. 2 South Bank's urban connectivity. Yellow: pedestrian; blue: vehicular; red: public transportation. Drawing by Elliot Harvie, 2015.

In opposition to the CBD's isolation, South Bank has grown in a tentacular way, establishing urban connections with its surrounding suburbs. South Bank's tropical arbour leads to the Kangaroo Point cliffs walkway designed by the architects of the Department of Public Works of Queensland, Don Watson and Spence Jameson, in the 1990s. Nevertheless, the conjunction of the arbour, the cliffs walkway and the landing of the Goodwill Bridge is not yet definitely solved. Three bridges link South Bank to the CBD. The vehicular and pedestrian Victoria Bridge was opened in 1969, establishing a connection between the two riversides in correspondence with the Queen Street Mall, an urban axis that would be reinforced in 2006 with the opening of Brisbane Square, dominated by a gateway structure designed by Denton Corker Marshall on behalf of the Brisbane City Council.³⁴ The way the Victoria Bridge lands on South Bank, right under the Queensland Art Gallery, remains one of the

weakest points of the master plan. In order to intensify the relationship between the CBD and South Bank and the accessibility to the cultural and leisure precinct, in 1997 the South Bank Corporation selected Cox Rayner's proposal for the Goodwill pedestrian and cycle bridge connecting the Botanic Garden and the QUT campus: the image of Brisbane as a "River City" was thus reinforced.³⁵ The idea of the construction of a pedestrian bridge was welcomed with suspicion – with a campaign against the new infrastructure promoted by the *Courier Mail* – but after its opening in 2001, the bridge turned out to be a great success. The Kurilpa Bridge, based on tensegrity construction principles, was opened to the public in 2009 and connects the north ending of South Bank with the Santos Tower and the Supreme Court of Queensland, generating an axis that culminates in Wickham Terrace and a hillside park.³⁶ The highly iconic impact of the bold white structure designed by Cox Rayner, Baulderstone and Arup on the image of the city centre reveals Brisbane's intention to shape its own international image. A fourth pedestrian bridge connecting Queen's Wharf precinct and South Bank has been planned. Both the railway and the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre (1993-95), a massive boxy building, represent a significant caesura with the neighbourhood. And along the riverside, the draft of the Kurilpa master plan for the renewal of the waterfront, released by the City Council in cooperation with the State government in 2014, does not offer any convincing architectural and urban solution to create a sense of continuity with South Bank precinct.³⁷



Fig. 3 South Bank and CBD's cultural and institutional buildings. Purple: school/university; pink: museums/galleries/theatre; orange: commercial exhibitions; green: health; blue: administration. Drawing by Elliot Harvie, 2015,

South Bank's *mixité*

Since the end of Expo '88, South Bank has become a denser area, offering a wider range of cultural and institutional activities and public spaces in addition to the existing QPAC designed by Gibson (Figure 3). In 1996 the Queensland Conservatorium was relocated in South Bank Parklands. In the same year the City Cat commenced to cut through the waters of the Brisbane River, providing South Bank with new access points. Griffith University's new Queensland College of Art development (2002-05) designed by Bligh Voller Nield and Donovan Hill established a relationship with the lagoon area by means of a courtyard. In 2006, two major cultural institutions were completed: the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA)

designed by Architectus and State Library of Queensland's redevelopment by Donovan Hill and Peddle Thorp. The new River Quay dining precinct designed by Arkefield opened in 2012. In the same year, the new Brisbane headquarters for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation ABC (2010-12) designed by Richard Kirk Architect was completed, adding to the functional complexity of South Bank by means of its facade. These buildings have an anti-iconic approach to architecture, being concerned with achieving urban relations within the area as a whole.³⁸

South Bank Parklands was an open-air free-access theme park, somehow based on a similar logic that has determined the configuration of many other riverfronts scattered around the world. It is the case of Darling Harbour in Sydney, which shares a similar history with Brisbane's South Bank as they both were planned to celebrate Australia's 1988 bicentennial; or Singapore Marina Bay, with its entertaining activities. But whereas Darling Harbour and Marina Bay are mainly concentrated on the mix use of commercial, residential and entertainment, Brisbane's South Bank has retained its original role as an integrated cultural and leisure area, with commercial and residential functions mainly concentrated in Grey Street. At this end of the precinct, with the project Southpoint by Anthony John Group, South Bank will be supplied with more residences, at the moment the use with the least presence in the area. In this sense South Bank, with its functional mixité and urban connectivity, seems destined to become a more and more European-oriented model for Brisbane, overlaid with occasional images of subtropicality.

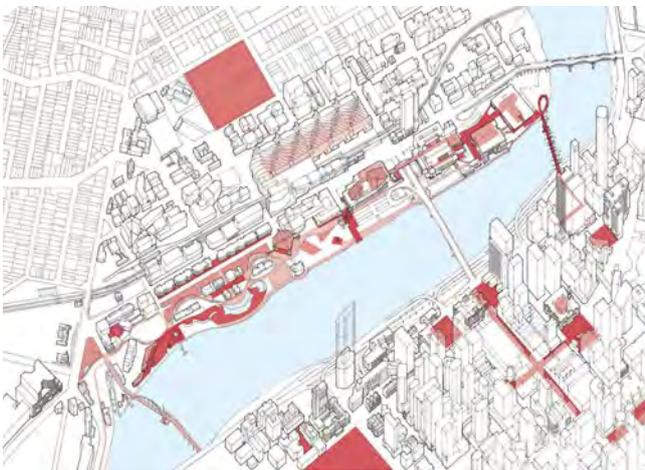


Fig. 4 South Bank's public spaces.
Drawing by Elliot Harvie, 2015,

No other architects after Brooks may have used the same kind of eccentric language to design their buildings in South Bank. Nevertheless, South Bank remained the place of possibility and visibility. That degree of experimentation, which never strays into iconicity, still innervates the architectural promenade of South Bank. It is the case of the Queensland State Library: with its recent extension,³⁹ it belongs to a series of representative institutional projects that have made Brisbane's civic architecture stand out in the national context. The library extension soon become a model in the making of the city and was followed by the Supreme and District Courts (2008-12) by Architectus and Guymer Bailey Architects⁴⁰ and

the Brisbane City Council Library (2006) by DCM, “the new public face of the Brisbane city council.”⁴¹ At a national level, not even Melbourne’s South Bank offers such a complex urban program of architectural promenades as one can experience in Brisbane.

South Bank’s skyline might yet again change according to a new master plan by Cox Rayner Architects proposed in late 2014.⁴² The renderings in circulation on the web show the proposal of high-rise buildings in an area that is now seen as ready to accept such vertical elements, set up like an army to conquer the urban voids of the area.⁴³ Such a move makes sense if we examine Brisbane City’s planning scheme for the city centre (Figure 5), which makes evident that the CBD peninsula is too small to contain its expanding business functions – looking instead to push its way out across the river towards the nearest suburbs, including South Bank.⁴⁴ Despite these signs of progressive urban pressure on the area, the solid horizontal spine of South Bank, with its public and institutional spaces, should be strong enough to resist any drastic transformation, allowing an architectural and urban “accretion” to unfold instead.

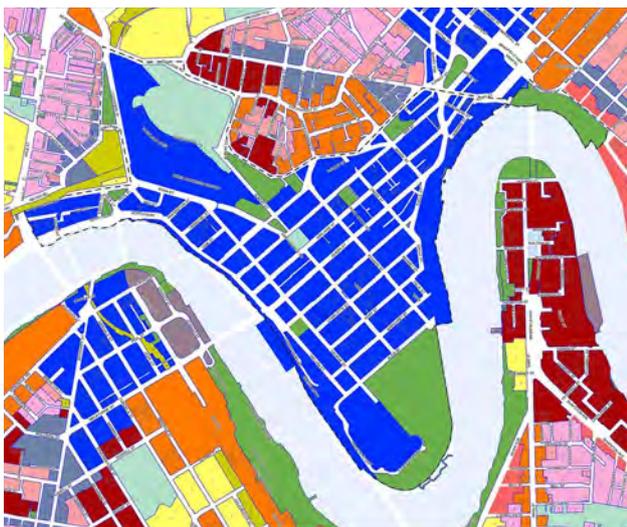


Fig. 5 Brisbane City’s planning scheme for the city centre. Blue: principal centre. *Brisbane City Planning Scheme City Centre neighbourhood plan Zoning map.*

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