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Centenary Estates: Private Development and Brisbane's Post-war Expansion West

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Abstract

The Centenary Estates project was announced in 1959 to mark the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the State of Queensland. It was an early private sector development; a master-planned community adjacent to the Brisbane River [Maiwar] situated between Brisbane [Meeanjin] and Ipswich [Tulmur]. An industrial garden city proposal, the Industrial Garden City Darra had been developed for the same site in 1916, but never realised.

The development was overseen by the LJ Hooker Investment Corporation. Also known as the Centenary Project, it organised residential, commercial and industrial areas on 3500 acres of land, allocated to six "self-sufficient" suburbs with 9 kilometres of river frontage and two adjacent industrial estates. A total of 10,261 residential lots were surveyed, anticipating 35,000 residents, with 20% of the land set aside for commercial and industrial purposes. It included the promise of an Olympic-size swimming pool, golf course and a new bridge across the river with supporting infrastructure financed by the developers, as part of a new Centenary Highway connection from the city to Ipswich through the western suburbs.

The paper will give an account of the prior history of the site including the proposed Industrial Garden City at Darra, and situate Centenary Estates within Brisbane's post-war expansion west, the shift from public to private development, new methods of promotion, lifestyle aspirations, the transfer of knowledge between government, corporations, planners, builders and architects, and a cautionary tale for the consequences of building on flood-prone farmland adjacent to the river.



Figure 1. Centenary Estates / Centenary Estates Limited (1961) (National Library of Australia).

Introduction

The Centenary Estates project was announced in 1959 to mark the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the state of Queensland. It was an early private sector development; a master-planned community adjacent to the Brisbane River [Maiwar] situated between Brisbane [Meeanjin] and Ipswich [Tulmur] on Turrbal Jagera country, marketed for post-war lifestyle. In 1916 the Industrial Garden City Darra, a proposal inspired by the garden city movement, had been put forward for the same site to facilitate the repatriation of soldiers returning after World War I, but it was never realised. Also known as the Centenary Project, the Centenary Estates "satellite town" 1 organised residential commercial and industrial areas allocated to six "self-sufficient" suburbs with 9 kilometres of river frontage and provision for two industrial estates designed "to meet Brisbane's rapid expansion."2 It included allowance for an Olympicsize swimming pool, golf course and the Centenary Bridge, a new bridge across the river, financed by the developers as part of a new Centenary Highway connection from the city to Ipswich through the western suburbs, along with "five additional road and rail bridges, eight kilometres of highway, sewerage treatment plants, and a water reservoir."3

Golden Era

LJ Hooker was one of the first real estate agency networks established nationally in Australia.⁴ In 1955, Hooker Rex was formed to oversee developments at Batemans Bay, Kogarah and the Gold Coast. In 1958, LJ Hooker Investment Corporation was formed to allow a further expansion of business activities. Centenary Estates was

developed under managerial agreement from Centenary Estates Limited by Hooker-Rex, with LJ Hooker the sole selling agent.⁵ The Menzies Government's credit squeeze affected the Hooker Corporation which posted its first ever loss in the financial year 1961-62, prompting a further restructure and full-page advertisements for Centenary Estates in the Courier Mail and Sunday Mail from November 1961, that continued sporadically through to 1970, when an advertisement appeared alongside an eight-page supplement in the Courier Mail that presented evidence of Brisbane's bright future as a consequence of projected growth.6 Former Prime Minister, Arthur Fadden, was appointed as chairman of the public company Centenary Estates Limited to oversee the development, and it was managed for six years under that banner. In October 1967 the private stakeholders were bought out by the Hooker Corporation and the project once again became a fully owned subsidiary. From July 1971, the name of the company overseeing the development was changed to Hooker Centenary, as a division of the Hooker Corporation. Centenary Estates is significant as a precursor to the advent of public-private partnerships, in this case a cooperation between the Brisbane City Council and LJ Hooker Investment Corporation.

The plan for 3,500 acres (1,416 hectares) of land released by Centenary Estates Limited in 1959, was initially imagined to comprise nine neighbourhoods with residential subdivisions between 600 and 700 square metres that heralded, according to the developers, "a golden era of high prosperity and unlimited expansion" at the beginning of Queensland's second century.7 The promotional brochure produced in 1961 pitched Queensland with its favourable climate as "moving rapidly towards its destined position as the pre-eminent State of the Commonwealth, and the richest investment field in the Australian continent" to a national and international audience, with the promise of low labour costs, plentiful power and water, access to raw materials, a strategic location - proximity to overseas markets - and a local work force, in short the potential to foster new industry.8 A total of 10,261 residential lots were surveyed anticipating 35,000 residents - the population advocated by Ebenezer Howard (1850-1926) for Letchworth Garden City (1903) in England – with 600 acres or roughly 20% of land set aside for commercial and industrial purposes.9 Framed by the idea of "neighbourhood living," shopping was to be organised with a principal Regional Shopping Centre – the illustration in the promotional brochure reminiscent of a British New Town – and secondary Neighbourhood Shopping precincts, with the promise of efficient delivery services. 10 The developers clearly had detached houses for the postwar nuclear family in mind when they pitched the development to the wage-earner, housewife, child, gardener, sportsman and sportswoman.¹¹

The development team had visited the British New Town of Crawley, planned by architect Anthony Minoprio (1900-1988) under the direction of Thomas Bennett (1887-1980) for the Crawley Development Corporation, and other projects in "America, Scandinavia and Europe."¹² As a foundational narrative the brochure recounted that:

In Centenary Year, Mr J Hattrick, a director of LJ Hooker Limited, was flying over the Brisbane area in a passenger-liner. Below him he saw the crowded city and suburbs of the capital, the silver serpentine pattern cut by the lovely Brisbane River through the changing greens of pasture and bushland to the west of the city. He saw the scattered factories in the Darra area, and the tree-shaded homes of residential Kenmore. Between them he saw four thousand acres of almost empty land – soft country, undulating, ringed by the river, dotted with trees and the magnificent natural pastures that welcoming soil grows.¹³

An agreement was reached with the Brisbane City Council, with Clem Jones (1918-2007), newly elected as Lord Mayor, at the end of 1961. The Centenary Bridge and Highway that would allow access to the northern suburbs and the city were an integral component of the development. In a second promotional brochure, "New Horizons," released in 1970, six suburbs – Jindalee, Jamboree Heights, Mount Ommaney, River Hills, Westlake and Middle Park – were identified, but two, Seventeen Mile Rocks and Sinnamon Park were mentioned as separate developments. It claimed that "Each suburb has a different characteristic." Two industrial estates became the suburb of Sumner, while Oldfield was incorporated into the suburb Seventeen Mile Rocks, but the industrial focus of the first brochure was left behind for an emphasis on the promotion of middle-class lifestyle activities.

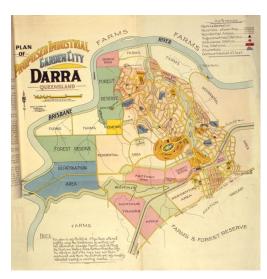


Figure 2. Plan of the Proposed Industrial City Darra, Queensland (1918) (Brisbane City Council).

Proposed Industrial Garden City Darra

The proposal for an industrial garden city for Darra that encompassed the Centenary Estates site was exhibited and presented in 1918 by Dr Thomas Arthur Price (1871-1957) – Mayor of Toowoomba – at the Second Australian Town Planning Conference in Brisbane. He was assisted in his task by surveyor D. A. Crawford who facilitated a contour survey, and civil engineers W. M. Nelson, W. H. Huxham and J. A. Louttit, and the proposal was drafted by A. E. Jones. He paper cited the "First Industrial Garden City Letchworth" as a precursor, and in line with the social agenda of the Garden City Movement, it argued that the plan was a solution that would counter social inequality, improve conditions for workers and most significantly, provide a platform for the repatriation of returned soldiers through the combination of housing and employment, including for the "partially disabled," in anticipation of the ending of World War I. 17

It argued for the economic benefit of planning industrial cities that yield "a far greater quantity of material wealth at less cost, and, in addition to this, a far greater number of the only true units of the wealth of any country – healthy, intelligent and good citizens." Darra, the paper noted, was a convenient site for industry; Brittain's Brickworks had been relocated there in 1899, and the Queensland Cement and Lime Company was established in 1914 on the basis of the ready supply of limestone from the Darling Downs to the west – in the 1930s it constructed a wharf on the Brisbane River at Seventeen Mile Rocks, bringing coral from Moreton Bay by barge – and its position in relation to the Ipswich coalfields and the main South-Western railway. 19 As

the paper forecast, "Access to coal, river, rail, road, proximity to capital and port, and an ideal site – everything is here to ensure success and to secure efficiency."²⁰



Figure 3. Queensland Cement and Lime Company, Darra, April 1965 (Queensland State Archives).

The plan of the proposal displayed in the conference exhibition set aside an ovoid figure at its core for public buildings, ringed by the main business area with a market reserve at one end, adjacent to the factory area that incorporated the existing cement works and brickworks and a radial street overlay somewhat compromised by the hilly topography.²¹ A secondary business and warehouse area was located adjacent to the train station. Sites for public buildings including an art gallery, public library, offices of the city commission, technical college, museum and law courts were allocated to elevated corners along with provision for a hospital and "two grammar schools." Shopping centres were provided at regular intervals, and fire stations and substations were positioned where roads radiated in the greatest number of directions.²² An Aviation Ground was located on the southern edge of the city. Factories, the paper stipulated, were to be built for efficiency of operation, hidden where possible from view, and separated from worker's houses by a ten-minute walk through park lands.

The plan provided for the separation of noxious industries south-west of the town centre. Two large blocks of rough country, one to the north and one to the west, with a total area of about 700 acres, were set aside as timber reserves. These reserves were in close proximity to the centre of the city, and imagined as a future source of revenue, and recreation area for young people and camping ground for "tired, sedentary workers." To attract new industry for repatriation purposes, good sites and residential

areas had been reserved, the paper noted. In addition, an area of 500 acres was set aside solely for repatriation purposes, considered as a half-way house between the army and civilian life, and to provide a training ground for the "partially disabled" through the provision of model farms, workshops and areas for recreation. ²⁴ 110 acres were set aside for a botanical garden through the heart of the city along a string of lagoons, with over 800 acres of recreation and other reserves provided, interspersed through the city, in addition to the forest reserves. ²⁵ A future Brisbane River basin power station on the Ipswich coalfield would, the paper claimed, supply cheap electricity and Mond producer gas – coal gas used for industrial heating purposes – would be carried by a high pressure main to supply cheap fuel for industry. ²⁶

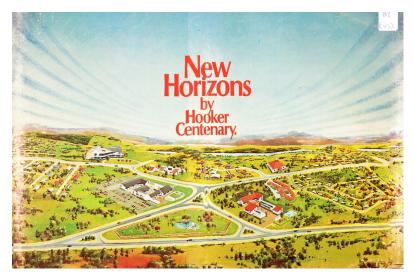


Figure 4. New Horizons by Hooker Centenary. Booklet cover (circa 1970) (Centenary Suburbs Historical Society).

New Horizons

LJ Hooker employed a variety of new promotional methods nationally, taking the lead from similar developments particularly in the United States, also applied at their Killarney Heights development in Sydney.²⁷ These included display homes, competitions to design houses, family days, cross-promotions with suppliers and furniture companies, and regular multi-page features in *Woman's Day* and newspapers.²⁸

Around 1970, towards the end of the life of the development phase of the project, Hooker Centenary produced the brochure "New Horizons" that further reset the focus of the development towards lifestyle and outdoor pursuits. The front cover featured an idealised birds-eye view across the most prestigious suburb, Mt Ommaney situated

"on the high central ridge" looking towards the river. The render depicted schools, a shopping centre and a hospital in a parkland setting flanked by suburban subdivisions on both sides. The representation also signalled an embrace of modern architecture and its use for architect-designed detached homes, using innovative new materials.

The allotments in the suburb of Mt Ommaney (1970), at over 1000 square metres were larger than those of Jindalee and Jamboree Heights. The first stage of the suburb was conceived as private courts each with around seven large properties, and a private entrance – gated communities – and provision for shared private ownership of internal roads and nature strips, a departure from previous subdivisions at Centenary Estates and one of the first developments of its kind in Australia. Riverhills (1973) would be designed, the brochure flagged, with young families in mind.

The official opening of Jindalee in 1962 brought the first public transport to the district, a bus connection to Oxley Station.²⁹ Looranah Street shopping centre – the first shops in the district – were also established early in the suburb's development. Jindalee became a focus for sporting activities with a golf course, swimming pool and bowls club. In 1969, McLeod Country Golf Club opened, the first women's golf club in Australia. If the proposal for the Industrial Garden City at Darra from 1916 had been formulated for the working class, Centenary Estates had moved away from the focus on industry to a promotion of outdoor lifestyle activities to the new post-war middle-class audience.



Figure 5. Hooker-Rex Display Home (1963) (Hayes and Scott Collection, UQFL278, Fryer Library, University of Queensland).

Display Homes, Dream Homes and Exhibition Houses

The Hooker-Rex Display Home completed in 1962 was opened to the public to launch Centenary Estates in the first suburb, Jindalee.³⁰ It was an affordable house prototype designed by local architects Hayes and Scott. It was a flat-roof, brick and timber, slab-on-ground house that featured a tall brick chimney, and block screen to the street. The house was accessible from the side with entry made legible by a brick wall extended beyond the house proper. It included a pop-up clerestory window for light and ventilation, roof overhangs, with a stacked breeze-block screen in front of bedrooms, and an iconic Hayes and Scott chimney, often used through the 1960s. The first promotional brochure signalled a move away from the characteristics of the timber Queensland house, and opened up the possibility of a range of house styles, declaring:

Today the contemporary Brisbane house is a compact, beautifully designed home that makes faithful use of its materials, cross-ventilated and adequately lighted by protected windows – perhaps a ranch-style house, or a split-level design where rising ground makes that a possibility. The old room-darkening wide verandah has gone, and terraces make the house a part of its own garden. Hooker-Rex will build a number of exhibition homes on home-sites in the neighbourhood areas.³¹

The house was built at 6 Jindalee Street on a north-facing block. Part of the brief was to set the scene for the Centenary Estates, to demonstrate to the public what modern housing and landscaping could be like. It was clad in timber chamferboards at the back but presented a brick-clad face to the street, along with a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows that incorporated a line of fixed, solid panels. Plans of the house do not survive but it is likely that the service areas such as the kitchen, bathroom and laundry were located beneath the clerestory window, towards the back of the house alongside the main living space, which included a fireplace. Three bedrooms were positioned at the front, towards the street. The house was entered by a door on the eastern side of the house, accessed via a path from the street that ran parallel with the garage, terminating in a large projecting brick wall used to both define the entry and screen off the back garden. Entry from the side allowed for simplified internal circulation and a reduced central hallway.

The flat roof was made possible by a cliplock roofing profile – a deep pan profile of continuous metal sheeting newly developed by Lysart Brownbuilt that allowed the construction of low-pitched roofs of large spans. The large clerestory window had four bays of Naco hopper windows with a remote winder, favoured by the architect Campbell Scott to facilitate the removal of hot air from the middle of the house. He also used the new Cowdroy and Lidco frameless window systems for north-facing window walls, a feature of many of the houses he designed. Hayes and Scott developed a particular modular treatment for windows in their affordable houses to give the houses a "prefabricated look, as though they were mass produced." The house interior was lined with plasterboard which CSR had been manufacturing since the mid-1950s and by the early 1960s had gained social acceptability. Another contemporary product employed were concrete screen breeze blocks, used for the freestanding fence that gave the street front of the house its distinctive monumental quality and provided a privacy screen for the glass window wall.

Photographs of the house after it was first constructed show it sited alone in a greenfield setting with remnants of bushland in the background. The design anticipated the time when it would be surrounded by neighbouring houses. Projecting walls, freestanding front fence and the placement of the garage were used to define the garden and create private terrace areas contiguous with the living spaces. This merging of the house and its garden is another Hayes and Scott trademark and was achieved simply and effectively on the compact, flat suburban block. Another efficient strategy they employed was the use of the generous roof overhangs to shade windows and walls while also providing weather protection for the entry pathway.

It is difficult to gauge how Hayes and Scott's affordable house prototype was received locally but based on the photographs taken when completed, was roundly criticised in *Architecture Cross Section*, published by the Department of Architecture at the University of Melbourne at the end of 1962, that was sent to architects and master builders across Australia.³⁴ Interest in Centenary Estates was initially slow, and it was only after Hooker-Rex had completed construction of the bridge linking Jindalee to Kenmore in October 1964 that houses and land began to sell in greater numbers. Certainly, few other display homes advertised by builders and developers in the local newspapers at the time appeared as strikingly modern as the house in Jindalee. The flat roof in particular set it apart from other proposals.

The Hooker-Rex Display Home is quite an early Australian example of an architect-designed display home, itself a marketing innovation of the early 1960s. The Colonial Gas Association established a display house and home service centre at the Beauville Estate, an AV Jennings project in Murrumbeena, Victoria, in 1935, one of the first display houses in Australia.³⁵ This was an American selling strategy, which the company and other project home builders continued to refine throughout the 1950s. However, as home ownership peaked in the early 1960s, architectural expertise began to be drawn upon as house builders became "more conscious of style and product differentiation." It was the phenomenon of project home villages in Sydney, such as the Master Builders Association's Parade of Homes of 1960 and Lend Lease's Carlingford Homes Fair of 1962 that launched architect-designed project homes, not only as a marketing tool but also as a form of popular entertainment. It is estimated that around 2 million people visited the Carlingford Homes Fair, which was co-sponsored by the *Australian Women's Weekly*.³⁶

This was clearly the model that Hooker-Rex had in mind when they commissioned ten exhibition houses from local architects and builders to launch the opening of Centenary Estates on 22 September 1962. Advertisements for the opening in the *Courier-Mail* claimed that each house was "a masterpiece of modern design, every one different in style and materials ... this is the most exciting Home Exhibition ever." As at Killarney Heights, Hooker-Rex also organised a state-wide, £11,500 "dream home" competition in conjunction with *Woman's Day* to mark the opening of the estate.³⁸

Centenary Estates was one of three Hooker housing estates promoted in 1963 with a Dream Home Competition. The others were at Killarney in Sydney with a house designed by Sydney Ancher (1904-1979) where Hooker also oversaw estates at Castle Cove and Winston Hills, and Burwood in Melbourne, that represented a concerted publicity campaign by Hooker on Australia's Eastern seaboard.³⁹ Hayes and Scott were again chosen, and their 'Dream Home' was a variation on the Hooker-Rex Display Home, a brick three-bedroom low-set extruded-gable house, further extended through flat-roof carport and living area with half-covered terrace to back yard. An L-figure plan was slipped to form the entrance and a clerestory pop-up positioned over living area. Hit-and-miss brick screen wrapped around service court to street, accessible from laundry and proud of carport setback from boundary. These projects

mark a moment where architects staked a claim in the provision of post-war housing overtaken by project home developers.

Conclusion

Centenary Estates provides a cautionary tale for the consequences of building on farmland adjacent to the river. Developed on the premise that the area would be subject to "occasional inundation," low-lying areas were significantly impacted by the floods of 1893, and with Centenary Estates substantially complete, the floods of 1974, and exacerbated by climate change, the recent floods of 2011, 2019 and 2022. With closer settlement to the Brisbane River since the 1960s thousands more people are now affected by floods. More productively, Centenary Estates represents an early example of close collaboration between private developers and the Brisbane City Council to facilitate Brisbane's post-war expansion west, the shift to private development, methods of promotion, and transfer of knowledge between government, corporations, planners, builders and architects. It also captures the brief moment when architects attempted to stake a claim to the emerging project home economy. The Industrial Garden City for Darra and Centenary Estates considered side-by-side, reveal Brisbane's shift from a city of workers to post-war middle-class expectations for lifestyle.

Endnotes

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^{8 &}quot;Centenary Estates."

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