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Blueprint for Brisbane



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BLUEPRINT FOR BRISBANE

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A bold plan aims to reimagine the city as a vibrant Asia-Pacific hub

SHANE RODGERS



For Brisbane there was always the danger of being Australia's forgotten third child, lost in the shadows of a sparkling Sydney with its big business, audacious bridge and iconic opera house, and "Marvellous Melbourne" with its mega events, culture and certain *je ne sais quoi*.

Sure, Brisbane had a great climate and nice people, a slightly quirky curiosity factor — and didn't Powderfinger come from there? Or maybe Savage Garden? Both? Yes, both.

It always seemed like a sense of me-tooism: the forgotten child trying desperately to get the attention of its parents, yet still treated as a kind of Sydney lite with a dose of warmth; a place you go on the way to somewhere else.

How things change.

Brisbane got lucky. Maybe it made its own luck. Whatever the reason, a series of fortuitous happenings conspired in the cosmos to suddenly put the city into the international conversation.

These included the almost accidental invention of the concept of a "new world city", a branding platform reverse-engineered into an international economic and social construct, and the hosting of the G20 summit, another example of the stars lining up through an accident of history and politics.

For a G20 host city, things could probably not have gone any

better — no major incidents or ugly protests, massive coverage of the city attributes helped by particularly hot weather, a speech by US President Barack Obama full of pro-Brisbane platitudes, and even the slightly disenfranchised Vladimir Putin going home and praising the hospitality he had experienced.

Then there was the opportunistic cluster that formed of Brisbane-based Asia-Pacific events which gave the city some international cred in the region, the attraction of some smart thinkers in the arts space who understood the value of cultural exclusivity, and the likes of *Monocle* magazine's Tyler Brule and global urbanist professor Greg Clark taking a special interest in the city.

G20 summits, which cost host countries hundreds of millions of dollars to stage, are notoriously difficult to leverage. There is no public participation, other than waving at fast-moving motorcades; they are over very quickly, and it takes a lot of hard work to get international media to focus on a city when they are busily filing about the pressing international issues of the summit.

Much of the impact is subtle and long term. In Brisbane's case there was an unprecedented two years' notice of the hosting, so there was time to develop a deep leveraging program backed by an international marketing campaign known as Choose Brisbane.

There were two principal positioning objectives: show Brisbane was a city where important international conversations could take place, and highlight its credentials as a business and people-friendly rising star of the Asia Pacific.

Such an international opportunity was overdue. Brisbane last received genuine international attention in 1988 during the highly successful World Expo, just six

years after hosting the Commonwealth Games. The Goodwill Games in 2001 brought some

international exposure but nothing like the opportunities that can come from having 7000 of the world's most influential individuals in town for the G20 summit.

Following the G20, Brisbane's Lord Mayor Graham Quirk asked his economic development steering committee, headed by Ian Klug, and his economic development board (Brisbane marketing) to compile a fresh seven-year plan

to capitalise on the international wormhole that had suddenly appeared in Brisbane's galaxy.

That plan, released last month, involved consultation with more than 1000 individuals and 500 companies and organisations, plus 16 workshops and forums since January. The result is an ambitious blueprint to reimagine Brisbane as an Asia Pacific fulcrum, vitalised around industries with future momentum, talent attraction and a creative approach to economic opportunity.

At the heart of this economy of ideas is the positioning of Brisbane as part of a global cluster of new world cities with similar characteristics, mindsets and commitment to finding economic openings to put them in the global slipstream.

The idea of Brisbane being a new world city emerged from a city brand exercise seven years ago. At the time it was fairly controversial, and met with derision interstate. But it was a concept that the city embraced as an ambition and it acted as an invisible conscience in the decision-making process. "Is this what a new world city would do?" was asked a lot at meetings. Still is. Brisbane kind of grew into the idea.

Enter Clark, a renowned British-based city economist, who took a shine to the new world city concept in the lead-up to the G20 and helped create an international buzz around it.

Economists are familiar with "world cities". "New world" cities are something else.

In his foreword to the Brisbane



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2022 plan, Clark says Brisbane is now pursuing a strategy similar to 24 cities around the world — the likes of San Francisco, Barcelona, Oslo, Santiago de Chile and Tel Aviv.

“Like them, it remains a city of local character, is very well-managed and enjoys a wonderful natural environment,” he writes.

“This it combines with being a world-leading city for knowledge, an emerging scientific and technological city, an entrepot for new firms and innovators, a corporate hub and a great location for global events and celebrations.

“This is what makes Brisbane Australia’s new world city. It has world-class opportunities within a highly livable metropolis. It knows how to combine global opportunity with local livability so that it avoids the sprawl, gridlock, smog and crime that seem to distort the achievements of other much larger cities.”

The new blueprint outlined the potential for Brisbane to lead a New World Cities Alliance to strengthen Brisbane’s global positioning. This conversation started last year when representatives from many of the like-thinking cities came to Brisbane for the Global Cafe, the city’s major curtain raiser

event ahead of the G20. They were receptive to such an alliance.

In pursuing this type of agenda, Brisbane has another advantage in national and global terms. Unlike cities with a multitude of local councils, Brisbane has just one, with a budget in the billions. It has the critical mass to pursue a big-picture international agenda, not just “roads, rates and rubbish”.

There is also an unprecedented level of co-operation between the councils of the broader southeast Queensland, including the Gold and Sunshine coasts, and a broader conversation about treating the entire area as an economic bloc.

Taken this way, in 35 years the region will have a population of more than six million, more than the current greater Sydney region

and the entire population of Victoria. Putting structure around this

bloc and scaling up the economic opportunities is part of the blueprint handed to Quirk. The idea of appointing a chief economist for southeast Queensland is flagged in the report.

This regional economy thinking has already sparked a serious dabbling in the idea of bidding for the Olympic Games, a reflection of the confidence, global mindset and audacity of the region.

In launching the report, Quirk pointed out that globally cities were becoming the key drivers of national economic activity and city governments had to “step up to the plate” to drive appropriate economic agendas.

“Economies are forever changing,” he said. “We can stand back and we can fight that change. But my observation is that anyone who fights change ultimately loses. What we have to do is adapt to change. This report is about positioning ourselves to drive job creation relevant to a globalising economy.”

The process and research to achieve the blueprint teased out some structural weaknesses in the Brisbane economy and identified areas of business that had high global potential and the capacity to ride international momentum.

These are knowledge-based and corporate services, accommodation and the visitor economy, higher and international education, energy and resources, creative and digital, property development and construction, advanced manufacturing, and food and agribusiness.

Internationalisation of the economy is seen as crucial. “If you only trade with yourselves, your economy virtually diminishes,” Clark says. “Trading with the world is the No 1 idea.”

Among the more ambitious recommendations in the report is the idea of positioning Brisbane as a cultural and knowledge hub for the Asia Pacific and something of a neutral stargate between Asia and the Western economies.

Brisbane already owns the Asia Pacific Screen Awards, the Asia Pacific Cities Summit and the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary

Art. The report suggests using this starting point to position the city as the Asia Pacific headquarters for growth industries and centres of excellence for knowledge and corporate services organisations.

Another theme, covered only in general terms in the report, is developing the notion of a “Team Brisbane” with greater co-operative funding and engagement between government and private enterprise in pursuits that drive economic activity.

This includes tourism marketing and expanding bid funds for events and conventions to help Brisbane move up into the major leagues in these areas. Such plans are always difficult. Do you mandate the funds? If not, how do you balance the equity and opportunity issues between those that contribute and those who don’t?

A key theme in many of the Brisbane 2022 workshops was the need to evolve the character of the city, badging and giving a nudge to the creation of “key precincts” and “living streets”. One of these with particular impetus is the idea of a “start-up land”, described as a “centrally located, resourced ‘campus’ for entrepreneurs and members of the start-up ecosystem to work, learn, convene and build their businesses”.

“The Hub, and its variety of functions, will serve to ‘engineer serendipity’ between entrepreneurs and customers; designers and technologists; start-ups and research institutions; business leaders and the next generation of business leaders,” the report says.

Talent and skills are also key. International students are a vital component of Brisbane’s export economy and the financial health of its education sector. Many students want to stay after they study, but this is often not easy.

One suggestion in the report is the creation of a global student internship program engaging Brisbane businesses to provide more employment and enterprise pathways for these students and using their skills and networks to forge a deeper economy.

In presenting the report, steering committee chairman Klug



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harked back to the traditional perceived rivalry between Australian capital cities, something he now sees as irrelevant.

“Increasingly the focus is north into China and Asia generally, and towards global opportunity,” he said.

“Industry and business are asking to be on the world stage and indeed Brisbane needs to be on the world stage, offering a competitive destination for talent and capital, students and artists, tourists, business leaders, scientists and entrepreneurs.”

Shane Rodgers is a former chief operating officer of Brisbane's economic development board.

‘It has world-class opportunities within a highly livable metropolis’

GREG CLARK
URBAN ECONOMIST





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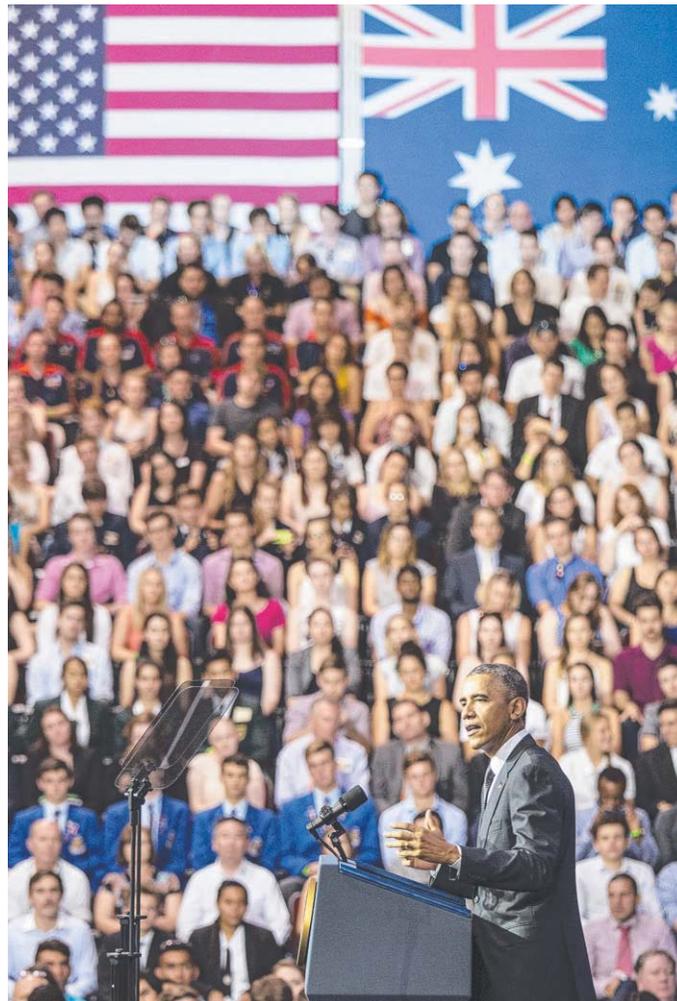
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Clockwise from main, Brisbane is developing serious international credibility through its hosting of Asia-Pacific events; Lord Mayor Graham Quirk requested a seven-year plan; the highly successful World Expo in 1988 first captured the world's attention; US President Barack Obama praised the city in a speech at the University of Queensland during the G20 last year