The Brisbane Line

Colin Mercer prepared a cultural policy for Brisbane. Here he reflects on the lessons.

Brisbane is Australia's (and one of the world's) largest metropolitan local government authorities. Its annual budget is pretty close to that for the whole of Tasmania. As a metropolis, with an identity as such, it is still emergent though the 'Expo factor' played a major role as a catalyst in its modernisation. Brisbane has not yet experienced, to any significant extent, any of the major problems associated with urban degradation though some of these are beginning to emerge.

During 1990 the city underwent the most intensive dose of urban planning and policy development in its history in the form of *The Brisbane Plan: A City Strategy* and the Inner Suburbs Action project. This was fertile ground for our own modest contribution of cultural planning and a cultural development strategy drawn up in consultation with both council officials and communities.

As a first step we had to establish some preliminary ground rules about what 'culture' actually means in the urban context, why it should have a policy framework attached to it and what it can actually do in the broader context of urban development. We had to establish a legitimate and acceptable currency for the concept of culture. Culture means the Cultural Centre, yes, but also street furniture and urban design; it means community arts, yes, but also the leisure and entertainment marketplace and industry; it means Tea Dances for the over 55s as well as provision of skateboard and BMX ramps and bowls; it means museums and galleries but also retailing profiles and strategies in inner city and suburban areas from 'ethnic shopping' to 'festival retailing'; it means the provision of performance, production and display spaces for small-scale cultural industries in media production, arts and crafts, fashion and design, and it means tourism strategies; it means the management of heritage resources in both the built environment and in the less tangible resources of ethnic and indigenous communities.

It means quite a lot, in fact, and cultural policy and planning is concerned with making appropriate and enabling connections across this diverse field of activities and institutions. Culture, in short—and this was an important rule of thumb for the Brisbane project—is what counts as culture for those who participate in it. From the point of view of policy formation at this general metropolitan level, it was important for us to be both agnostic and pragmatic in the evaluation of culture and cultural resources and to refuse any hierarchy of cultural activities.

So this was a cultural policy for urban development in which 'arts' occupy only one part of a fairly broad spectrum of human activities. If you go for an arts policy you are stuck with an agenda which, in both popular and specialist opinion, has opera at one end and community arts at the other, and all you can do on that agenda is argue for a different ordering of priorities: you cannot change the agenda itself when you are stuck in an arts rubric. We felt it important to step cautiously to one side of this more traditional agenda and look in different directions.

Hence we adopted (and adapted) a whole language which might seem at variance with traditional arts concerns. We used terms like 'cultural industries', 'cultural precincts and corridors', 'the role of culture in economic development', 'mixed use and adaptive development' 'the cultural element of social and economic planning', 'quality of life' and even

the'cultural element in economic development scenarios'. We were not preaching to the converted but to hard-headed budget, planning, and economic development administrators and policy makers who may not have thought of the place of culture in their scenarios for Brisbane's economic development.

It was very important to persuade the people who make policy that culture matters from the point of view of hard-nosed economic development and, equally, from the point of view of access, participation, equity and social justice—even if their view of culture sometimes remains tied to an idea of 'prettification'. This was not a tactical ploy on our part. A 'cultural industries' orientation such as was developed in London in the early 80s, in several other cities in the UK, in Rome from the 70s and all over France from the mid-70s has enormous potential in:

* providing the necessary infrastructure—the human, economic, physical and spatial resources for cultural development. This may entail the establishment of vertically integrated 'media zones' as has recently happened in Birmingham and Sheffield in the UK to revitalise inner city areas, kick-start local industrial development and provide employment and a quarry of local talent for the arts, leisure and entertainment industries.

* getting those concerned with cultural affairs actually to turn their attention to what really counts as culture for the majority of the population. This may involve, for example, community arts workers acting in the role of 'brokers' between local performers, musicians, visual artists, etc, and the cultural marketplace of pubs, clubs, media production agencies, government departments, architecture and design firms, developers and so on. For example, the Community Arts unit in Brunswick, Melbourne, has recently acted in this way by setting up its own record label. It means community arts workers thinking of themselves more in the role of managers and facilitators of community cultural resources across the board.

* addressing access, equity, participation, employment and training issues. This 'mainstreams' cultural policy not

to the extent of making it 'official' but to the extent of addressing the majority of people's lives. This means talking about culture in relation to shopping, urban design, mall development and custodianship of the built and natural environments which are full of cultural 'meanings' and characterised by diverse daily cultural uses. And, in the urban context, it means addressing the nature and meaning of civic culture or the 'civic realm' and shaping policy on access to, participation in and identification with the texture and quality of city life from which many groups remain marginalised. Women's access to city centres is a particularly important issue here as is the perception of the city centre, its resources, its 'official' image and presence by ethnic and Aboriginal communities and young people.

Ken Worpole's recent work in the UK especially (with Geoff Mulgan) *Saturday Night or Sunday Morning: From Arts to Industry—New Forms of Cultural Policy* and the more recent collaborative project *City Centres, City Cultures*, focuses on some of these arguments. We drew a lot of material and ideas from this work as we did from some of the initiatives of the organisation, Partners for Livable Places, in the USA and from the work of Augustin Girard in the French Ministry of Culture and Communications. These all provide invaluable resources for some new thinking about cultural policy which moves it away from the compensatory, 'missionary' and therapeutic logic of some traditional arts programs. They address issues of access, equity and participation within the framework of more general objectives for social and economic development at the level of the locality, the city, the region, the state or the nation.

Having established these principles as a starting point, you may find that you have launched yourself into the whole of human life but, as one senior arts administrator from the Queensland state government put it, "we are all in the leisure industry now" and, as with all industries, due attention needs to be paid to the allocation and distribution of resources. From the point of view of policy formulation and equity, it is much better if you use language like this than if you rely solely on the

more traditional 'motherhood assets' of creativity, expression, aesthetic appreciation, the civilising ethos, identity and so on. These 'merit goods' and 'externalities' arguments used by many arts economists will necessarily position culture as a dignified and worthy but poor cousin in need of handouts. There are other ways of approaching the issue.

With these principles in mind, and in order to give us some purchase on the whole of human life we drew up a five-point policy framework to establish cultural planning as an integral part of urban development initiatives. The heading and rationales we used were as follows:

1. The General Policy Framework: Cultural Planning for Quality of Life

To establish 'quality of life' as an objective entails the formulation of a policy framework for cultural planning along with appropriate organisational arrangements and budgetary allocations. Motherhoodish as 'quality of life' may sound, it is worth stressing that it has an increasing currency as a general framework for policy development in two key areas:

Quality of life has now become an important unit of economic calculation. A 1984 US report by the Real Estate Research Corporation noted the 'surprising finding...that quality of life ranked third overall (among criteria for industrial location), carrying the same weight as utility costs'. Quality of life means quite simply the physical, historical, cultural and social attractiveness of a place: features in which cultural resources from urban design to information strategies have a major role to play.

In addition to these economic calculations, there are the direct and more diffuse social benefits of deploying cultural resources in urban development to foster civic and local identity and to facilitate participation in and management of community assets.

2. Culture and Economic Development

Establishing culture as a legitimate sector of economic activity is a further important move. There are three key elements to this: the first a more or less traditional defence of the economic benefits of existing cultural activities,

the second and third are related to the emerging agenda of cultural development.

Firstly, spending on cultural activities has a 'multiplier effect' of a factor of approximately 1.5 on income and employment in local economies. People going to the cinema, galleries, museums and festivals spend money on bus or taxi fares, on meals in restaurants, or related publications and so on. This produces significant medium to long-term effects on the local economy in terms of employment, income and domestic product.

Secondly, a broader and more strategic issue than that of the 'economic benefits of the arts' as traditionally understood is the recognition of the key role of contemporary cultural industry development in forms ranging from publishing to television, video production and design. The 'post-industrial' society which is evident in the development of information and communications technology, the significant proportion of Brisbane's workforce in the leisure, tourism, recreation and personal service sectors and the emphases in various policy statements on clean-industry and information-based development mean that the 'cultural industries' will have a significant role to play in the city's future development.

The cultural industries comprise the print and electronic media including publishing, film, television and video-production, graphic art and design, the leisure and recreation sectors, music and advertising. An arts and cultural policy framework which is concerned only with largely 'pre-industrial' traditional cultural forms is prone to miss out on where culture is now being made and defined. It is important therefore to think of cultural resources as components of local economic development strategies.

Thirdly, national and international indicators suggest that tourists are increasingly less interested in 'showpiece' resorts and destinations and more interested in environmental, cultural, heritage, ethnic and historical features. Cultural tourism is a strategy which is designed to satisfy the requirements of economic development in an industry which now represents 6% of the nation's GDP without sacrificing environmental and cultural quality. The special role of a cultural planning strategy in this context is summarised by Carole Rifkind, of the US organisation,

Partners for Livable Places, when she argues that 'basing tourism on the arts, ethnicity, architecture and...heritage involves the recovery of cultural resources...we hardly knew we had'. There is a precarious but not impossible equilibrium to be established here between the interests of 'hosts' and 'guests'.

3. Culture, Social and Community Development

In programs targeted to community development, self-reliance and stewardship, cultural resources have a strategic role to play. It is not just the corporate or industrial attractiveness of places which is important but also the quality of life for citizens and residents and these two facets are, of course, closely related. The provision and facilitation of arts and cultural facilities and activities have provided invaluable resources to encourage participation, a sense of identity and place and a general sense of belonging to a dynamic and viable community.

Cultural programs can turn anonymous urban 'spaces' into special places by encouraging strategies for the management and custodianship of community assets and heritage. Such programs can also be directed to encouraging forms of social equity in recognising and maintaining the diversity of cultures and cultural resources in a given community.

Brisbane is an increasingly ethnically diverse city. Overseas-born populations in some Statistical Local Areas (SLAs) are as high as 46%; non-English speaking background (NESB) residents as high as 31%. The Aboriginal and Islander population in Brisbane increased by a massive 71.4% between 1981 and 1986. Brisbane has a population which is multiethnic if not yet multicultural. Cultural planning in this context includes addressing the 'lifestyle' aspects of eating, dress and leisure routines. A cultural development strategy needs to address, service and facilitate diverse cultural needs and to realise the wealth of cultural resources in the overall cultural profile of the city.

4. Building on and developing a Cultural Infrastructure

Cultural infrastructure ranges from museums and galleries through community halls, libraries and cultural centres to the establishment or facilitation of space and opportunities for production, performance and dis-

play and the designation of cultural and heritage 'precincts'. Such an infrastructure is necessary in order to

* provide the necessary space and opportunity for cultural production

* provide texture and 'animation' to city and suburban areas

* offer a distinctive identity and image to the city and hence a sense of stewardship

* enhance the cultural industries and their possibilities of returning economic and social benefits by enlivening key areas of the city and providing a 'marketplace' for the producers and consumers of culture. There are also documented benefits of such initiatives in the areas of retailing and public safety.

In programs of urban design and improvement, cultural skills and values have an obvious role to play in the elaboration of a 'City Image' both in terms of perceived attractiveness from outside and in terms of internal texture and quality of life.

Such skills and values can be applied from the largest corporate headquarters to the smallest item of street furniture; from Public Art to the maintenance and adaptive use of heritage buildings and sites; from museum and gallery management to mural design. Such skills are often ill-used or under-used but they are there to be drawn on given the imagination and commitment to a durable and quality City Image. Such a strategy would also provide employment to a significantly under-employed section of the local workforce and prevent the continuing cultural 'talent drain' to the southern cities.

Many cities in the world have designated specific areas as cultural precincts as key components of their cultural infrastructure. Washington DC, for example, introduced an ordinance in 1985 "...to develop a concentration of public and private spaces and activities for the arts and artists including fine arts, performing arts and arts-related retail and entertainment uses that provide for local, national and international arts activities'.

This entailed establishing both physical and organisational linkages between existing venues of cultural activity (museums, theatres, etc), the enhancement and integration of heritage buildings and sites, the development of an appropriate open and public space strategy and enhanced supply of rehearsal, performance and arts spaces to benefit both practitioners and the city's general amenities.

5. Management and Funding Issues

In order to be strategic, it goes without saying that a carefully formulated medium to long-term strategy and policy framework is necessary.

While provision of resources and facilities and direct financial assistance in the form of civic patronage is still a key component of government strategies for culture, there has been a shift towards combining such provision with active facilitation of programs and activities. This has entailed local government acting in the roles of advocate, catalyst, researcher, planner and adviser with the aim of fostering forms of community development and self-reliance.

This benefits government and it benefits the community by removing the sense of 'passivity' from service provision. Cultural activities are by definition active processes of production and consumption: they get people involved in participation, celebration and an active sense of belonging to or identifying with their community, place, lifestyle, environment and city. Combining 'provision' with self-activity, self-reliance, identity and participation is the special domain of a cultural planning strategy. This applies across the board from interactive living history museums to precinct performances and displays to community arts programs.

Partnership possibilities in strategic cultural development as a component of city and regional planning exist in various forms:

* Between the three levels of government

* Between government and community

* Between government and the private sector

* Between the community and the private sector

...and various combinations

In the financing and resourcing of festivals, exhibitions and major cultural events such partnerships already exist in an ad hoc way. More co-ordination and examination of the possibilities are needed, however, particularly in those areas which have regional, state or federal implications. These include (i) community development and social equity objectives; (ii) tourism strategies; (iii) major festivals; (iv) regional cultural initiatives; (v) co-ordinated arts, culture and leisure programs; (vi) cultural industry development.

Strategic cultural development in the context of urban planning requires a unit of management, co-ordination and liaison along with appropriate advisory and consultative bodies—a 'Ministry for the Quality of Life' as Robert McNulty once put it. Those cities and local authorities around the world—including a couple in Australia—which have successfully or even partially embarked on such strategies, have established an administrative unit concerned with cultural affairs and development, with a jurisdiction in management, facilitation, advocacy, research, liaison, program development and policy formation across the range of cultural activities broadly defined.

With a policy framework of this type it is possible to establish cultural planning as an integral component of a general strategy for urban development, simultaneously addressing some of the major issues affecting Australian cities such as urban 'blight', unemployment, local economic development, the demographic depletion of inner city areas, street crime, and access and equity issues for marginalised populations and minorities. Given the imagination, will and resources, of course.

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