

LOGOS TO GO: BRISBANE'S EXECUTIVE BUILDING DEMOLITION A LOSS OF POLITICAL STRUCTURE AND SYMBOLISM

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As I'd noted recently in the local online press,¹ commuters returning to work in Brisbane's CBD after the summer holiday period will by now have adjusted to a partially closed William Street and fully closed Queens Wharf Road. These first visible signs of disruption followed the handover on January 1 of the Queens Wharf resort and casino site to the Destination Brisbane Consortium, led by the Star Entertainment Group.² In an otherwise quiet time of year for government announcements, the happy task fell to State Development Minister, Anthony Lynham, to declare the jobs-generating project officially underway. Domestic construction firm Probuild has commenced site enabling works, including 'soft strip-out' of three adjoining, now-emptied government buildings soon to be demolished.³ The majority of their public servant occupants had moved by late last year to the imposing new government tower at 1 William Street opposite Parliament House.

Much of the related media focus in the final months of last year focused on the coming demolition of the former Executive Building at 100 George Street, and the seeming loss of decades of Queensland's political history and Brisbane's built heritage. Several reports highlighted the building's rich internal history, tracking the public's last glances inside the old Cabinet room and Premier's office, where decisions of great moment and events of great drama played out in recent times.⁴ The structure was described variously as 'stoic', 'boxish' and 'stodgy', but the "physical epicentre of [Queensland's] governance."⁵ Little mention was made of some of the building's distinctive external features, and even less about the prominent government logo signs adorning each side of the parapet atop the building. Perhaps few will lament the logo's departure; it's long been a polarising symbol for some of government presence in the inner city. Still, it's worth noting that this highly visible and very recognisable legacy of the Beattie era will soon disappear from its conspicuous place in the city's skyline.

Familiarity bred contempt?

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¹ Chris Salisbury, "When the dust settles, where to for Beattie's burgers?" *Brisbane Times*, 9 January 2017, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/when-the-dust-settles-where-to-for-beatties-burgers-20170109-gtodho.html>.

² Felicity Caldwell, "Queen's Wharf development site handed to Destination Brisbane Consortium," *Brisbane Times*, 1 January 2017, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/queens-wharf-development-site-handed-to-destination-brisbane-consortium-20170101-gtkfsh.html>.

³ Queensland Government, "New Year kicks off with QWB's 6-year jobs journey," 'Media Statements,' 1 January 2017, <http://statements.qld.gov.au/Statement/2017/1/1/new-year-kicks-off-with-qwbs-6year-jobs-journey>.

⁴ Casey Briggs, "Queensland Executive Building open for final time before demolition," *ABC News*, 10 December 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-10/executive-building-open-for-final-time-before-demolition/8107332>; Tony Moore, "Walk where the premiers walked in Executive Building tours," *Brisbane Times*, 12 August 2016, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/walk-where-the-premiers-walked-in-executive-building-tours-20160812-gqrk02.html>.

⁵ Matt Condon, "Seat of power," 'QWeekend' lift-out, *Courier-Mail*, 10 December 2016, pp16-18.

The logo in question was created by local architect and designer, Michael Bryce, notable (besides being spouse of former Governor-General, Dame Quentin) for designing the Queensland pavilion at World Expo '88 and the logo for Sydney's successful Olympic Games bid. Launched by former premier Peter Beattie in April 2000, the refashioned government logo was depicted as a modern corporate identifier for a 'new look' Queensland in the 21st century.⁶ Forming part of Beattie's concerted effort to spark debate about Queensland's direction under his administration, over the course of the next decade the changed logo appeared on practically every government document, sign and structure across the State.

The former official logo, modelled on Queensland's coat of arms, was retained for use on ministerial letterhead, but was overtaken as the symbolic imprint of State government by the soon ubiquitous 'sunburst' image. Instead of modified versions of government logos on each department's documentation, the new logo was a uniform (and ultimately cost-saving) identifier across all of government. Significantly, owing partly to his government's longevity, the image became indelibly associated with Beattie himself. For this reason as much as any, it remains a divisive and highly politicised emblem, symbolising a period of both cultural change and Labor hegemony in office, led by premiers Beattie and Anna Bligh (1998-2012).

Accounts from some former bureaucrats assert that the logo was widely disliked internally, supposedly owing to the presumed high initial cost of converting from the old logo.⁷ Others panned the massive rebranding exercise as Kafkaesque in its scope and pervasiveness. More noticeably, the image was quickly derided by sections of the media and public alike as the 'Beattie burger', supposedly resembling a fast food meal of burger and fries more than the image of land and sea overlaid with sunrays it was meant to represent. Beattie brushed off such criticisms in typical style with the undeniable observation that 'it got people thinking'.

Beattie, in fact, hadn't come up with the idea of logos emblazoned on top of the Executive Building. Former premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen, who officially opened the building in April 1971, oversaw the installation shortly afterwards of rooftop signs bearing the State's coat of arms, only to be replaced by Beattie's modern logo almost three decades later. The Beattie logo signs have adorned the parapet of the Executive Building for nearly 17 years since, casting their 'eye of Sauron'-like gaze from atop the 'dark tower' across a riverside vista which, even in that space of time, has seen considerable structural rejuvenation. The huge development coming to the north bank of the Brisbane River, and the replacement of those government buildings and lofty logo signs with a dazzling new integrated resort, continues this tradition of inner city transformation.⁸

Perceptions and priorities

Former premier Campbell Newman declared shortly after assuming office in March 2012 that changing symbols and logos was far down his list of priorities.⁹ His Cabinet, however, was understood to be unanimous in its disdain for the logo (or, more accurately, its clear association with the Beattie/Bligh era) and its presence on the roof over their heads. The logo was officially abandoned by the LNP government in the middle of its first year, but was subject to only a gradual phase-out from government materials, signage and websites in an effort to keep down costs.¹⁰ Reportedly, costs assessed to be over \$100,000 – and the poor 'optics' of avoidable expenditure

⁶ Chris Salisbury, "Queensland: the slogan state," *Queensland Historical Atlas*, 6 December 2013, <http://www.qhatlas.com.au/queensland-slogan-state>.

⁷ Personal communication with the author.

⁸ Tony Moore, "Brisbane's \$3 billion inner-city facelift begins January 1," *Brisbane Times*, 1 January 2017, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/brisbanes-3-billion-innercity-facelift-begins-january-1-20161230-gtk4bn.html>.

⁹ Daniel Hurst, "Restore public trust in government: Newman sets team's mission," *Brisbane Times*, 28 March 2012, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/restore-public-trust-in-government-newman-sets-teams-mission-20120328-1vxmn.html>.

¹⁰ Tony Moore, "'Beattie burger' bound for scrap heap," *Brisbane Times*, 18 July 2012, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/beattie-burger-bound-for-scrap-heap-20120717-22912.html>.

for a government decrying a supposed 'debt emergency' it inherited – precluded the removal of the large logo signs from atop the Executive Building.

Following internal communiques from senior departmental offices, however, many inside government were left in little doubt about the potency of symbols and other remnants from prior administrations. Newman's LNP soon stamped its own imprint across the whole of government, beginning with its web presence, commencing an exercise in removing much of those remnants from public view.¹¹ In the same vein as halting the issuing of Beattie-era 'Smart State' licence plates,¹² the LNP administration reverted to a stylised version of Queensland's coat of arms as the government's logo. This emblem had been granted to the colony of Queensland by Queen Victoria in 1893 and displayed on government materials since well before the State's 1959 centenary, from which time its public or commercial use was restricted by enabling legislation. Its re-adoption was a pointed signal from Newman's LNP, whose allegiances and predilections lay in a more traditional vision of Queensland.

Governments since Beattie's have, arguably, been less concerned with symbols and slogans ('Can Do' notwithstanding),¹³ so in many ways it's unsurprising that there should be no mention from the government or the project's developers about the fate of the logo signs. After all, since mid-2012 they'd not officially been in use, and Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk was wise enough two years ago not to engage in symbolic change (again) just for the sake of it, maintaining the crest logo as the government's imprint. But those signs are still a larger-than-life emblem of a political period that most Brisbane and Queensland residents would well recall. Tellingly, their departure – and that of the building – hasn't elicited the kind of ardent reaction that, for instance, followed when the G20-leftover 'Brisbane' sign was slated for removal from South Bank for safety reasons.¹⁴

Progress comes at a cost

After the proposition that the government might consider saving the logo from the fate of the rest of the building was cast by this writer into the social media-verse, Beattie himself was quick to respond saying this was a right and proper course of action, since "love it or hate it, it's part of Queensland history which should be preserved." Many would likely think this predictable from a former premier with a reputation for sloganeering, symbolism and grand promotion (of both self and State). While some might also counter that this sentiment overstates the signs' significance, especially compared to some of the memorabilia housed *inside* the building – highlighted during the public open day on December 10 last year – Beattie still has a point.

Past governments, and ordinary Queenslanders, have at times been too ready to dispense with artefacts or reminders of our history and heritage, both Indigenous and post-colonisation. As noted by award-winning local architect, Don Watson, when the Newman government released plans for the parliamentary precinct's redevelopment a few years ago,¹⁵ sometimes even sites which are unappealing to sections of the public have value worth preserving (the old Boggo Road Gaol site at Dutton Park, perhaps, being a recent case in point).¹⁶ Critics of the redevelopment plan at the time

¹¹ Salisbury, "Queensland: the slogan state."

¹² "Queensland no longer the 'Smart State'," *Brisbane Times*, 22 July 2012, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/queensland-no-longer-the-smart-state-20120722-22hpw.html>

¹³ Nick Bryant, "Can Do? Campbell Newman's bid for Queensland," *The Monthly*, December 2011, <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2011/december/1347591112/nick-bryant/cando-campbell-newman-s-bid-queensland>.

¹⁴ Matt Eaton and Andree Withey, "Council dismantles Brisbane sign made famous during G20 due to safety risk," *ABC News*, 6 February 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-02-05/brisbane-sign-from-g20-dismantled/6072254>.

¹⁵ Katherine Feeney, "Protecting Brisbane's brutal charm," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 2012, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/protecting-brisbanes-brutal-charm-20120611-205d4.html>.

¹⁶ Cameron Atfield, "Heritage campaigner blasts Boggo Road development application," *Brisbane Times*, 30 October 2015, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/heritage-campaigner-blasts-boggo-road-development-application-20151029-gkmceh.html>.

lamented another example of government prioritising 'progress' over preservation,¹⁷ and the loss of prime examples of Brisbane's 1970s/80s-era 'brutalist' architecture: along with mullets and moonwalking, another to add to the list of seemingly unloved features of that bygone time.

Those opponents of the Executive Building's demolition highlighted the loss of history it would represent, reminding how progress had often triumphed over preservation in the State's past. Many Brisbane residents would, of course, recall the city's record of 'renewal' before environmental and heritage protection measures were a required feature of development proposals. The Bjelke-Petersen government's demolition of the CBD's Bellevue Hotel in 1979, and the demolition of the National Trust-listed Cloudland Ballroom in Bowen Hills three years later, altered the State's heritage landscape forever.¹⁸ These controversial acts sparked demands for heritage conservation (and deepened fractures within the then coalition parties) which would see later governments introduce and gradually strengthen heritage protection legislation.

It's noteworthy that the Queen's Wharf developers devote a section of their showy project website to the heritage sites, buildings and values – including recognition of Indigenous cultural attachment¹⁹ – which the development will 'restore and enhance' during construction, in line with the State government's Priority Development Area regulations.²⁰ This protection doesn't extend to the old Executive Building and its annexe, or the next-door Public Works Building or the Neville Bonner Building on William Street, all of them non-heritage listed and slated for demolition over the course of 2017. In the words of Treasurer Curtis Pitt last month, with an eye to the thousands of jobs in the offing, "it's out with the old and in with the new."²¹ Neville Bonner's legacy in the CBD will continue, at least, with a new pedestrian bridge across the river to be named in his honour.

The logo lingers

Despite this imminent demolition, though, the Beattie-era symbolism has persisted – in both a virtual and physical sense – in the city's landscape, and indeed across the State. The logo's entire removal from the government's web presence and its structural assets was presumably too costly an exercise for the Newman government to justify, at least within the unexpectedly brief time available to it. Consequently, the 'Beattie burger' logo remains in view in countless forms, from signage at sporting fields and hospital wards, to government-sponsored websites, to decals on the side of public buses, and even to street address markers out the front of other government buildings. Its presence around us is a lasting reminder of a government's attempts to 'rebrand' Queensland in a more modern light. None of these images, however, is as visible as those logos perched atop the government's own – soon to be methodically demolished²² – Executive Building. The signs stood in recent times almost in mock defiance of changes introduced by Newman's administration.

What use the Beattie-era logo signs could be put to is probably now a moot point, with the building sites having passed into the resort developers' hands. State Development Minister Lynham

¹⁷ Francene Norton, "Calls to save Qld Government Executive Building," *ABC News*, 1 October 2012, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-09-28/calls-to-save-the-qld-government-executive-building/4286964>.

¹⁸ Tony Moore, "Heritage, Brisbane style," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 December 2010, <http://www.smh.com.au/business/property/heritage-brisbane-style-20101217-190og.html>.

¹⁹ Destination Brisbane Consortium, "Bringing Brisbane's heritage to life," 'Queen's Wharf Brisbane,' <http://queenswharfbrisbane.com.au/construction#overview>.

²⁰ Tony Moore, "Casino developers vow to preserve heritage," *Brisbane Times*, 14 May 2013, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/casino-developers-vow-to-preserve-heritage-20130513-2ji7j.html>; Cameron Atfield, "Heritage work begins at Queens Wharf ahead of construction," *Brisbane Times*, 16 January 2017, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/heritage-work-begins-at-queens-wharf-ahead-of-construction-20170116-gtse8j.html>.

²¹ Queensland Government, "Queen's Wharf on the move with first approval," 'Media Statements,' 19 December 2016, <http://statements.qld.gov.au/Statement/2016/12/19/queens-wharf-on-the-move-with-first-approval>.

²² Cameron Atfield, "How to demolish a high-rise building: Queen's Wharf buildings to be 'munched'," *Brisbane Times*, 25 January 2017, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/how-to-demolish-a-highrise-building-queens-wharf-buildings-to-be-munched-20170124-gtxzu2.html>.

suggested some months ago that items of interest salvaged from the Executive Building would be later auctioned for charity,²³ but hadn't repeated the claim since, certainly not regarding any external features. Thankfully, at least, State Development Department executives had the foresight to insist upon the retention and appraisal of most of the building's internal artefacts prior to handover.²⁴ So it's a stretch to imagine the logos festooned around the George Street entranceway to the completed resort development, which the Executive Building site is being transformed into, according to the project plans. It might have delighted some to see the round logos converted into versions of the Money Wheel which currently graces Brisbane's Treasury casino, albeit an equally unlikely fate.

Assuming they escaped the wrecking ball, it could be that the logos are simply taken into storage, much like the hundred-year-old iron lacework balustrades of the vanished Bellevue, rumoured to have sat rusting in a hidden departmental basement in the city prior to being auctioned off more than a decade after the hotel's now infamous demolition. Maybe, though, the numbers of enthusiastic visitors to the Executive Building's open day last month signalled a changed perspective. Brisbane residents – and Queenslanders more broadly – might well have reached the stage where the relics of our political and built heritage, be they mere symbols or more 'meaningful' artefacts and structures, are recognised as valuable and worth preserving, at least as reminders of the foundations upon which modern edifices like Queens Wharf are built.

²³ Moore, "Walk where the premiers walked."

²⁴ Personal communication with the author.