

7 Impressions of the Brisbane 2022, New World City Action Plan

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A nighttime photograph of the Brisbane skyline, featuring several illuminated skyscrapers and buildings along the waterfront. The lights from the buildings are reflected in the dark water in the foreground. The sky is a deep blue, suggesting twilight or early night.

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Introduction

With so much going on in Brisbane and Queensland politics and judiciary at the moment it was a real shame that the release of Brisbane's Economic Development Strategy entitled "Brisbane 2022 – New World City Action Plan" occurred without much hype or widespread pickup by the media or business community.

The strategy and its underlying intention of making Brisbane one of the world's true 'new world' cities is not only newsworthy but something that everyone in Brisbane, particularly those of us in business should not only be aware of, but also be excited about.

Having taken the time to read the Brisbane 2022 – New World City Action Plan, it was great to see amongst many things, the recognition of property development and construction as one of the identified key growth sectors for Brisbane. Equally, I was excited to see a clear link in the strategy between economic development and town planning, land use policy and the precincts of Brisbane.

Generally, I would give Council a good solid pass mark for the strategy. Sure there are a few opportunities for things to be pushed a little harder and I think a few future opportunities to extend and expand this work to aid its implementation. So here are my 7 Impressions of the Brisbane 2022 – New World City Action Plan.

Impression 1

Brisbane as a 'New World City'

Brisbane is certainly growing up, and we have long lost our 'big country town' persona, but many of you might be asking 'what is a New World City' and do we want Brisbane to be one? Fair enough questions, and I think the resounding answer should be yes. Brisbane sits alongside a group of 24 cities such as Barcelona, Miami, Calgary and Singapore that are called these New World Cities. Not a bad bunch of cities to be sitting with, I would have thought!

These cities (plus Brisbane) all have a highly desirable lifestyle, an easy commute, generous green spaces, a rich cultural offering, access to globally competitive career and business opportunities, sustainability as a priority, easy access to leisure activities, and a healthy environment. All of these things are surely things we value of Brisbane and also things that can be strengthened as we grow.

For this reason it is great to have an aspirational vision for the city, which also contains a 'smart growth' formula that will maintain a high quality of life for residents, whilst enhancing existing city benefits and assets.

To me the real benefit of the New World city tag is the permission this tag gives us to leverage those assets to elevate Brisbane onto the world stage as a city that competes (and wins) globally for talent, capital, innovation, students, visitors and major events, which should excite us all.





Impression 2

Celebrating and Leveraging Unique Parts of Brisbane

When I think about the great cities of the world they all have well-defined precincts, clusters or districts. Be that the 'meat packing' district of New York or the Montmartre arts precinct of Paris. Likeminded people doing likeminded things tend to gravitate together as a natural phenomenon, so it makes sense to foster and leverage that natural gravitational pull.

So to see Brisbane's intention of identifying, shaping and growing the unique precincts and districts is encouraging.

This approach recognises that the 'Brisbane' is not one homogenous opportunity, but a series of precinct and locational based opportunities.

Perhaps we don't (as yet) have any precincts as famous as those of New York or Paris, but I can certainly see in time that these can be defined and grown. Our economies have changed and we are moving away from a consumerism society to what is being called the 'experience' economy. We are making conscious decisions about where we live, work and play based on the quality of the experience offered. The identification and strengthening of these precincts can only serve to allow the experience each of those precincts offers to be defined and refined, which is a positive thing.

We have the foundations of our knowledge corridors linking QUT at Kelvin Grove, though our hospitals and Boggo Road research clusters through the Princess Alexandra Hospital, we have our creative industries roots in the Valley, emerging restaurant strips and precincts scattered around the city. If we can truly create new tech precincts, and start up clusters whilst also strengthen our existing precincts to create economies of scale and critical mass, then I believe that we can, as the strategy suggests, attract businesses and talent from around the world to set up home in Brisbane.

Impression 3

The 'Lifters' Versus the 'Leaners'

The challenge (and opportunity) with any policy document such as this, is figuring out who is going to do the heavy lifting when it comes to the implementation. It is certainly one thing to come up with a list of actions and an entirely different thing for those actions to then be delivered and crossed off.

Sure Council and Government may have a major role in the implementation of economic development, but the heavy lifting, in my opinion, is best done by the businesses, industries and residents themselves, after a platform has been laid down by government.

In my view Council has grasped that the economic growth within cities needs to be grass roots lead and not all top down and this is reflected within the strategy. It is positive to see that Council proposes to work on strategies to retain and attract the talent to deliver upon our growth aspirations.

Having said that, I believe that the city will find a lot more people willing and able to help do their bit of moving us towards being a new world city if they can more easily understand how then can get their teeth into the opportunity. I can't help but think if the whole Brisbane 2022 document was a catalyst for a second document which was a "how can we help deliver economic growth" guide with very clear lines of sight for businesses and entrepreneurs to get involved, then perhaps we might see more people jumping onto the Brisbane bandwagon or at least understanding how they can leverage off the platform that Council will be laying out for the city and our economic growth.



Impression 4

Planning as an Economic Development Tool

The city's planning scheme is one of the best economic development tools that Councils' have at their disposal. So with this in mind, it is great to see so many linkages to land use planning and planning scheme related items within the new strategy. Planning is rarely an economic tool itself, but it can certainly be an 'anti-investment' tool, if it is just too hard, too expensive or too risky for businesses to convert an underlying economic opportunity and willingness to invest within a city.

I believe what this strategy does is put the city on notice that to become a New World City, perhaps some of the old parts of Brisbane will have to become the opportunities for the new precincts, clusters and centres of excellence.

Brisbane has a plethora of land within the 5-8km of the CBD which arguably is not really contributing to the direction that the New World City industries would be taking us.

Council has to date been quite wed to retaining our original industrial roots, with very strong protectionism over this old industrial land through the City Plan document. Ironically, industrial uses are not identified, as one of the growth sectors for the city in the future. Whereas knowledge based industries, corporate services, creative and digital industries and advanced manufacturing all feature heavily.

What this says to me, is that a real opportunity exists to re-purpose our older (arguably defunct) industrial precincts that are often quite close to the CBD into vibrant mixed use precincts containing incubators, starts up, diverse range of housing and integrated villages. And I would hope that a future by product of this strategy is a strategic rethink by Council as to the future of these precincts and how New World places can come from Old World uses.



Impression 5

Consumable Economic Development

It is not often that anyone would choose to read an economic development strategy (or at least own up to it) and even less likely for someone to do so and to get excited by it. And that to me says an awful lot about where a major problem exists in the economic growth of our towns and strategies and where many Councils are missing a major opportunity. Let's face it, more often than not, they are documents produced to 'tick a box' by economists for economists.

These documents are often hard for seasoned professionals or the governments themselves to understand let alone mums and dads and the average business person. Which to me is perplexing since isn't the purpose of producing a strategy such as these about capturing peoples interest in future opportunities. Surely if no one knows about the growth aspirations and plans for a city, or can't understand how they themselves fit into that strategy and can leverage off it themselves, then are we truly likely to get growth on a large scale.

I actually think the new Brisbane strategy has done a pretty good job of being consumable to a wide audience, but I still see real opportunities for this strategy to be taken further. I see an opportunity to re-cut it and tailor content to different business segments. Different versions for the International 'Mega' corporations, through to large Australian organisation, through to SME's, Start-ups and Mum and Dad businesses. If we truly want widespread adoption and economic growth outcomes, we need the wider business community to seize the document, find what is relevant to them, see the opportunities and then respond themselves.

There is an opportunity to create a very clear line of sight through all the strategies from the foundation seven economic priorities within the strategy right through to detailed implementation, education and assistance initiatives to help businesses deliver upon the city's economic aspirations. They are after all the growth aspirations of the city, Council alone cannot achieve the growth. Sure they can facilitate, lead it, promote it and activate it, but in the end the investment will be largely born by the private sector, so it is this group that we need to work with and educate on the opportunities that our city possesses.

Impression 6

Outcomes not Process

I think that Brisbane has grasped that one of the core roles it can play in the economic development space is to promote the City as a whole. They have and clearly will continue to tell those willing and able to create investment and growth about the opportunities. After all, entrepreneurs and investors who have incomplete access to information about the nature of a city in terms of growth and investment opportunities, or issues such as planning and investment support, will just invest elsewhere, perhaps in one of the other 24 New World Cities.

So put bluntly – unless informed, many potential investors will not even know a particular region exists as an option for establishing their business.

Brisbane has both the strategy, but also the delivery vehicles of Brisbane Marketing and the Council themselves to do their bit in establishing the platform for businesses to leverage and to shout to the world the opportunities we have in our city, so we really have no excuses for not delivering upon the potential.

Brisbane is no doubt strongly influenced by global economic factors, on one hand this provides an opportunity not readily available somewhere else, on the other hand, the big global dollar could arguably sometimes be a distraction from the core economic foundation that any city and region needs to have, that being the businesses that are already here in the City.

So I can't but wonder if the strategy needs to be drafted with 2 audiences. One being the big and small overseas investors and entrepreneurs who can be lured to Brisbane. And secondly, drafted for our existing businesses - you know, the type of business that might own their premises, is a local and who does their best to hire locals. I am not saying that local businesses are our future, but if you don't communicate the growth plans and benefits to them, then I think we have missed the opportunity to get the traction from a really critical part of the local economy – that being the one that provides the necessary services to the bigger employment generators in the region.

Impression 7

Measure Once, Benefit Twice

Lastly, I thought I would perhaps finish with a tip for Brisbane. That being 'measure once and benefit twice'. Generally speaking cities are very complicated beasts and it is hard to measure the effectiveness of economic development strategies such as the Brisbane 2022, but not impossible. The value comes in measuring, however you can, the changes and growth in our cities as a result of these policy decisions.

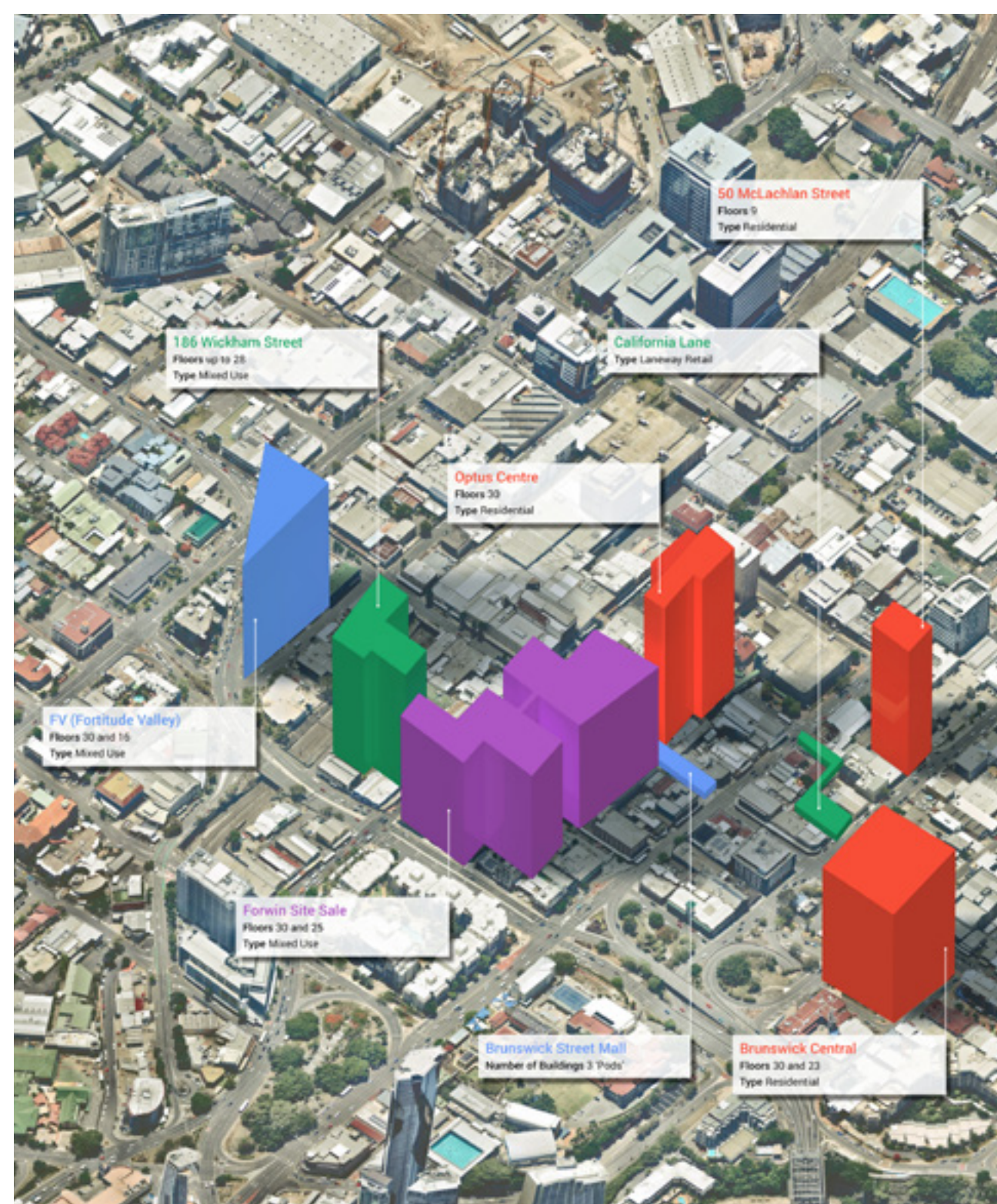
I was lucky enough to work with Council in 2014 on the redesign and repositioning of the Brunswick Street mall.

Having spent circa \$4m on that upgrade, I was able to then identify upwards of \$500m of development projects which were then mooted within a 400m walk of the Mall, when almost none had occurred for the previous decade.

This includes projects such as the Gurner FV triple towers with 1000 apartments, a redevelopment proposal for the old Optus Building for twin 20+ storey residential towers, The Bakery Lane project and an approval to convert the T.C Beirne building into a Hotel. It is pretty powerful, I would suggest for Council to then proudly say that for every \$1 they spent, they generated \$100 of investment in Brisbane or a 1:100 ROI.

I think if Council and Brisbane Marketing are able to develop a measurable set of metrics and data set that can be monitored and maintained, then I am sure in the not too distant future, we will be able to proudly say, we have hundreds of new tech start-up businesses, and thousands of people employed in vibrant new centres of excellence and precinct clusters around the city.

So go forth and measure and then come back and proudly show to the residents of the city, that not only has the city grown and truly become a New World City, but that we haven't lost our unique character and identity that us, the current residents of Brisbane, are so proud of.





Conclusion

As a proud lifelong Brisbane resident, I am certainly going to embrace our New World City opportunities and I am glad that Brisbane is seizing the opportunity rather than letting it slide by. I believe the Brisbane 2022 – New World City Action Plan is an amazing place for us to continue our economic growth.

As a Planner, I am very pleased to see recognition of the tangible links of achieving economic development with good planning and the efficient and effective use of land within our city. I would certainly encourage Council to relook at how it can foster and facilitate the development of **'New World places from Old World uses'** because I am sure the outcome will be more jobs, better communities, more vibrant places and precincts and an attainment of the New World City potential.



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