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Introduction

What If You Threw an Expo and Nobody Came?

The extraordinary part of the exposition being put together on the banks of the Brisbane River, for me, is this: that of all the places on earth where the 21st century could have been unveiled, mankind chose Queensland.

Robert Haupt, *The Sydney Morning Herald*¹

IT WAS BIG. IT WAS bright. It was the pre-crash 1980s: a period of bacchanal consumption in which media-feted financial cowboys were flanked by celebrities, politicians, and socialites as they championed extraordinary ventures, staged extravagant parties, and raised their glasses to risk.

But even in this climate of gilded confidence, it was difficult to persuade anyone to take a chance on World Expo 88 (Expo).

It seemed that *everyone* knew the exposition was going to be a disaster – and the only people insisting otherwise were being paid to. There were so many unknowables that potential investors were reduced to performing the business equivalent of studying tea-leaves.

One such pursuer of portents, American businessman Chuck Sanders, scoured Brisbane in 1987 for ‘some sort of omen’ that could induce him to set aside common sense and take part in Expo.² As

an eleven-time world exposition veteran, Sanders knew such events entailed financial risk; but investing in this instance was more akin to a leap of faith. Those who had even heard of the host city were most likely aware that Brisbane, capital of the state of Queensland, Australia, was an international minnow. With a population barely touching a million (and just 2.5 million in the entire state), organisers could not expect to fund this extravaganza through local and intrastate ticket sales alone – yet the prospect of securing high-profile exhibitors capable of luring interstate and international tourists was bleak.³ World expositions were in decline: many contemporary host cities had failed to break even with their events.⁴ A relic of a bygone era, expositions seemed to have been superseded by newer and shinier toys. If the vast cities of Europe and America were encountering difficulties sustaining such festivities, what chance had Brisbane – for six months? An increasingly unpopular event in a largely unheard-of city sounded decidedly resistible.

One night during his Brisbane sojourn, Sanders observed a couple and their teenage children as they joined him in the elevator of the recently completed Hilton hotel, situated in the city's central mall. Sanders intuited they were not guests of the establishment, and was puzzled when they pressed the button for the highest floor, as he knew there was little of interest there. When the elevator began its ascent, the family peered excitedly through the glass-sided vessel as the ground receded beneath them – at which point it dawned on Sanders that such an experience was still a novel form of entertainment in this city. When a member of the family was inspired to cry out 'Wooooo!!!', Sanders had his omen: if Brisbane locals were this enchanted by elevators, surely they'd embrace a world exposition in 1988.⁵

Expo defied problems, precedents and pundits to become the largest, longest and loudest of Australia's bicentennial events. A colourful 1980s amalgam of cultural precinct, theme park, travelogue, shopping mall and rock concert, the Expo behemoth had the formerly sleepy city of Brisbane bedazzled. During its six-month

run, over eighteen million visits were recorded (including staff, VIPs and repeat visits from season-pass holders) – a figure that exceeded Australia’s population at the time.⁶ From 10 am to 10 pm, seven days a week, for six months, attendees wandered slack-jawed around the otherworldly environment that its chairman, Sir Llew Edwards, referred to as ‘the happiest place on earth’.⁷

Expo is popularly perceived as the catalyst for Brisbane’s ‘coming of age’. And, like most coming-of-age experiences, some of it was awkward. Expo was a product of its 1980s environment: a time of big hair and big objects, when having an event meant having a *spectacular*. It was also a product of its place – arguably the wrong place: Brisbane, Queensland. Under the premiership of the National Party’s Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, the state was frequently the subject of derision. Mad cousin Queensland was different. Parochial. Corrupt. A relentlessly backward source of embarrassment that was best kept locked in the national cupboard. Such criticisms played to a cornucopia of patronising generalisations ... many of which were not unjust.

In the years prior to Expo, Queensland exhibited some of the hallmarks of a police state: public gatherings were discouraged, protesting was virtually illegal, and small groups of people could be subject to police questioning for being outdoors. Rumours of corruption within the police force were frequent – and frequently ignored. The dark absurdities of the period include confiscation of the *Hair* soundtrack on the basis of obscenity by police later linked to a prostitution protection racket, and the premier’s invocation of ‘State of Emergency’ powers to facilitate a rugby match.⁸ Bjelke-Petersen’s role in the Whitlam government’s dismissal and the sacking of striking South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB) workers confirmed his reputation for authoritarian politics. His publicly expressed desire for Queensland to secede from Australia was, for many, the icing on the Queensland nut cake.

The state government appeared to prioritise development and control over culture. What passed for popular culture in Queensland

tended to manifest itself in a tourist-oriented predilection for big things: the Big Pineapple, the Big Cow, the Big Dinosaur. The Bjelke-Petersen years were also about big development – if development can be taken to mean the destruction of landmarks such as Cloudland and the Bellevue Hotel, a high-rise construction free-for-all on the Gold Coast, schemes for the sale and redevelopment of the Botanical Gardens, and the premier's unrealised dream of drilling for oil on the Great Barrier Reef.⁹ It has been suggested that some of Bjelke-Petersen's developer associates (colloquially known as the 'white shoe brigade', owing to their predilection for such footwear and their casual business style) also looked with the lust of Gollum upon a certain piece of South Brisbane real estate.¹⁰ A run-down industrial slum to many, a place of character to some, and home to a few, the bank of the Brisbane River opposite the CBD was ripe for redevelopment. What was needed, claimed the cynics, was an event to justify the resumption of such prized land. Something for the people. A *spectacular*, if you will.

As an unofficial underdog, Queensland was not expected to host Expo 88. The more populous – and polished – cities of Sydney or Melbourne were deemed a better fit, especially by the powerbrokers who lived in them. Expo was secured for Queensland through an unprepossessing combination of skulduggery and bull-headedness, against the wishes of Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, and to the dismay of other states. The announcement was greeted with blank confusion within Queensland itself. For a long time, other (predominantly Labor-run) states refused to participate in what was expected to be a 'Joh Show'. Commitments from international participants were also torturously slow to eventuate. Public opinion about Expo in Queensland ranged from protest to ambivalence. In the years leading up to the event, there was a genuine possibility it would be an expensive and humiliating flop.

Expo organisers encountered an extraordinary array of challenges, including public ignorance of world expositions, the perilous state of such events, media criticism, controversial land resumptions,

anti-Queensland bias, strained intergovernmental relations, the conflicting requirements of multiple organisational bodies, bicentennial controversies, and protests.

The exposition's theme song, 'Together, We'll Show the World', became a rallying cry for Queenslanders to support the event in the face of local, national, and international doubts. The herculean efforts of Expo's organisers against such odds returned great dividends. The year after Bjelke-Petersen's premiership came to an ignominious end with the thwarted 'Joh for PM' campaign and revelations of police and political corruption, Expo presented Brisbane with an all-singing, all-dancing, government-sanctioned gathering place.

Through night parades, the Aquacade, smoke machines, and laser beams, Expo held the people of Brisbane enthralled. With eighty-four display pavilions (thirty-eight international, fourteen government, and thirty-two corporate), attendees could 'travel the world' in a day: they could ski at the Swiss Pavilion, view artefacts from the Vatican, inspect a terracotta warrior from the Qin Dynasty, and learn about leisure in the USSR; they could witness the wonders of high-definition television, dancing robots, and 'text internet', ride the monorail, sight the Magna Carta, star-spot dignitaries and celebrities, and watch tap dancers on a pink submarine in the Brisbane River; they could 'go for a bit of a rave' at the Heat Shield Disco, view a rock concert performed on a river stage, and partake in the notorious 'Chicken Dance' at the Munich Festhaus. The breadth of experiences on offer meant season passes were deemed of such value they were still being bought just weeks before the event's conclusion. The city went Expo crazy.

But the exposition wasn't the only transformative event in town.

Two of the most significant events in Brisbane's recent history – Expo 88 and the Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and Associated Police Misconduct (hereafter referred to as the Fitzgerald Inquiry) – took place side by side. The then premier of Queensland, Mike Ahern, had the delicate task of

inviting the world's gaze to the state while some of his former ministers were testifying at the inquiry – several en route to jail.

Somewhere between the fluorescent festivities at Expo and the muted tones of the courtroom across the river, the Bjelke-Petersen government lost much of the credit for its extraordinarily popular endeavour. Expo began as one of Joh's 'big things', but it grew into something bigger. Its organisers and participants helped steer the event from the 'old ways' into the new, producing a comparatively apolitical event. In the process, mainstream Brisbane assumed a sense of ownership over Expo – most evident during the redevelopment controversies that arose in relation to the site. The land belonged to the people now. At least ... the most recent people. And they would exert their democratic right to enjoy the fake beach subsequently built upon it. Thirty years later, Expo continues to be venerated at key anniversaries long after events such as Brisbane's 1982 Commonwealth Games have faded from memory.

Given the impact Expo is credited with having had upon its host city, there has been surprisingly little analysis of it, which may be partly attributable to a (warrantable) 'sense that Expo was a parochial Queensland event, primarily focused on entertainment and consumption, and therefore not of national significance'.¹¹ It is also possible that those familiar with the less palatable aspects of its originating government may have struggled to appreciate the event's virtues. World exposition research is itself a relatively new field: Robert Rydell's 1984 book *All the World's a Fair* is credited with being the first 'to argue that world's fairs merited serious attention due to their complex nature and overlapping discourses that illustrated the zeitgeist of an era'.¹² There has been excellent consideration of select aspects of Expo,¹³ but little engagement with its broader journey from political tool to cultural phenomenon. *We'll Show the World* considers the shifting social and political environment in which Expo was conceived, planned, and executed, and the manner in which such factors shaped – and were in turn shaped by – this event.

The first chapter, 'On the Origin of the Expo Species', locates Expo in world exposition history by outlining the development and meaning of expositions, motivations for hosting one, and the risks associated with doing so. Chapter Two, 'We Need to Talk about Queensland', contextualises the local and national opposition to Brisbane as Expo host, the challenges negotiated by organisers, and the effect the event was to have upon its host city. Chapter Three, 'The Getting of Expo', considers the state government's circuitous world exposition manoeuvrings, and the manner in which some of its controversial traits helped secure the event for Brisbane. Chapter Four, 'We'll Show the World', details the array of impediments to producing Expo, the managerial decisions that helped avert a 'Joh Show', and the steps taken to persuade an ambivalent public to embrace the event. Chapter Five, 'Brisbane Comes of Age – Again', examines the euphoric public response to Expo alongside criticisms of the event and challenges arising from the contemporaneous Fitzgerald Inquiry. Chapter Six, 'After Party', explores the bitter battles for the meaning, legacy, and ownership of Expo. The conclusion, 'Shine On Brisbane', draws together the previous chapters to illustrate the zeitgeist of this era, and illuminate Expo's significance to Brisbane.

Sources consulted for this book include newspapers, magazines, parliamentary records, official documents and reports, private collections, promotional materials, television segments, speeches, biographies, oral histories, academic works, alternative press publications, protest materials, and interviews conducted by the author. Interviewees include Expo Chairman Sir Llew Edwards, General Manager Bob Minnikin, Queensland Premier Mike Ahern, Brisbane Lord Mayor Sallyanne Atkinson, Queensland Under Treasurer Sir Leo Hielscher, a number of Expo division directors and producers, early exposition proponents James Maccormick and Sir Frank Moore, 'Together, We'll Show the World' campaign and theme deviser Carol Lloyd, Queensland Events Corporation Chairman Des Power, *Expo Schmexpo* protest film director Debra

Beattie, 'Cyclone Hits Expo' protest song co-writer Adam Nash, Executive Officer of the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA) Bob Weatherall, Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) director Tony Kelly, and *Cane Toad Times* editor Anne Jones. The interviewees were uniformly generous with their time and remarkably candid in their recollections. Given the disparate views canvassed herein, a reasonable indication of whether balance has been achieved may be (alas) that no one is entirely satisfied with the result.

Expo's highlights, pavilions, and guests are touched upon in this work, but it is not a catalogue of things to see and do at Expo. Many such guides were produced at the time and are readily available from online auction sites. This is an examination of what took place around, behind, and between the Expo cracks. It explains how the 'Joh Show' became the people's party, and how an event initially greeted with outrage, scepticism, or indifference came to mean so much to so many. It is the story of how, to Brisbane, Expo was personal.