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QUEENSLAND, GOLDEN CHIPS AND THE TEMPTATION OF THE ASIA-PACIFIC MODEL

In the wake of Brisbane's recent history and its effort to strengthen its geopolitical role in the Asia Pacific region, the construction of the Queen's Wharf Integrated Resort Casino in the Brisbane CBD by 2017 will play a central role, bringing a dramatic change of scale and culture in the architectural development of the city. This project is the linchpin of a broad strategy, which promotes tourism infrastructure to ensure Brisbane's visibility and presence in the Asia Pacific market. With their association to a luxury lifestyle made of glittering golden chips and ostentatious opulence, the casino has a prime role within Brisbane's rebranding strategy. To attract international visitors seeking the experience of a world-class city, however, integrated resort casinos are only one component of a larger inventory. Iconic pedestrian bridges, panoramic wheels, wonderland gardens and glamorous swimming pools located on waterfronts – already part of the Brisbane urban landscape - have recently become essential features to convey a convincing image of a rampant global city.

This paper aims to investigate critically the role of architecture in the making of contemporary city, focusing on the recent transformations on the area across Brisbane's CBD and South Bank. In order to understand Brisbane's strategic use of architecture to consolidate its position in the international market – and the repercussion of this choice – the paper will adopt a historical perspective on this phenomenon, considering Moshe Safdie's research on high-density mixed-use integrated resorts, including his projects for the Robina International Casino (1982) in Queensland's Gold Coast, Marina Bay (2011) in Singapore and the most recent Chongqing Chatianmen mixed-use intervention in China. The comparative analysis of these precedents with Brisbane's urban restructuring will build an understanding of the existence of a consolidated urban trend and highlight the circulation of architectural ideas and strategies across Asia Pacific cities.

Introduction: Toward a “World-class City”

With the ambition of becoming part of the international network of global cities, after Expo’88 Brisbane has rebranded itself as ‘Australia’s new world city’, a slogan that was widely used in 2014, when Brisbane hosted the G20. According to the “2012-2031 Brisbane Economic Development Plan” published by the Brisbane City Council, the challenge for Brisbane is to outperform its global competitors and secure the economic benefits that will be on offer.¹ There are different interpretations of what is required to be a “world-class city.”² While Brisbane’s strategic plan includes business meetings strategies, increased airline routes and a major events strategy to build a calendar of future events,³ other sources point to the importance of a locally rooted lifestyle and a reliable system of security.⁴ And yet, in order to foster its global visibility and credibility, a city has necessarily to take into account its urban development and deploy a large inventory of architectural elements that can boost its glittering and advanced urban image. Iconic pedestrian bridges, panoramic wheels, wonderland gardens and glamorous swimming pools located on waterfronts have recently flourished, becoming essential features for conveying a powerful image of a rampant global city. Within this broader topic concerning the making of a world-class city in the Asia Pacific geopolitical frame, the objective of this study is to investigate what role architecture plays in representing Brisbane’s rebranding aspirations and which urban strategies have been adopted to initiate its urban changes in a global context.



FIGURE 1 City branding in the Asia Pacific Region. (graphic by the authors)

As demonstrated in recent studies,⁵ Expo’88 and its legacy projects for South Bank Parklands have already shown the Queensland Government’s intentions to upgrade the international reputation of Brisbane from a peripheral city to a leading capital city of the Asia Pacific region – using South Bank as an incubator for urban changes. Since the late 1990s, Brisbane has actively sought to improve its “urban inventory” through the procurement of major urban architecture and infrastructure. An element that distinguishes an Asia Pacific world-class city is the presence of a “wonder garden”, which fosters the idea of a luxurious Eden. Here Brisbane has been forerunner. In 1992 it experimented, creating an artificial forest in the middle of the city, enriched by a lush arbour covered with a purple bougainvillea.⁶ In addition the idea of placing a swimming-pool in the heart of the city was tested for the first time in Brisbane with the opening of Kodak Beach in the same year.⁷ A smaller version of a ‘Kodak Beach’, the Cairn’s Esplanade, came in 2003 while Singapore’s Infinity Pool on top of the Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort Casino followed in 2010. Nevertheless, the highly iconic pool of Singapore does not guarantee the same public accessibility offered by the Queensland examples, which are open to the public and for this reason they remain unique globally. The idea of a pedestrian bridge to revitalise parts of Brisbane’s city centre came in 2001, with the construction of the Goodwill Bridge, which generated a lively debate at local level. The construction of the Kurilpa Bridge, the world’s largest hybrid tensegrity bridge designed by Cox Rayner Architects, followed in 2009, proving to be an authentic success: an iconic piece

of pedestrian infrastructure over the Brisbane River, which has become a landmark of the city. The same Australian architectural firm designed the project for the Helix Bridge, a double-helix structure opened in 2010 in Marina Bay, Singapore. From Beijing to Singapore, Hong Kong and Yokohama, panoramic wheels have recently become part of a world-class city's skyline.⁸ The Wheel of Brisbane was opened in South Bank in 2008, coincidentally with Melbourne's Southern Star, the Tianjin Eye and the Singapore Flyer. Installed during the 20th anniversary of World Expo'88 and the 150th anniversary of the State of Queensland 1859–2009 celebrations, it was meant to be a temporary structure but the local authorities decided to keep it.



FIGURE 2 The world-class city's components. (graphic by the authors)

However, in order to attract international visitors seeking the experience of a world-class city,⁹ having “a hugely ambitious construction project that takes forever,”¹⁰ such as an integrated resort casino, is required.¹¹ For its impressive dimensions and the economic income it can generate, the integrated resort casino retains a prime role in boosting the visibility of a world-class Asia Pacific city. Lee Kah-Wee observes that as a consequence of the flourishing economy of the ‘Asian tigers’ and China, there has recently been a sudden increase of golden chips in Asia – the consequence of a dramatic acceleration in the construction of casinos in the region.¹² The completion of the Queen’s Wharf Integrated Resort Casino in Brisbane’s CBD, scheduled for 2022, is designed to bring a considerable change of scale and culture to the architectural development of the city. According to local authorities, the Queen’s Wharf Integrated Resort Casino will add to the international success that Expo’88 and the subsequent completion of South Bank Parkland in 1992 were able to secure for Brisbane over the last three decades. Located on the opposite river side from South Bank Parklands, the Queen’s Wharf Integrated Resort Casino will allow the penetration of South Bank’s ,outdoor lifestyle and the playful character of its public lagoon into the more business-oriented CBD, particularly through the construction of a new bridge connecting north and south and a major waterfront regeneration project. Here, however, the laid-back atmosphere of South Bank will be turned into a more glamorous - and less accessible - semi-public experience.

The Temptation of the Asian Pacific Model

Amongst all the initiatives that are reshaping the urban identity of Brisbane, the Queen’s Wharf Integrated Resort Casino seems to be the catalyst of the political and economic vision that the capital city of Queensland is bringing into play. While celebrated by the local and state authorities as a means to boost Queensland’s touristic industry,¹³ the local architectural community has regarded the new project as a threat for the balance of the urban texture of the CBD and South Bank believing, amongst other concerns, that the urban ecology of the river will be eventually compromised.¹⁴ Richard Kirk, the Australian Institute of Architects’ Queensland Chapter president (2014-2016), has firmly criticised the intervention’s planning approach: “The Brisbane city grid is a very tight city grid, and large format buildings like casinos

don't sit well in fine-grained city centres [...] Cities that are focused on an internalized experience are struggling. Any project that doesn't recognise that will have an adverse impact on the city's future viability." Kirk believes that "the city is always more important than individual interests,"¹⁵ a view, which at this stage of the architectural proposal, seem to be overlooked. Michael Keniger, former Queensland government architect, stresses further the importance of keeping the public interest as central in the process of city making: "There's no question that economically it might make sense to the city but in an ideal world, is that the best site for it?"¹⁶ Queen's Wharf Casino Resort Development was never a design competition, missing out on the opportunity to involve architectural firms able to question, improve and interpret the brief in new terms. However, internationally, it is common practice that the process of assigning resort casino developments privilege economic criteria, where the winning bid has to primarily address strategies to increase international tourism and boost the State's economy through this and construction process itself. The design proposition seems to be considered secondary or at least, in the Brisbane case, the value of the architectural component has not played a decisive role in the process. This is a substantial difference from Singapore's Marina Bay Integrated Resort Casino, which has been able to pair the promotion of innovative design strategies with strong economic benefits for the city-state.

The dimensions of Brisbane's entire architectural complex in relation to its urban context are such that it is legitimate to refer to the assumption formulated by Rem Koolhaas in one of his most controversial essays "Bigness: Or the problem of Large."¹⁷ Koolhaas recognises a fundamental demiurgic essence to "bigness [which] destroys, but it is also a new beginning." The Queen's Wharf Integrated Resort Casino indeed implies a series of breaks "with scale, with architectural composition, with tradition, with transparency, with ethics [...] with any urban tissue."¹⁸ Nevertheless, it is legitimate to doubt that the current architectural proposition could embody such a pivotal role in the making of Brisbane as a world-class city. The Queens Wharf Integrated Resort Casino's architectural outcome is quite underwhelming, not radical at all, lacking in innovation in the urban reinvention of 'Brisbane birthplace' – unlikely Marina Bay Sands, which has drastically reoriented the city centre, opening to new urban scenarios. The Queens Wharf Integrated Resort Casino seems to be strongly founded on the single ideology of attracting Asian businessmen to gamble away their money. Given the current financial crisis in China, this aspiration should be considered carefully, evaluating the sustainability of the whole project against the drop of injection of Chinese and Asia money.¹⁹



FIGURE 3 Cottee Parker Architects, Queen's Wharf Integrated Resort Casino in Brisbane. (Copyright Destination Brisbane Consortium 2014)

The choice of a casino as an instrument to promote urban tourism is not a new strategy in Australia. As Michael Hall has explained, casinos have been used by State Governments to overcome phases of economic recession.²⁰ However from the 1970s, when the first Australian “casino fever” took place in Hobart, Launceston, Darwin and Alice Springs, the approach to the casino as a type has fundamentally changed. From being hosted in one independent building in peripheral cities – like an in-vitro experiment while fearing an uncontrollable epidemic –²¹ in the current 4th iteration of Australian “casino fever,” casinos have become part of integrated complexes in the heart of major cities. Only in Queensland,²² on top of the Queen’s Wharf Integrated Resort Casino in Brisbane, are there two additional licences for Integrated Resort Casino – assigned to Cairns²³ and the Gold Coast.²⁴

Certainly, the adoption of integrated resort casinos as a part of a larger intervention to revitalise central urban areas is not limited to Queensland, as proven by the current development in Sydney’s East Darling Harbour, known as Barangaroo. They all present a similar set of issues: “Every building is too large, too high, too intrusive and too little respectful of the public domain it exploits. The most extreme instance is Chris Wilkinson’s 275m tall hotel/VIP casino for Crown Entertainment,” observes Philip Drew referring to Barangaroo.²⁵ The nominal and functional shift from the “casino” to the “integrated resort casino” is not a secondary factor, as “saying ‘yes’ to the integrated resort is not quite the same as saying ‘yes’ to the casino.”²⁶ In other words, from an ethical point of view, the integrated resort has become an effective disguise for the casino, which is still perceived as an immoral entity nestled in the heart of the city.

One reads on the website of Cottee Parker Architects, authors of the contentious project in Brisbane: “The iconic architecture and public realm have been developed as a quintessentially Brisbane landmark, emphasising Brisbane’s unique subtropical climate, lifestyle, cityscape and heritage assets.”²⁷ The overall mass of Brisbane’s new integrated resort casino has been broken down into four residential towers and a semicircular mixed-use building, which will host the hotel and the actual casino. This semi-toric prism will constitute the monumental linchpin of the complex and the plinth for a swimming pool, a moonlight cinema and a sky terrace. Considering the program and the architectural components of the Queen’s Wharf Integrated Resort Casino, one cannot miss the glaring similarities to one of the most discussed building in the Asia Pacific region: the \$5 billion, high-density, mixed-use integrated resort Marina Bay Sands (2004-10) in Singapore.

Considering both the economic and architectural global success of Marina Bay Sands, it is reasonable to claim it as an intervention constituting a milestone in the progression of its type in the region, not only for its new architectural approach but for its central role in the city’s urban renewal too. The idea of deconstructing the monolithic tower, breaking it down into 3 elements connected by a curving slab atop them, is a genuine invention. Koolhaas first put the theory of the skyscraper in crisis introducing the idea of “killing the tower”,²⁸ adopted a similar solution for his De Rotterdam (1997-2013)²⁹ much earlier than the completion of Marina Bay Sands. And yet, while De Rotterdam is a vertical city composed by 3 interconnected mixed-use towers, Marina Bay Sands’ 3 towers are joined at the top by means of a spectacular sky-pool (Infinity Pool), providing the complex with a unique and recognisable feature.



FIGURE 4 Moshe Safdie, View of Marina Bay Sands and Marina Bay by night in Singapore, 2010. (Photo credits Pedro Guedes)

Surprisingly, Queensland is not new to the idea of the integrated resort, as in 1982 a project was commissioned for an International Standard Tourist Complex and Casino as part of a major urban development plan in the suburban area of Robina, Gold Coast,³⁰ commissioned by the Robina Land Corporation (RLC).³¹ The RLC was founded in December 1980 by a joint venture between Arthur Earle and the Singaporean shipbuilder Robin Loh, who purchased the 1658-hectare site for AU\$11.2 million from the liquidators of the Cambridge Credit Company. Having monitored the area since 1964, the two investors understood its potentialities to become a real estate development targeting

weekenders and retirees.³² Despite the absence of a spectacular swimming pool, in Robina the relationship with the water is a pivotal component, with the artificial lake becoming an element of exclusiveness. Bridges are the preferred means of connection of three of the four islands on reclaimed land; a “fantasy” garden occupies an entire island, which is accessible only via boats, amplifying its dimension of wonder. The casino, already in this early experiment, is “isolated” and disguised into a complex program of functions, which included a luxury hotel, convention facilities, an indoor sport arena, recreational and entertainment facilities, a pony trail and a bicycle path. Only a part of the master-plan was built, while the project of the integrated resort casino remained on paper. Curiously, the seminal ideas that drive the Marina Bay Sands in Singapore and the Queen’s Wharf Casino in Brisbane were already present, much earlier, in the Robina project. In order to diminish the impact of the hotels’ giant volumes, the two imposing triangular buildings of Robina were split into two parts, a solution adopted in Marina Bay Sands as well to lighten the massive overall volume. Also, the understanding of the building as a landmark, the attempt to emphasise the top of the building and the Portmanesque layout of the hotel make Marina Bay Sands conceptually very close to the Robina project.

It is worth noting that the Israeli-Canadian architect Moshe Safdie, the architect of Marina Bay Sands, was also the designer of the Robina casino complex. As observed by Safdie himself: “A program rather similar to that of Marina Bay Sands, incorporating an arena, convention centre, grand casino, several hotels, was conceived as part of a large new town to be called Robina.”³³ At the time of the Robina project, Dr Loh was already in contact with the Israeli-Canadian architect due to his interest in Safdie’s Habitat ‘67 and his experimentation in 3D prefabricated modules for housing developments in South East Asia,³⁴ with the intention of adopting the name of Robina for a large number of projects.³⁵ While their collaboration brought to the construction of a two-tower complex in downtown Singapore, Ardmore Habitat (1982), the Robina Integrated Resort represented the occasion for further experimentation with the concept of “mega-scale.”³⁶ Its geometrical architectural language based on the use of a triangular matrix has been extensively tested in project proposals encompassing Kenzo Tange’s Boston Harbour (1959) and Project for the Bay of Tokyo (1960) and, more literally, Safdie’s first proposal for Habitat (1963).



FIGURE 5 Moshe Safdie, International Standard Tourist Complex and Casino in Robina Queensland, 1982. (Moshe Safdie Architects Archive)

Moshe Safdie and the Shift from “Mega-Structure” to “Mega-Scale”

Moshe Safdie (1938-), Israeli-Canadian architect, 2015 AIA Gold Medal-winner and previous Director of Urban Design Program at Harvard University, has worked on the theme of the mega-structure since the 1960s. During this period of fervent theorisation of the social aspirations of architecture, Safdie focused on social housing conditions through the standardisation of the components, technological innovations and studies of layout, all kept together through the use of a mega-structure. The projects designed during this period, characterised by a high degree of formal experimentation, were mainly unbuilt, constituting a repertoire for Safdie’s future architectural production. His Habitat ‘67 stands out as an exception, as well as one of the few successful experiments in the world of a built residential mega-structure.³⁷

Safdie observed that: “We made a quantum leap by actually building it, with real construction techniques and real materials and structures. Suddenly Archigram and all the others seemed terribly naive, dreaming up images but not buildings. And then Kurokawa managed to build his own tower - that funny thing with plug-in pods.”³⁸

In 1976 the publication of the book *Habitat Bill of Rights*,³⁹ written by Safdie in collaboration with Nadar Ardalan, George Candilis, Balkrishna Doshi and Jose Luis Sert, proved a pioneering document for the investigation of qualitative affordable housing, marking a shift in Safdie’s practice. During the 1980s, Safdie was busy with his academic responsibilities at Harvard University. In the 1990s, while being responsible for the design of six of Canada’s principal public institutions, he focused on the definition of monumentality in public and institutional architecture. The formal outcomes, which explicitly refer to constructivist masterpieces and exhibit a clear homage to Metabolist precedents, highlight his intention to maintain tight relationships with ideological and formal tendencies as much as a declared mission to realise experimental ideas into built forms.⁴⁰

Since 2004, with the “Tall building fellowship” granted by the Safdie Architects office,⁴¹ the core of Safdie’s design research has been concentrated on redeeming the dystopian and dehumanising reputation of megastructures and densification.⁴² In so doing, Safdie has initiated a conceptual shift from an ideological and obsolete understanding of mega-structure to a more contemporary idea of the “mega-scale,” understood as a town and not a building. Aiming to humanise the “mega-structure,”⁴³ Safdie has problematized the issue of Bigness through four main strategies. The first technique is the integration of residential, commercial and institutional facilities into a single mixed-use complex. The second strategy coincides with the adoption of gardens to reinforce the connections with nature, (light, water and vegetation) in order to resolve the alienating atmosphere of mega-structures. Natural elements guarantee to positively influence the wellbeing of the users. Across Safdie’s body of work, the garden acquires different variations. In *Habitat '67*, for instance, each apartment was democratically provided with a private garden while in the Robina Casino, it became a fantasy Hanging Garden referring to the lost and exotic splendour of Babylon, as Safdie extolled.⁴⁴ The provision of a public realm to resonate with the physical and cultural settings of a precise cultural and climatic environment constitutes the third strategy.⁴⁵ Finally Safdie tests the fragmentation of the architectural mass, in order to maximise the exposure of the single units differently arranged. In a residential building, for instance, the deconstruction of the architectural mass into modules secures to each module a high degree of exposure to natural light. Differently, in a mixed-use typology, the deconstruction of the tower into a series of modules provides the opportunity of multiplying the ground floor and its annexed public realm. This need emerges with the necessity of having multiple points of connectivity between the vertical elements, as experimented with at Marina Bay Sands as well as in Chongqing Chaotianmen (2012-2017). The two projects provide a similar program for those elevated public platforms: a garden equipped with a swimming pool, bars, restaurants and clubs, privileged views of the city and a very exclusive atmosphere.

Conclusion: The Circulation of Architectural Strategies across Asia Pacific Cities

The link between Singapore and Queensland, and the connections of the cities of the Gold Coast, Singapore, Brisbane and Chongqing, cast light on how the concept of Marina Bay Sands is not that new or exclusive. It was indeed tested more than 20 years ago in Australia, turning the Gold Coast into a sort of Queensland “Coney Island”.⁴⁶ The comparative study of the International Standard Tourist Complex and Casino in Robina Queensland (1982), Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort in Singapore (2011), Brisbane’s Queen’s Wharf Integrated Resort Casino and the ongoing construction of the Chaotianmen mixed use complex in Chongqing, one of Brisbane’s Sister Cities in the Asia Pacific region, strengthen the argument of an existing network of architectural and urban relationships in the Asia Pacific region, although there are huge differences amongst these cases, especially considering their urban role.

With the calendar of events that Brisbane has developed, one perceives the way the city is building its international reputation as a growing economic reality to affirm its role as a competitive global touristic hub in the Asia Pacific region. In 1993 the first Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art was held at the Queensland Art Gallery. The first and second Asia Pacific Cities Summit and Mayors’ Forum were hosted respectively in 1996 and 1999 in Brisbane, marking the further aspiration of the capital of Queensland to establish tighter connections with the Asia Pacific Region. Brisbane was again the host city of the Mayors’ Forum in 2003, 2007 and 2015, in so doing declaring its commitment to improve liaisons within the Asia Pacific.⁴⁷ The Queensland’s Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA) opened in 2006 and in a relatively short time gained fame as housing the “world’s most significant collections of contemporary Asian and

Pacific art.”⁴⁸ To complement this great effort to play a part in the construction of an Asia Pacific community is related event – the annual Asia Pacific Architecture Symposium, which started in 2016 and explores architecture, design and urbanism from the region.⁴⁹

An additional factor revealing the intention of strengthening the circulation of urban and architectural ideas in the region has been the creation of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew Prize in 2010.⁵⁰ The declared mission of the prize is “to facilitate the sharing of best practices in urban solutions that are easily replicable across cities [...] to promote exemplary thought-leadership and exchange of ideas among cities, so as to spur further innovation in the area of sustainable urban development.”⁵¹ Relevant to the argument of this paper is how every capital city of the Australian East Coast has been awarded with a special mention for its contribution to the development of urban strategies. In 2010, Melbourne was awarded for its innovative approach to urban renovation; in 2012, Brisbane received a special mention for its outstanding role in the provision of urban design combined with subtropical architecture. Finally, in 2016 the 3 guiding principles (Green, Global and Connected) of Sydney’s Sustainable Sydney 2030 Plan have assured the special mention of New South Wales’ capital city. Evident is the emphasis on the tropical component of the architectural and urban projects considered. This attribute make the Queensland capital a paradigmatic example for Singapore. Their affinities regarding the presence of multicultural populations, the innovative approach to urban projects, recognition of the great potential of the waterfront for celebrating public events but also for offering a high-standard lifestyle and the vision of becoming global urban environments in the Asia Pacific region are strengthened by climatic similarities which highly characterise the architectural outcomes of both cities.⁵²

As predicted by Koolhaas in his pivotal essay “Singapore Songlines”,⁵³ Singapore is emerging as an experimental architectural and urban laboratory in the region and Marina Bay, with Safdie’s Marina Bay Sands being the paradigm that constitutes a necessary terms of comparison when creating an aggressively appealing image for an aspiring new world-class city. However, the implementation of a finely tailored strategy does not guarantee an equivalent success in its outcomes and the “Marina Bay effect” might not take place necessarily with the same strength in other cities that are aiming to become global. This is the case of Brisbane, where the project of the Queen’s Wharf Integrated Resort Casino comes across as a naive operation, emulative of a successful precedent. However, what is relevant to this analysis is the recognition of the role played by Australia, and Queensland in particular, in the development of architectural and urban strategies for the definition of a world-class city. However, considered in its historical perspective, the formal and typological similarities between Marina Bay Sands in Singapore, and the Queen’s Wharf Integrated Resort Casino in Brisbane – and between their related urban strategies of pedestrianisation and ‘leisureisation’⁵⁴ of the public space – should not surprise.

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