

How ‘Development’ Promotes Redundant Visions: The Case of the Queen's Wharf Casino Project, Brisbane

Richard A. Slaughter
Foresight International
Australia

‘You only need to spend millions of dollars advertising something if its worth is in doubt’ (Attrib. Donella Meadows, 1941-2001.)

Abstract

Pathways toward ‘overshoot and collapse’ futures are not always or exclusively determined by international trends, national governments, wars and large-scale events. While these gain considerable attention their overall impact is arguably no greater than the constant ‘drip, drip, drip’ of conventional decision-making around more mundane activities that fall under familiar headings like ‘business strategy’, ‘economic growth’ and ‘development’. While cities have master plans and strategic goals most of them evolve within, and are expressed through, a continuous series of commercially inspired projects founded on narrow short-term economic assumptions. They emerge from a typically up-beat, entrepreneurial (profit-oriented) and finance-based worldview that is little short of delusional. As a result, many large-scale projects are poorly conceived and end up working against shared community interests. The central purpose of this paper is to contribute toward a broad re-appraisal of such projects in the hope that future ‘developments’ can be turned toward more consciously proactive and socially responsible ends.

Keywords: development, economic growth, redundant visions, casinos, anthropocene, transition to sustainability

Introduction

The paper considers a project currently being promoted as ‘transformative’ for Brisbane – a ‘mega-casino’ and high-end 6-star resort right in the heart of the city. It suggests that such projects embody redundant visions based on inadequate information and inappropriate values. They display a willed ignorance of the recent past, a profound misreading of the present and an increasingly perverse incapacity to confront ever more challenging futures. This, we should note, is occurring in a region where a number of city futures projects have been carried out over recent years (as outlined previously in this journal – see Russo, 2015) to apparently little enduring effect.

As poorly conceived development processes extend over decades both the form of and the options for cities become constrained. In the absence of any serious environmental scanning or sustained futures capability they become ever more maladapted to changing global conditions (Floyd & Slaughter, 2014). This fact is, however, widely overlooked. Yet a glance beyond the marketing gloss suggests that, if built, this casino project would exacerbate existing social problems and make the city even less sustainable than it is now. It is a clear example of ‘profit now – pay later.’ But, as ever, the profits go to the few (which in this case includes a handful of very rich Chinese investors) while the costs are shared by the many.

Misguided Marketing, Misguided Development

At the time of writing a serious and generously funded campaign is under way in Brisbane. It is intended to convince decision makers and the public that proposals to transform Queen's Wharf, a prime CBD site by the river, into a casino and mega-resort is, in some sense, ‘desirable,’ that it will not produce a tasteless and over-scale planning disaster. That this is happening at all is, in large measure, due to a strategy adopted by the previous Liberal National Party (LNP) government under Campbell Newman. That is, instead of engaging in any kind of public consultation process with the local community at all it announced a ‘competition’ between two pre-selected bidders. One of these - Echo Entertainment - was chosen without further ado by the government - end of story. Yet the closer one looks at this project the less sense it makes.

The marketing effort has been huge, expensive and expertly planned. Channel 9 and NewsCorp's *The Courier Mail* have pulled out the stops to run stories and features depicting the project as a true gift to the nation. They've made good use of a range of ‘artist's impressions’ and sophisticated video ‘fly-throughs’ (Echo Entertainment Group, 2015a). The basic strategy has been to conceal the real purpose of this type of development behind layers of apparent ‘desirables’. Foremost among these is the highly seductive mantra of ‘jobs, jobs, and more jobs’ that, at a surface level, plays equally well to the government, economists and the general public. What's not to like? Well, for a start few people seem to be asking the right questions. For example: what kind of jobs? Why these jobs and not other, more useful ones? How secure would they be with a continuing decline in the terms of the regional casino trade? What are the longer-term social and economic implications?

Next to jobs is the mantra of ‘economic development’ that, in this context, appears to mean ‘more of everything’. That is more visitors (another item that plays well, especially with business), more ocean terminals, more shopping and restaurant facilities etc. Again, what's not to like? Finally we are being sold on the notion that, in order to qualify as a new ‘world city’ Brisbane needs to take up and cherish such projects. They are said to ‘add to our profile’. They increase our status. They make us more modern, more attractive, especially to ‘visitors’. But what do these assurances mean and who are these phantom visitors? Published sources reveal that the casino and its accompanying six-star resort are being predicated on the tastes of China's upper middle classes and especially their growing band of super-rich (Echo Entertainment Group, 2015b). Now, to put this as delicately as possible, are such groups known for their taste, their discrimination? Or are they distinguished by ostentatious over-consumption, ignorance and waste? A moment's thought reveals the answer. This kind of development really has little or nothing to do with the residents of Brisbane or with Australia's real interests. It also contradicts the view that rich nations need to rein in their consumption to reduce global impacts and increase global equity (Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 2013). But it has a great deal to do with the flight of Chinese capital from the mainland and its need to find new conquests overseas.

After fleeing the crashing stock market, Chinese investors have been pouring cash into what they think are haven investments, including bonds, insurance products, big-city real estate and artwork. ‘There's a strong sense of flight to quality, to bonds and properties in first-tier cities,’ said

Qing Wang, president of Shanghai Chongyang Investment Company' (Gu, 2015).

So that's it. 'Brisbane' is not seen as the home of several million people all with interests in social wellbeing and a viable, sustainable future. It's merely a 'haven investment.' Mr Cheng, owner of the Chow Tai Fook (CTF) business empire, is one of the Hong Kong tycoons who, according to *The Courier Mail*, are 'driving a global vision for "new world" cities with the \$2billion-plus Queen's Wharf precinct in Brisbane'. The project is described as 'the shining jewel of multibillion-dollar landmark projects across the planet.' One could never accuse these people of understatement. Also of interest here is that a Mr. Chang, Chief Executive of CTF, openly lays claim to a peculiar kind of city planning 'expertise'. He says that 'we like to take something historic and add arts, culture and local flavour.' He then adds, 'we like to inject some vibrancy and new energy into those districts' (Michael, 2015a). All of which seems rather odd, if not to say presumptuous. Exactly to what extent can it now be said that Hong Kong billionaires and their agents are standing in for our own planning agencies?

The global hyper-rich and their associates have a well-known penchant for seeking to shape the world according to their own very specific tastes. As Kempf and others have shown, these groups exert powerfully negative and disproportionate effects upon others regarding what is considered desirable (Kempf, 2009; Slaughter, 2010, p. 57-60). This same process can be seen in cities where bold statements of corporate dominance and power loom over earlier structures that once embodied more broadly useful and egalitarian civic functions - churches, libraries and city halls. In cities around the world such trends are becoming universal. In London, for example, sustained waves of overseas investment have, for some years, been re-making the city in the interests of capital, much to the detriment of its physical and social fabric. As new luxury tower blocks are completed families are displaced and have no choice but to sell up and leave. Cashed-up foreign buyers can be content, however, as their funds take on the tangible form of 'deposit boxes in the sky.' Local councils - there as here - are seduced by the promise of new income from rates and other charges. London as a whole is steadily becoming privatised. But again, when international capital is the driving force for change nearly everyone loses (Klein, 2007; Klein, 2014).

Brisbane residents might also want to take note of what has occurred closer at hand in Sydney over recent years. Writer Giacomo Bianchino has suggested that 'a concordat between government and business rarely concludes itself in favour of the citizenry.' He adds that 'the focus is almost always on international appeal rather than civic or community use.' Does this sound familiar? Projects at Bangaroo and the Bays Precinct are cited as 'just the most recent chapters in a long narrative of government complicity with corporatisation' (Bianchino, 2015). Now it's Brisbane's turn. An Australian company built on gambling (which it refers to as its continuing 'engine room') teams up with two Hong Kong commercial giants to shoe horn a casino and mega-resort into a wholly inappropriate site - the government precinct by the river. The proposition includes: '1100 premium hotel rooms, 50 new restaurants and bars, event spaces for 60,000 people, jobs for 8000 workers, 2000 apartments and 12 football fields of public space' (Echo Entertainment, 2015). It sounds like an offer too good to refuse because it is designed to achieve exactly that.

The aphorism attributed to Donella Meadows (above) applies to this and, indeed, many similar projects. Billions of dollars *are* being spent on something 'whose worth is in doubt' (Michael, 2015b). No effort is being spared to persuade the community that such a project will enhance the city and bring real benefits. But when the balance of costs and so-called 'benefits' are weighed a very different story emerges. As in London, Sydney and elsewhere, the real game is not about civic or local benefits but, rather, about capital investment, capital accumulation. It is, in other words, part of a vast deception that needs to be examined with far greater care. There are at least four specific reasons to reject proposals of this kind:

- Issues regarding architectural forms, landscape and heritage
- A range of social and economic concerns

- Related civic and ethical issues, and,
- The need for developments of all kinds to take a broader temporal view. For example to acknowledge the ‘real’ future prospects and challenges that look certain to overturn conventional assumptions and practices.

Architecture, Landscape and Heritage

The most obvious drawback is that the proposed development is hugely over scale. A group of local architects recognised this. They suggested that ‘developments of this scale will overwhelm the historic fabric and erase parts of it such as the streets that are fundamental to its (Queensland’s) story.’ The group asked ‘where ... are the civic spaces that signal government purpose?’ And would the business of government ‘now be carried out in a ‘casino resort’ with its additional 7000 cars?’ (Rogers, 2015). Such questions remain unanswered. If built the project would indeed dominate the entire city and the existing riverside landscape, including the popular and highly successful Southbank. The latter has succeeded in part because it respected the need for multi-use public space by providing a tapestry of environments that significantly enhanced Brisbane’s conviviality and outdoor recreational areas.

Casinos, however, are obviously very different creatures. They are exclusive (and excluding) spaces that reduce citizens to the status of mere ‘punters’. As such they are characterised by deception, exploitation and cruelty. This was again brought home in an ABC documentary on the ways that poker machines are specifically designed to deceive those who use them, destroying many lives in the process (ABC, 2015). The documentary, in turn, led a firm of public service lawyers to mount a legal challenge claiming that ‘poker machines are in breach of consumer law for misleading and deceptive conduct’ (Willingham, 2015). Regardless of the specific device or ‘game’ we know that ‘the house always wins.’ The ‘empty rich’ and the ‘victim punter’, along with a stream of other passers by are beckoned by hollow assurances of ‘winning’ that can never be sustained. Casinos can therefore be legitimately viewed as metaphorical ‘black holes,’ social parasites, in any community and, as such, they cannot but cast a long shadow over its character, its residual heritage values and, indeed, its future. Some of these issues are discussed further in the following section

Social and Economic Concerns

Gambling emporia are problematic in almost every possible way. They occupy a seldom-acknowledged gulf or rift in contemporary social awareness. As noted here they invest in heavy-duty marketing and paint themselves with generous amounts of gloss and hype precisely in order to conceal and to deceive. They want to be viewed as ‘good citizens’ that contribute to society. Yet unlike traditional pubs, parks or community centres, they do not fulfil any real social needs at all. They are compelled, rather like actors past their prime, to put on lashings of makeup, dress in the most beguiling costumes and put on a variety of showy and distracting performances.

Yet the social and economic worth of casinos – complete with all the many trimmings – is seriously in doubt. Does Brisbane need an influx of cashed-up Chinese high rollers or high-end retail outlets for esoteric European brands? A handful of merchants might argue that it does. Equally, a few over-priced and exclusive restaurants might well have a point. Certain attractions in the red light precinct of Fortitude Valley also stand to benefit. But, overall, a new city-based casino actually imposes a broad spectrum of new costs and taxes on the city and its inhabitants. How can we be so sure about this?

Studies carried out in New Jersey found that a single ‘problem gambler’ was likely to affect some ten other people in their family or social circle (Helm, 2015). Another study closer at hand in Victoria estimated that no less than 30,000 people across the state (are) affected by someone else’s

gambling' (Willingham, 2015). The ABC documentary mentioned above also detailed some of the costs to local communities of gambling venues (ABC, 2015). Does Brisbane need a new cycle of diffuse but chronic deprivation spreading throughout the entire urban and suburban area? The central contradiction of gambling precincts is that they destroy lives. This is truly 'rough trade' and, as such, it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify anywhere.

Civic and Ethical Issues

The glitz and glamour that is wrapped around the dismal reality of a new casino constitutes a false assurance that something of real value is being proposed. This is false since aspects of the social fabric will in fact be downgraded, taken away or destroyed. A mega-casino in the heart of Brisbane would certainly compromise its currently busy, but good-hearted, atmosphere. Whereas a city thrives on qualities such as accessibility, charm and convivial outdoor spaces a casino complex cannot escape the fact that it embodies a profound disrespect both for cities and their inhabitants. The underlying values – greed, exploitation, deception - are simply irreconcilable with those of a progressive and egalitarian society. This, in part, helps to explain why casinos are sometimes pushed out to the margins – not exactly 'out of sight' but certainly toward less centrally provocative locations. Placing one right in the centre of prime riverside real estate is a collective metaphorical 'slap in the face.' It directly contradicts the city's civic licence and purpose - the wellbeing of all its citizens.

Journalist Katherine Noonan also hit the mark when she took aim at the debased and 'used' values that she saw demonstrated in the over-the-top architectural designs prominently on show. With a mixture of wit and acerbic comment her view is that:

Oversized shiny buildings with potted palms on top, infinity pools and indoor atriums are a dime a dozen. Check out the artist's impression of the development for Brisbane. Looks like something I saw in Hong Kong 10 years ago. Every casino looks the same. Sky decks are so 2005. You visit these cities, stay in these resorts and are bored by them, hungry for a bit of history, soul, grit, texture, authenticity. See one Macau with its casino malls, seen them all. Yet here we are in Brisbane, pretending this will be different (Noonan, 2015).

Noonan catches the contrast here between what is authentic and real in travel experience and what is fake. Clearly casinos fall at the latter end of the spectrum.

Preparing for 'The Real Future'

The issues outlined above would be enough in any reasonable view to question whether a new mega-casino for Brisbane should go ahead. But there is one further consideration that, thus far, does not appear to have been publically aired anywhere. Yet in some ways it is even more compelling. It turns on understanding the past and present sufficiently well, and in sufficient depth, to provide a compelling sense of what is at stake in terms of the 'real future.'

Informed views back over the decades since World War Two reveal many vital insights that have been largely or entirely missing from conventional views of development. One concerns the speed-up and change of scale of human activity around the world. To look at almost any measure of that process on a graph is to see the same generic upward curve repeated time after time. What this means is profound, although the implications continue to elude many. There has, in a nutshell, been a vast and unprecedented increase in extraction, impacts and subsequent influence on global systems across the entire range (Steffen et al, 2004). The dynamics of this process have been observed, clarified and displayed in a variety of ways - through conferences, research papers, books, journals,

documentaries and so on (see Taylor, 2008; Slaughter, 2010). Little effort is now required to gain an understanding of the state of the planet in what is increasingly seen as the ‘anthropocene’ or era of human influence (Slaughter, 2012). Most of this is uncontroversial but, despite the availability of so many reliable sources, the wider implications are widely ignored. Paradigm blindness, ideological constructs and developmental barriers remain rife. Many actors within the corporate sector have, to the collective cost of humanity, stood in the way of human societies coming to grips with the new realities. One of their slogans was simply ‘doubt is our product’ (Oreskes & Conway, 2011; Klein, 2014; McKibben, 2015b).

The shifts are, however, dramatic and essentially undeniable. Fifty or sixty years ago, in the mid-20th Century, it was still possible to depict humanity as being in some sense ‘surrounded’ by vast and inexhaustible nature. Now, in the second decade of the 21st Century, it is ‘nature’ that is surrounded and compromised by human populations, and especially the currently affluent (Kemp, Ibid.). Some attempts have been made here and there to adjust to the new conditions of scarcity and compromised natural systems. But there is a long and challenging road to travel before a viable balance between humans and natural process will be achieved. Collectively, as a culture, we are simply not focused on this – which is why those with unobstructed forward views seriously anticipate the emergence of a new ‘Dark Age’ (Hamilton, 2010). What, therefore, is the point in stimulating further consumption, more material growth, more waste and, indeed, more extreme and unproductive versions of the consumerist lifestyle?

The Key Is ‘Transition’

What is meant by ‘commerce’, ‘profit’ and even ‘economic growth’ needs to be more honestly reflected upon, and reconceptualised; also how these imperatives are currently conducted, how they influence what people do and live their lives. It is in this very specific and severely overextended context that the construction of new casinos beggars belief. While there may have been some justification in an under-populated and well-supplied ‘cornucopian’ world, that world no longer exists.

The whole commercial game and its over-scale offshoots – its marketing, investment, growth-at-all-costs practices - need to be reined in and re-directed. We clearly need to move away from old-style growth and consumption to the exacting process of living sustainably in an over-full world – a ‘planet under pressure.’ The nature of this transition – and the ways that society chooses to engage in or ignore it – is *the* central issue facing everyone (New Economics Forum, 2016). In this view much existing and planned commercial infrastructure represents a misdirection of wealth, effort, materials, skills and overall social capacity.

These are all required for different ends; ends that are informed by a clear recognition not only of the much-heralded ‘opportunities’ ahead but also of the overlooked challenges facing human civilisation. The notion and the reality of a mainstream, multi-sector transition takes us into new territory. It is a growing reality that holds out unlimited promise for human societies. It is here that the new jobs, new professions, new business and opportunities lie. They do not and cannot emerge from the mistakes and oversights of the industrial period that further inscribe the downward path to dystopia.

Conclusion

At a Griffith University event on the other side the river opposite the site of the proposed casino development I asked a gentleman over lunch what he thought about the proposal. His one word reply was indicative - ‘outrageous.’

Attempts to sell Brisbane a new casino are indeed misguided and should be rejected.

Casinos and related projects belong to a past that is already falling behind us. They also evoke redundant futures that we should endeavour to avoid. The glossy, idealised images and marketing hype are little more than smoke screens that serve to disguise financial and economic interests seeking to continue inappropriate and regressive forms of development. The state government and the city council need to resist being seduced by promises of ‘new jobs’ and ‘new sources of income’. As shown above, previous experience in places as far apart as Maryland, USA, (where the boom and bust cycle has already occurred) and the state of Victoria, Australia show that early expectations are never fulfilled. Jobs will be fewer than promised and of variable quality. Equally, when the full social and economic costs of gambling are assessed the balance of assumed income to state and city would still fail to impress. On the other hand, investing in the transition from old-style growth toward building a sustainable infrastructure for the long term not only creates more jobs but also makes infinitely greater sense.

The future facing humanity contains challenges that will test our species to its limits and most likely beyond them. Adapting to these challenges will cost us far more than current conventional thinking will admit. It follows that a core task for civil authorities is to put much greater efforts into understanding what futures that include the possibility of ‘overshoot and collapse’ scenarios actually look like from our vantage point in time. Few are yet asking how such futures can be moderated or even avoided. So here’s a thought experiment. Before approving any further casino-type developments in Brisbane (or anywhere else) ask suitably qualified people from beyond ineffectual civil agencies and misdirected commercial entities to assess how the millions of dollars that would be expended building more useless infrastructure would be better spent preparing our over-dependent societies for the real future.

Perhaps the most certain bet of all is that casinos as they are currently framed and understood would not appear anywhere in that revised and vastly more empowering outlook.

Author’s Note

Since this piece was written the Chinese government has accelerated its crackdown on gambling and casinos, both of which are illegal on the Chinese mainland. As many as fifty casino employees, including several from Packer’s Crown group, have recently been arrested and face severe jail sentences. It’s clear that attempts to curtail the big spending ‘high rollers’ and to prevent the organisation of ‘junkets’ for travel to gambling venues, have reached new levels of intensity. Once regarded as a ‘grey area’ the government has finally moved to ban the practice altogether. These changes are bad news for the owners of casinos in Australia and especially those who are currently spending millions of dollars to develop new sites.

As this paper noted, early publicity for the Queen’s Wharf project clearly stated that the casino element of the project was regarded as the ‘engine room’ of the entire, high-end complex. To proceed now would depend on continuing the very practices the Chinese are determined to stamp out. In other words, *the business model behind the construction and operation of these large-scale, foreign financed casinos is broken*. The operators have gambled and, in this case, look like losing big-time. Which means that the cities that would otherwise suffer the wider social consequences may yet be spared.

Correspondence

Richard A Slaughter
Foresight International
PO Box 793, Indooroopilly, Queensland, Australia
Email: rslaughter@ozemail.com.au

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