

Daniel Rautio, 'GoMA: Cultural Change in The Sunshine State?'

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*'Why I was so angry with Robert was, we were going through, hopefully a cultural change: smart state, universities, a modern gallery and a moron of a Minister who had just made an outrageous speech. So it was an interesting combination...sort of the dichotomy of Queensland in a sense.'*<sup>1</sup>

Much is made of New Queensland. In New Queensland, people are not arrested for civil demonstrations, Special Branch officers do not police university classes<sup>2</sup> and our premiers presumably understand the doctrine of the separation of powers<sup>3</sup>. In New Queensland, education levels are at par or exceed other states<sup>4</sup>, biotechnology thrives and people line up for miles to attend the latest exhibition at the Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA). Indeed, it is this dichotomy between Old Queensland and New Queensland that Peter Beattie alludes to in the above extract from his interview with *Queensland Speaks*. Yet if Beattie's observation that GoMA demarcates a significant shift in Queensland's political culture is unpacked, problems arise. Firstly, given that significant reform in Queensland has only occurred in the last 20 years, the idea of there being a New Queensland is, at best, overstated. Secondly, through linking GoMA to educational initiatives, the gallery has developed with a bias towards engagement rather than aesthetic appreciation which I argue is a continuation of a trend in Queensland towards practical education. Finally, the construction of GoMA on the Kurilpa Point site – a site of significant heritage value – also continues a trend within Queensland that sacrifices heritage for rapacious development. In short, GoMA does not represent any clear delineation between Old and New Queensland but should instead be seen as ambiguous mixture of old and new, an embodiment of governmental aspiration mixed with the legacy of Queensland's past.

In the aforementioned statement, Beattie discusses cultural change within Queensland, with reference to a not-so-distant past. Yet for those who reside outside of Queensland, or indeed the country, the previous culture that Beattie refers to may not be self-explanatory. While it is outside

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for the Government of Queensland, *Queensland Speaks*, 2011, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/peter-beattie> 01:14:06 -01:16:37

<sup>2</sup> Special Branch was an infamous bureau within the Queensland Police Service tasked with the monitoring of 'subversive groups and individuals'. It targeted political parties, activists and also sat in on classes at the University of Queensland (which at the time was known for a location of political activism against the Bjelke-Petersen regime). See Daniel Hurst, 'Inside the Spy Unit,' *Brisbane Times*, 7 April 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Bjelke-Petersen was unable to explain the doctrine of the separation of powers when the question was repeatedly put to him throughout the Fitzgerald Inquiry. Bjelke-Petersen quoted in Justice Michael Moore, 'Judicial Independence: Breaking Free From the Executive Branch' (paper presented at the 19<sup>th</sup> Pacific Regional Judicial Conference, Tumon, Guam, 7-10 November 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Year 12 Attainment,' (4102.0, Australian Social Trends, Mar 2011), 1.

the scope of this article to summarise all the factors that led to Queensland being known as the Deep North, a brief summary is necessary. Firstly, for most of Queensland's history it has historically been the most decentralised state within Australia, with more than half the state's population lying outside of the state's capital.<sup>5</sup> This has resulted in regional issues being of significant importance within state politics. Connected to this decentralisation is the state's major economic reliance on primary production and, more recently, mining.<sup>6</sup> While these historical factors create a framework for a certain type of development pattern within Queensland, academics and commentators have drawn links between these factors and a certain type of attitudinal difference within Queenslanders that can be summarised as the Deep North. This is best defined by Hughes who describes the Deep North as:

authoritarian, racist in its dealings with Aborigines, heavy handed to the point of violence in its dealing with political dissidents, vulnerable to the pressures of multinational mining groups, and right wing groups opposed to liberal social trends, which have been at work in post war Queensland.<sup>7</sup>

While the notion that Queensland's reputation was vastly different to the rest of Australia is contested by some<sup>8</sup>, the idea that Queensland is – or at least was – culturally conservative compared to the rest of Australia is a recurring theme throughout Queensland's history. Subsequently, it was against Queensland's reputation as the Deep North that the Goss Government – the first Labor Government in 32 years – came to power in 1989 with a cautious, albeit extensive, reform agenda.<sup>9</sup> As part of this reform agenda implemented by Premier Wayne Goss, an explicit attempt to modernise Queensland, both institutionally and culturally, was undertaken. Therefore, it is this cultural change, represented by a contemporary, urbane art gallery that Beattie refers to in his comments regarding GoMA.

Throughout his interview with *Queensland Speaks* one gets a sense of how much credit Beattie claims for the construction of GoMA and its representation of New Queensland. Indeed, many of the statements made by interviewees seem to confirm a newspaper by-line that touts Queensland as

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret Cribb, 'Queensland Politics', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, 51(11): 1

<sup>6</sup> Roger Stuart, 'Resources Development Policy: The Case of Queensland's Export Coal Industry,' in A. Patience (ed), *The Bjelke Petersen Premiership: Issues in Public Policy*, (Melbourne, Longman Cheshire: 1985), 57.

<sup>7</sup> Hughes cited in Charles Sampford, 'From Deep North to International Governance Exemplar: Fitzgerald's Impact on the International Anti-Corruption Movement,' *Griffith Law Review* 18(3): 2.

<sup>8</sup> Dennis Murphy, 'Queensland's Image and Australian Nationalism,' *Australian Quarterly* 50 (2): 3.

<sup>9</sup> Janet Ransley and Richard Johnstone, 'The Fitzgerald Symposium: An Introduction,' *Griffith Law Review* 18 (3): 111.

beautiful one day, cultured the next.<sup>10</sup> Supporting this argument is the following statement made by Beattie to *The Australian*:

Once upon a time there was a generation that prided itself on being anti-education, anti-arts and never went through the door of a library unless they were lost. The reality is the new Queensland values the arts, it values the art gallery...This is a new era...knowledge is our - future.<sup>11</sup>

Again, we see that Beattie invokes the idea of GoMA (and other areas of the cultural precinct) as representing cultural change as if it had already occurred. While studies in political culture are notoriously problematic (with cause and effect almost impossible to separate)<sup>12</sup>, it is likely that what can be said about cultural change is that it occurs over an extended period of time. Moreover, throughout such periods of change, it is logical to assume that a legacy of the past will continue to shape future practices, particularly when such reform has only recently commenced. Nevertheless, Beattie talks about GoMA not in aspirational terms but in terms of the 'reality' of New Queensland. Certainly, GoMA does represent an aspirational shift by the state government towards artistic development which has not been seen for most of Queensland's settler history; however, to assume that such reforms, in the space of 20 years, could so rapidly create a dichotomy between Old and New Queensland belies the incremental nature of cultural change.

Another aspect that problematises the idea that the Beattie and Goss Governments were responsible for the change that GoMA represents is the fact that planning for the gallery began under the previous Coalition Government who were in power from 1996-98. While the first Beattie Government did decide to continue (and increase) funding for the project under the auspices of the Queensland Cultural Centre 2000 Project (Q-CCC 2000 Project), planning was already begun by the Liberal Deputy Premier and Minister for Arts Joan Sheldon.<sup>13</sup> Sheldon elaborates on her putative ownership of the GoMA project in her interview with *Queensland Speaks*,

That was my complex, actually... We drew up the whole plans for GOMA... and I launched all that, and may I add, had most of the funding in place early 1998 and the election was in June 1998. Unfortunately we then lost government and nothing happened for 18 months. It would be fair comment to say Matt Foley did not really want to pursue anything I'd started.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Editorial, 'Beautiful One Day, Cultured the Next,' *The Courier Mail*, 27 December 2007: 32.

<sup>11</sup> Annabelle McDonald, 'Arts Precinct Puts Modern Spin on Old Clashes,' *The Australian*, 25 November 2006:11

<sup>12</sup> Marc Hooghe 'Political Culture,' in JT Ishiyama & M Breuning (ed), *21st Century Political Science: A Reference Handbook*, (California: SAGE: 2010), 202 -09.

<sup>13</sup> Queensland Art Gallery, 'Gallery of Modern Art Timeline,' accessed at [http://qag.qld.gov.au/about\\_us/architecture/key\\_facts](http://qag.qld.gov.au/about_us/architecture/key_facts).

<sup>14</sup> Centre for the Government of Queensland, *Queensland Speaks*, 2012, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/joan-sheldon>, at 00:27: 02-00:31:14

In reality, the idea that the gallery represents both cultural change and cultural change implemented in the last 20 years is, at best, one of convenience. GoMA did not develop out of Beattie's commitment to cultural change within Queensland, but rather he was able to exploit GoMA within a wider framework of modern, cultural Queensland rhetoric. While the claiming of credit for public works programmes by successive governments is nothing new in Australian politics (particularly as public works do not conform to an arbitrary time period such as an electoral cycle), the idea that GoMA represents a clear cultural change solely instituted by Labor is not as natural as Beattie might have us believe.

Further support for GoMA containing elements of Old Queensland can be found in the interrelationship between the gallery and its emphasis on education, particularly children's education.<sup>15</sup> In her article on Queensland, Rae Wear observes that due to an emphasis on primary production, farming and the lack of an urban middle class in Brisbane, education has historically been undervalued and skewed towards practical achievement.<sup>16</sup> Julianne Schultz also observes that historically, educational attainment within Queensland was significantly lower, with only 12% of the population completing more than 9 years of schooling in the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> It is against this backdrop of practical achievement and lower educational attainment that the Beattie Government implemented the Smart State initiative: there was an explicit attempt to replace the devaluation of education with a 'knowledge economy'. Indeed, when discussing GoMA and its relationship to the Smart State, Rachel Hunter, Director-General for Education, Training and the Arts argues her portfolio combination (Education and Arts) was no accident, with education and the arts deliberately being combined 'because the smart state is the creative state'.<sup>18</sup>

While linking education with the arts is not in and of itself problematic, I argue that the consequences of linking art with education has continued a trend in Queensland that prioritises the practical versus the aesthetic. In Queensland, the success of a particular exhibition lays not just in its aesthetic value but by how well it engages the community. As Nicholas Thompson states, this does not mean that GoMA is automatically inferior to its equivalent in Sydney or Melbourne but it does mean that the curatorial decisions of the gallery are different and impact exhibitions in tangible ways. In relation to GoMA, Thompson observes that due to a prolonged era of state conservatism,

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<sup>15</sup> The Queensland Art Gallery maintains a permanent Children's Art Centre within GoMA and has attracted over 70 artists to develop children's exhibitions. Refer <http://qag.qld.gov.au/kids> for further information.

<sup>16</sup> Rae Wear, 'Queensland,' in B. Galligan and W. Roberts (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 485

<sup>17</sup> Julianne Schultz, 'Disruptive Influences,' *Griffith Review* 21 (2008): 5

<sup>18</sup> Centre for the Government of Queensland, Queensland Speaks, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/rachel-hunter>, 00:49:10-00:51:57

contemporary art's public growth and appreciation was stunted.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, he observes that the curatorial decisions of the gallery [GoMA] reflect this period of 'cultural catch-up', emphasising engagement and accessibility as part of each exhibition.<sup>20</sup> In summary, he states that:

The role of this institution is a complex one, a juggling act between presenting critically and artistically valid exhibitions and getting people through the doors; a mix between cultural relevance and popular appeal.<sup>21</sup>

While there is a view that GoMA is demonstrative of a cultural shift within Queensland, it is equally plausible that GoMA also represents the ambiguity of Queensland's cultural identity: GoMA is confusingly both a cultural icon and an 'upmarket crèche', containing populist programming.<sup>22</sup> Further, this emphasis on engagement and education (rather than purely aesthetic appreciation) is precisely what Director-General of Arts Queensland, Leigh Tabrett, refers to in her interview with *Queensland Speaks* when she states 'the great thing with GoMA is that it is not just beautiful artwork or beautiful pieces but their dedication to how to engage with the public.'<sup>23</sup> In short, we see that the legacy within Queensland of practical education and the value of an object being assessed in relation to its utility has influenced the development of GOMA. As such, any strict dichotomy between old and new Queensland that GoMA supposedly represents is problematised by the prioritisation of educational engagement contained within the gallery's curatorial strategy.

Another area where we see historical patterns continuing to shape contemporary practice within Queensland is in relation to the physical site that GoMA was built on. Throughout Queensland's history, Kurilpa Point (the site on which GoMA now stands) has been almost constantly inhabited by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.<sup>24</sup> In 2000, Archaeo (a consulting archaeology company) briefed Government on the historical significance of the site. They state,

A number of sites, places and features can be identified that possess clear significance according to a variety of criteria...Additionally, the cultural significance of Kurilpa Point, in particular, requires careful management during design development...continuity of use in terms of open space, meeting places and pathways that have connected people and places through South Brisbane from the time of traditional occupation to the present should be maintained.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Nicholas Thompson, 'Negotiating art and its public: Optimism at the GOMA', *Art Monthly Australia*, 219, May 2009, 30.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>22</sup> Katherine Feeney, 'GoMA accused of being childish on its 5<sup>th</sup> birthday,' *Brisbane Times*, 23 November 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Centre for the Government of Queensland, *Queensland Speaks*, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/leigh-tabrett>, 01:03:41-01:08:40

<sup>24</sup> Queensland Art Gallery, *GoMA: Story of a Building* (Brisbane: QAG, 2006), 35.

<sup>25</sup> Archaeo, *MA-QCC Masterplanning Consultancy* (Brisbane, 2000), 7.

Thus, it is clear the Queensland Government, via advice from Archaeo, were cognisant of the long-term Indigenous and non-Indigenous use of the proposed site well before construction began in 2006. Moreover, the Kurilpa Point site was also a place of significance for much of Brisbane's inner-city homeless. In a research brief conducted into police move-on powers, the Parliamentary Library notes that in 2006 there were both significant homeless and Indigenous populations at Kurilpa Point.<sup>26</sup> Given both the historical significance of the site and its connection to Indigenous and homeless people, one would expect that more consideration would have been given to these two factors before construction began; unfortunately, this was not the case. While some measures were made to mitigate the impact of construction on the homeless and Indigenous groups, the general approach to tackling the impact on the homeless was via police move on-powers.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, no questions were raised during question time or in committee sessions that raised the social impact of construction. While the tension between construction and social impact is an ongoing feature of public works, the inability of GoMA to recognise and incorporate the cultural and historical provenance of Kurilpa Point into the current site itself presents the risk of Queensland continuing its cultural amnesia about its past.

Bjelke-Petersen once stated that 'cranes in the skyline' were a measure of the state's success.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, what can also be seen in the construction of GoMA is the continuation of longstanding trend within Queensland's that links 'progress' with destruction. Examples of this are all too common: both the Bellevue Hotel<sup>29</sup> and Cloudland<sup>30</sup> were demolished, despite widespread protest, to make way for new buildings or because the maintenance of these sites was simply considered too expensive. When the Kurilpa Point site for GoMA was announced, Archaeo also noted in their initial report to Government the potential for significant sub-surface archaeological material to be located within the site.<sup>31</sup> Subsequent to this advice, Archaeo produced a number of

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<sup>26</sup> Nicolee Dixon, 'Police 'Move-on' Powers,' (Research Brief 2006/16, Queensland Parliamentary Library), 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> Measures included tours of GoMA, food vouchers and funding for temporary accommodation throughout GoMA opening festivities. For further information see Annabelle McDonald, 'Arts precinct puts modern spin on old clashes,' *The Australian*, 25 November 2006: 11.

<sup>28</sup> Rae Wear, 'Straddling a Barbed Wire Fence,' *Queensland Historical Atlas*, 2010, Accessed at <http://www.qhatlas.com.au/content/johannes-bjelke-petersen-straddling-barbed-wire-fence>

<sup>29</sup> Built in 1880, the Bellevue Hotel was a large establishment in the Brisbane CBD that provided accommodation for regional politicians, celebrities and was a cultural icon throughout Brisbane. It was unceremoniously demolished in the dead of night by the infamous Dean Brothers. See Daniel Hurst, 'Bellevue Hotel was cheaper to knock down,' *Brisbane Times*, 2 January 2010.

<sup>30</sup> A classic World War II structure, Cloudland Dance Hall was an entertainment venue that hosted concerts, ballroom facilities and also was used as an exam hall by the University of Queensland. Situated on a hill, it was an iconic Brisbane landmark with a highly visible roof arch. Cloudland suffered the same fate as Bellevue and was demolished by the Dean Brothers in the middle of the night. See Ian Wallace, 'Gen Y Kissed Goodbye to Cloudland of Credit,' *The Courier Mail*, 20 October 2008: 27.

<sup>31</sup> Archaeo, *MA-QCC Masterplanning Consultancy* (Brisbane, 2000), 7.

reports including a Cultural Heritage Management Plan that were also provided to Government. Nevertheless, when construction eventually began, appropriate time and planning was not given for the excavation of sub-surface material and, in effect, the archaeologists were forced into a rushed salvage operation. In their *Report on the Cultural Heritage Salvage Operation*, they state:

As the project was going ahead regardless of the cultural heritage material that might still exist (Indigenous or otherwise), the project brief in effect became a salvage operation....any archaeological investigation was required to fit within the pre-set timescale of the program of works.<sup>32</sup>

As a result of the Government's attitude to the social value of the site, important archaeological material was destroyed during construction.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, while basic consideration was given to the concerns raised by archaeological experts, it was arbitrary and done with the understanding that heritage would not halt development. Therefore, another longstanding trend within Queensland that favours development at the expense of heritage can ironically be seen in a building that, according to many, is meant to represent cultural change within Queensland.

For a state that is arguably known best for its illiberal culture and controversial politicians, the *concept* of a major gallery dedicated to contemporary art presents a sharp dichotomy. Additionally, the cautious reform agendas undertaken by our politicians since Bjelke-Petersen have meant that the Queensland of old, the Deep North, is harder to see from the skyscrapers of the Brisbane CBD. Nevertheless, upon closer inspection the *reality* of GoMA is far less representative of complete cultural change. With its emphasis on education, the curatorial strategy of the gallery has resulted in an uneasy tension between the aesthetic and the practical. This, in turn, continues the long term trend in Queensland that approaches the aesthetic with a certain level of suspicion. Additionally, its construction on a site of historical significance – a significance that is now seemingly forgotten within Queensland – without proper consideration for the social impact of construction continues a trend within Queensland that understands development as a zero-sum game. Despite what many people might want to believe, GoMA is less a dichotomy and more an ambiguous collection of historic trends mixed with the governmental aspirations of a (slightly) different sort of Queensland.

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<sup>32</sup> Archaeo, *Report on the Cultural Heritage Salvation Operation*, (Brisbane, Archaeo, 2005), 59

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29