Urban Renewal Brisbane – Our First 20 Years

Urban Renewal Brisbane
Brisbane is a rapidly growing, economically robust and culturally vibrant ‘New World City’, but this wasn’t always the case. In the late 1980’s Brisbane was struggling with economic stagnation, urban decay and crime creating an exodus of residents and businesses to the suburban fringe.

In 1991, the Urban Renewal Taskforce was established under a tri-governmental partnership and charged with revitalising derelict industrial suburbs in Brisbane. The key objectives of the Taskforce (now known as Urban Renewal Brisbane) were to create sustainable live-work communities in the inner city, revive local economies, deliver affordable housing and reverse the exodus of local residents and businesses.

Urban Renewal Brisbane initiated innovative approaches to planning and development in inner-city Brisbane, partnering with the private sector, eliminating bureaucratic obstacles, engaging the local community, championing urban design excellence and sparking new ways of thinking about the city’s heart.

Post-Industrial City
Within 10 years Urban Renewal Brisbane had achieved a dramatic turn around in the fortunes of the former industrial suburbs of Newstead, Teneriffe and Fortitude Valley. URB prepared exemplary master plans, funded new infrastructure, delivered catalytic projects and facilitated new development including:

- Master plans for Newstead, Teneriffe, Fortitude Valley and Bowen Hills
- Facilitating the redevelopment of vacant warehouses and industrial sites to deliver over 6500 new homes, including hundreds of affordable dwellings
- The $22m upgrade to Brisbane’s S1 Sewer, essential to inner-city growth
- The $220m Inner City Bypass (ICB) to divert regional traffic from the Valley and City Centre
- The $7m upgrades to Brunswick St and Chinatown malls
- Reviving inner-city culture with Brisbane Powerhouse and Judith Wright Centre
- Managing the catalytic redevelopment of key Council landholdings, including Green Square, Emporium and Newstead Riverpark

This sparked a revival in inner-city living and transformed the derelict inner north-eastern suburbs, without damaging the fabric of existing communities or demolishing the industrial heritage of the area. The activities of Urban Renewal Brisbane were the springboard for an inner-city cultural renaissance and a mushrooming of creative and knowledge based industries.
River City
Alongside the revitalisation of the inner north-eastern suburbs, Urban Renewal Brisbane also turned its attention to the much maligned Brisbane River. Unloved and polluted by industrial effluent and dredging, the river was in a poor state and underappreciated by Brisbane residents. The redevelopment of the Teneriffe wharves presented an opportunity to establish a riverfront promenade, but URB developed a more ambitious plan to reconnect Brisbane with its remarkable river, by:

- Delivering a continuous 14km Riverwalk from Newstead in the north, through the City Centre to Toowong and West End in the south
- Creating a new public transport network of CityCats to link inner-city suburbs
- Initiating new pedestrian bridges and green bridges to connect the north and south sides of the river
- Establishing new waterfront parklands and public spaces (e.g. Newstead Riverpark and Howard Smith Wharves)

Brisbane’s identity is now centred on its river-side location, and the river has been transformed from a muddy conduit for industry into a cultural asset, a focus for tourism and residential development, a connecting spine for public spaces, a recreational asset and a means of transportation. Brisbane River is now home to thousands of cyclists and pedestrians using the Riverwalk each year, as well as 17 CityCats and the annual Riverfire festival.
New World City
In recent years Brisbane has experienced an unprecedented boom with approximately 60-80,000 new residents moving to South East Queensland each year, with many of these living and working in Brisbane. The State Government’s SEQ Regional Plan requires Brisbane to plan for 156,000 new dwellings by 2031, not to mention the corresponding increase in employment and infrastructure. This rapid growth has placed great pressure on Brisbane’s inner city, but it also creates tremendous opportunities.

URB has embraced the challenge to plan for growth in the inner city, with 12 new neighbourhood plans recently prepared for CBD expansion precincts such as Fortitude Valley and South Brisbane, Major Centres including Toowong and Nundah, as well as transit corridors like Milton and Eastern Corridor.

Most notable of these is the award-winning City Centre Master Plan, which represents a bold and comprehensive vision for the CBD as a place to live, learn, work and play. Upon completion of the plan, URB immediately went to work on implementing the Plan and its 12 demonstration projects, including:

- Revitalisation of King George Square and Queen Street Mall
- Jacob’s Ladder and Market Street upgrades
- Vibrant Laneways and Inhabit Fiesta

After 20 years of urban renewal, the State’s capital has been transformed with unprecedented growth being harnessed to deliver excellence in urban design and subtropical architecture. Residents (50,000) and businesses (70,000 employees) streamed back to the inner city between 1991 and 2011, and URB’s plans can already accommodate 40% of the city’s future infill target to 2031. URB has also delivered major new cultural facilities, affordable housing, transport infrastructure and major parklands, inspiring Brisbane’s revolution from a ‘big country town’ into a New World City.
Dense inner-city development is no longer a rarity in Brisbane, and is rapidly becoming the norm. Other cities are experiencing similar attitudinal changes within the development industry, government and amongst end users. Residents and businesses are beginning to value quality and accessibility over quantity and car parking. Stimulating inner-city development is not as difficult as it once was, but the creation of sustainable urban communities remains a challenge.

**Political Commitment**
Successful renewal requires changing the established planning framework, built form and travel behaviours, which can at times be unpopular amongst stakeholders. Renewal also requires significant capital investment into infrastructure and facilities to support the growing population. Successful urban renewal needs to be comprehensive and it takes time. New businesses, residents and developers are less likely to invest in a rundown area if the local government is not willing to commit to catalytic investments in the area. These changes and investments require political and executive support within the local authority, and renewal agencies need to explain and justify proposed changes to internal stakeholders as much as external community stakeholders.

**Focus Renewal Activity**
Renewal agencies need a clear mandate to manage growth and change, guided by a city-wide growth strategy. Renewal precincts need to be tightly focused on key locations to make efficient use of available resources. Derelict industrial land, stagnant centres and transit nodes are good focal points for urban renewal. Focused renewal precincts will deliver more distinct and comprehensive renewal outcomes in the most critical and visible locations.

**Development Economics**
From its inception, URB has sought to partner with the development industry. The Urban Futures Brisbane board comprises industry representatives who guide and advise Council’s
renewal activities. URB also undertakes research into development economics to inform renewal strategies and ensure built form outcomes are developable and attractive to investors. Idyllic urban design is futile if it is unviable to build, and given the extent of growth confronting Brisbane, plans need to harness market forces and incentivise private development in return for improvements to the public realm and infrastructure.

Community Engagement
At the commencement of any project URB proactively engages the community including local residents, businesses and development industry professionals. URB is upfront with the community about the need for growth and change, and presents planning as an opportunity to guide that growth, protect valued attributes and address existing problems. We lead the community through 4 key stages of the project, including visioning, options, draft strategy and draft statutory plan. This process ensures the community can inform the vision, participate in decision making and provide feedback on draft documents. URB’s community engagement strategy is efficient and focused, allowing Council to swiftly plan for rapid growth and respond to new development pressures in the city.

Built Form
Simple and robust built form guidance is integral to planning for urban renewal, and URB puts particular emphasis on the street interface. Built form provisions need to be flexible to ensure developability, but robust enough to ensure positive outcomes for the community. Some key built form principles include:

- Density should respond to access to shops, services, employment and transport, and height should be informed by established character, site area, streetscape and development economics
- Buildings should address the street with doors, windows, balconies and active land uses
- Street frontages should have a human scale in both vertical scaling and horizontal rhythm
- Provide sufficient setbacks to allow daylight, outlook, ventilation and landscape amenity, but ensure resulting building envelope is developable
- Protect existing heritage, but also create future heritage
- Encourage local shops and services to reduce travel demand
- Car parking should be underground and vehicle access points minimised
Public Space
Investment in public spaces is an affordable and visible catalyst for urban renewal. Dense urban development means more people on the street; commuting, shopping, working and relaxing. Streetscapes need to be upgraded with wider footpaths, landscaping, lighting, street furniture, bikeways and bus stops. Residents and workers will need new places to meet friends and eat lunch, so parks and squares may need to be created. Land is expensive in dense urban areas, so renewal agencies need to seek new public spaces on major development sites and also make the most of available public spaces, including small laneways.

Access and Transport
Traffic and parking are common concerns amongst community stakeholders. Any dense and successful place will become busy, and the innate spatial inefficiency of cars means that congestion and parking will always be problematic. Notwithstanding the above, renewal precincts can be highly successful with only modest transport infrastructure and parking provisions. Transport is merely a means of accessing our needs, and dense urban precincts should provide access to local shops, services and employment within walking distance, dramatically reducing the need for vehicle travel. This local access should be supported by pedestrian friendly streetscapes and complemented by an efficient transit service connecting to district and regional destinations.