

A RETAILING HISTORY OF THE IPSWICH CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT (CBD) FROM THE MID-1970S TO 2003

Abstract

This thesis is a retail history of the Ipswich CBD from the mid-1970s to 2003. It argues that the Ipswich CBD developed its physical composition through a combination of its belated experience of the national retail innovations, their rapid application once adopted, and the mitigating influence of local business factors. This evolution is explained through a matrix of four interconnected themes: the change in the type of CBD retail businesses; the nature of specific businesses involved in the CBD transformation; the increase in civic participation in CBD retail decision making, and the combined effect of these three factors upon the physical composition of the CBD and its image as a retail destination. These four themes are elaborated through a historical narrative that examines the introduction of the corporate supermarket and shopping centre from the mid-1970s, the impact of the destruction of Reids (formerly Cribb and Foote) Department Store in 1985, the revitalization of CBD shopping with the completion of the Ipswich Mall in 1987 and Kern Corporation's Ipswich City Square shopping centre in 1988, the negative effects of the recession in the early 1990s and the subsequent competition from the suburban shopping centres, and the more recent debate surrounding the proposed Riverlink development and the adoption of the River Heart vision to plan the future CBD retail development.

Introduction

“This is the day of business. In no period of the world's history has it occupied such an important place; for business, as it is now constituted, affords ample opportunity for the highest honors, for the most enduring fame, and for unlimited wealth and power. It is a field to attract the able and ambitious, and in which to exercise the greatest talents” (*Jubilee History* 141). With florid recitation and grandiose sentiment these words introduced to readers of the *Jubilee History of Ipswich* the achievements of retailers Cribb and Foote, the city's most successful business. Despite this turn-of-the-century enthusiasm for retailing the city has historically maintained a civic image as a working person's city based on the coal mining and railways industries. This essay fills this historical gap. It analyses the history of the Ipswich CBD from the mid-1970s to 2003 and addresses one of the under-researched topics¹ being commissioned for the city's 2010 sesqui-centenary of foundation.

¹ One essay being written each year from 2002 until the Sesqui-centenary in 2010

Retailing is way of examining a culture and has recently attracted scholarly attention. Historian predominate; Beverly Kingston's *Basket, Bag and Trolley*, Kim Humphrey's *Shelf Life*, Gail Reekie's *Sex, Selling and the Department Store* and Rachel Bowlby's *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping* all consider retailing through its ubiquitous institutions – the supermarket, department store and shopping centre – tracing their historical evolution through to their most modern manifestations. Cultural theorist Meaghan Morris in contrast focuses on the individuality of specific places with a distinctive insight readily applicable to the unique features of Ipswich's retailing institutions. The largest body of work examines commercial heritage and is divided into three areas: State and federal heritage legislation that defines the legal framework through which commercial heritage places are assigned their cultural heritage values; guides to practical conservation techniques² and conservation plans that trace the historical evolution of commercial places.

The above research has generated a framework in which Ipswich's retailing history can be understood. Its retail development mirrored other Australian urban spaces of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Retail centres evolved from collections of local shops in strips along the busiest municipal thoroughfares. Depending on the size of the urban locality this strip of shops might have remained as the main street; if the urban centre grew large enough, it would have formed the nucleus of the Central Business District (CBD).

Grocery stores, haberdasheries, saddleries and pharmacies were just some of the businesses that evolved during this time. While there was consistency in each urban centre of the kinds of businesses offered, their ownership was highly parochial, reflecting the names of the local families that owned them. These common business types linked their geographically disparate owners to create a national retailing experience.

During the 1960s the introduction of suburban shopping centres and new retail forms³ challenged this similarity of experience. CBD's responded in different ways; from the end of the 1960s when these innovations had effectively become commonplace each CBD began a period of isolation rather than of commonality of experience. What distinguishes Ipswich is the timeframe in which this isolation occurred. The historical theoretical framework deals mostly with capital cities where the effects of retail innovation were experienced soon after their introduction. The Ipswich CBD only began to be affected from the mid-1970s; it would be another ten years before a clear

² This includes the *Main Street* series (New South Wales and Queensland State Governments), *A Lot In Store* (NSW Heritage) and *Urban Heritage* (Australian Heritage Commission).

³ The most notable was the corporate supermarket.

CBD/suburban retail dichotomy could be visibly discerned. In framing this essay from the mid-1970s to 2003 the scholarly research must take a background place in preference to the sources relating directly to Ipswich.

This isolationist approach is further influenced by the type and availability of these local sources. With business records, sources had either been destroyed or simply discarded by businesses that saw no merit in retaining business documentation beyond what is currently demanded by taxation and auditing statutes. What is even more disconcerting is those businesses that refused outright to co-operate, withholding potentially important information without any acknowledged reason. These proscriptions have demanded an increased reliance on available sources – newspaper articles and local government records – that concentrate on pivotal, well-documented events in the Ipswich CBD's history.

This essay argues that the Ipswich CBD developed its physical composition through a combination of its belated experience of the retail innovations described above, their rapid application once adopted, and the mitigating influence of local business factors. This juxtaposition of factors is best understood through a framework of four interconnecting themes: the change in the type of CBD retail businesses; the actions of specific businesses involved in the transformation of the CBD; the increase in civic participation in CBD retail decision making, and the combined effect of these three factor upon the streetscape of the CBD and its image as a retail destination.

The most obvious change in the Ipswich CBD is in the type of retail businesses it has supported, broadly characterized through the family business and the concurrent rise of the corporate entity. This is seen on two levels. First, corporately-owner retail outlets have tended over time to become larger. Rapid suburbanisation allowed them to expand voraciously in terms of outlets opened and occupied retail space. When these same corporate retailers opened up in CBD's they brought improved economies of scale that local family-owned retailing businesses could not match; using this strategy, corporate supermarkets managed to effectively displace thousands of local grocery outlets. Second, the space in which these new outlets came to operate has also become corporatised. The rise of retail shopping centres challenged the traditional horizontal layout of strip shopping and made the verticality of multiple outlets under the one roof more desirable. CBD's then tried to compete with the allure of suburban shopping by adopting shopping centre-like facilities; for example in Ipswich the combination of thirty-four individual properties into one megalithic complex. These new manufactured spaces, although once owned by a variety of local businesses,

now come under the control of corporations whose interest in the vibrancy of the CBD's retail offerings often only extend to their new centre's profit-generating potential.

History written from a retailing perspective inevitably brings with it a plethora of names and it is important to distinguish within retail corporatisation the specific retailers, developers and corporate property-owners whose actions have made distinct contributions to the evolving face of the Ipswich CBD. While Cribb and Foote were arguably the best known local business in Ipswich, McDonnell and East and Coles also made significant contributions. When considering the development of the CBD the Kern Corporation stand out as overseers of the rebuilding of the retailing heart; it left behind a built legacy that still dominates the city centre today. Similarly it will become increasingly difficult to untangle the fate of the CBD from Wingate Properties' current plans for the proposed Riverlink development.

The Ipswich City Council has also become increasingly occupied in meeting its myriad civic responsibilities in planning and promoting adequate retail growth. The Council's involvement evolved from encouraging growth, through a phase of acting as a development partner (in the Kern development), to its current role of managing the existing retail infrastructure and debating how it will evolve. The discharge of its responsibility has often promoted harsh criticism and is a defining factor in how the CBD evolved.

The combined impact of the changing retail environment, the actions of prominent businesses and the Council's increased involvement has dramatically altered the streetscape and image of the CBD as a retail destination. The Ipswich City Square and a cluster of other smaller shopping centres on its periphery stand in stark contrast to the retail heritage precinct centered on the Top of Town to the east and the remainder of the Victorian and Edwardian shops along the main streets that have resisted the urge to modernize. The CBD presents itself as a quixotic mix of traditional brick and tin on the one hand and glass and concrete on the other. This dichotomy not only challenges the city's designation as a heritage city, but also continues to fuel the debate over what is being done to revive its once prosperous CBD trade. In a city eager to throw off the epithet of industrial city with a new city image, the empty shop fronts, chipped paintwork and broken neon signs often speak more loudly to potential shoppers.

In order to develop these themes and argue the thesis they support, this essay has been divided into five distinct areas; chapter one examines the introduction of the corporate supermarket and shopping centre from the mid-1970s; chapter two considers the impact of the destruction of Reids

(formerly Cribb and Foote) department store in 1985: chapter three examines the subsequent revitalization of CBD shopping with the completion of Kern Corporation's Ipswich City Square shopping centre in 1988: chapter four considers the negative effects of the recession in the early 1990s and the subsequent competition from suburban shopping centres, and chapter five examines the more recent debate surrounding the proposed Riverlink development and the adoption of the Rive Heart vision to plan for future CBD retail development.