

**A Retailing History of the
Ipswich Central Business District (CBD)
From the mid-1970s to 2003**



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Abstract

This report 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.

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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 sesquicentenary of foundation.

Retailing is a way of examining a culture and has recently attracted scholarly attention. Historians 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.

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

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).

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 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.

³ The most notable was the corporate supermarket.

What is even more disconcerting is those businesses that refused outright to cooperate, 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 be come 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. The story of change, and the promise that such change might bring, is the essence of the story that follows.

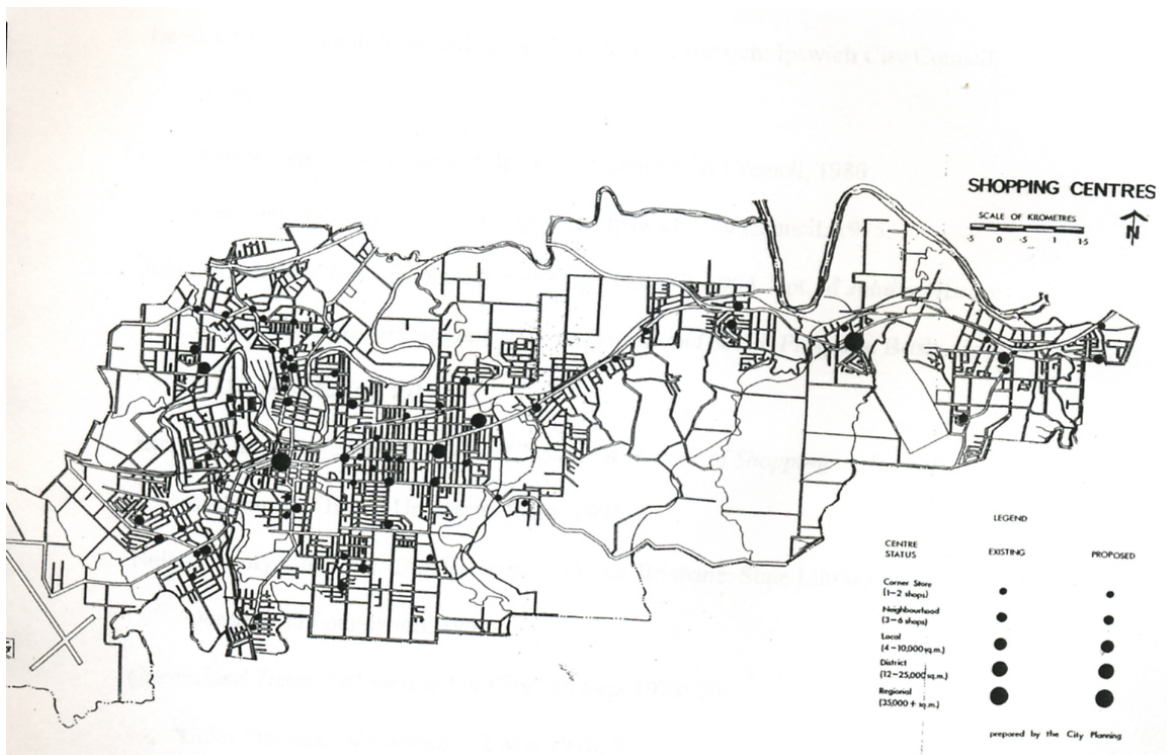
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Chapter 1

“A delight to those who use it”

The retail transformation of the Ipswich CBD from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s.



Shopping Centres in Ipswich, 1979.

Source: Ipswich City Council. Ipswich Yearbook: Volume 2.

Ipswich: Ipswich City Council, 1979: 101-102.

When Dr Llew Edwards, Member for Ipswich, declared his city's latest retail addition to be "the showplace and envy of every centre in Queensland" it was clear that Ipswich shopping was about to reach a new level of sophistication (*Queensland Times* "Attraction" 20). Ipswich CBD retailing experienced a significant commercial shift from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. The supremacy of traditional strip shopping, characterized by small family-owned businesses centered on a busy main street, was challenged by the introduction of corporate retail entities: the supermarket, the mall and the drive-in shopping centre⁴. The effect of this transformation was most noticeable in three areas: Ipswich City Council's growing awareness of its planning responsibilities for new retail outlets; the uncritical promotion of any kind of CBD retail development; and a growing incidence of modern architectural style, with its emphasis on composite geometric forms and futuristic-looking fusions of concrete and glass. By the mid-1980s new retail structures punctuated the skyline in sufficient quantity to render the Ipswich CBD a curious hybrid of old and new.

Retailing changes swept Australia during the 1960s. The most important was the large-scale adoption of the drive-in shopping centre. Chermside Shopping Centre, opened in 1957, was the first centre built in Australia especially with cars and suburban travel in mind. Throughout the 1960s these centres proliferated and challenged the notion that shoppers had to purchase at a variety of shops and service outlets to get the range of consumables they needed; promotion of the centres' centralized location with easy parking, their wide range of shops and community services like libraries and medical suites, and the protection they offered from the extremes of Australian weather were all features used to their advantage. The 1960s were also dubbed the 'supermarket sixties', beginning with the first opening in 1960, by both Woolworths and Coles, of "purpose built, free-standing, 'one-stop' shops" (Humphreys 100). The success of modern corporate supermarket chains was due to their exploitation of economies of scale which allowed cheap bulk

⁴ Beverly Kingston identifies the 'drive-in' shopping centre as the result of increased car usage combined with new suburban shopping locations. Drive-in centres were purpose built and gave cars first priority as a means of conveying customers to the shops (94-95).

purchases to be sold to customers for a lower price. This was combined with a reliance on self-service and an emphasis on modern surroundings that promoted shopping as something more than a mundane household chore.

By the end of the 1960s a clear shift in retailing practices could be discerned for both the retailer and the consumer. Over 650 corporate supermarkets opened by the end of 1968 and the receptiveness of the public to fraternize their operations challenged independent grocers. The supermarket's share of the national grocery market had reached 50.2%, eclipsing the 23,000 independent grocery outlets that struggled to hold onto 13%; the diminishing remainder was captured by buying groups (Humphreys 113). After ten years, supermarkets had become so entrenched in Australian retail culture that Humphreys declared with confidence that they "effectively dictated where and by what means most Australians purchased food and household items" (104).

A similar proliferation of shopping centres was also a hallmark of the end of the decade. Beverly Kingston argues that "during the 1960s most possible variations of the suburban or regional shopping centre were tried somewhere in Australia" (95).

While this ubiquity was a significant factor in the development of post-war Australian suburbs, it also meant that people living in existing older suburbs in the inner city, traditionally reliant on their CBD for retail and other service outlets, now had a choice of shopping venues. In order to compete CBD's also had to install supermarkets and shopping centre-like facilities. Local CBD retailing culture, which up to this point had been highly parochial and dependent on the efficacy of local retailers, was directly challenged by national corporate retailing concerns.

Ipswich had a strong local commercial history firmly centered upon its CBD. The '1910 Jubilee History of Ipswich', published to mark fifty years of municipal government, devoted a quarter of the publication to the promotion and enunciation of successful local businesses interests, many of which were founded in the traditional retail areas of grocery, stationery, butchery, leather goods, tailoring and

mercery (119-157). Having been declared a city six years previous, Ipswich was keen to present itself as a bustling centre and the source of a wide range of goods and services. The publication is clearly an exercise in self-promotion and retailers may have paid for inclusion of their business biographies. They were keen to align their business interests with the civic progress that the history promoted; business and progress were portrayed as complimentary. When the Municipal Centenary was celebrated in 1960 a similar jubilatory publication praised longstanding businesses, stressing the prominence of their proprietors and the geographical extent to which their products were sold throughout the state. Contemporary photographs of the main retailing streets display solid rows of shops with traders' residences on the upper level. The names of the trading institutions, almost always that of a family name, were decorated in prominent places visible to all who walked below (9, 12-13, 15, 36, 89,93-96, 102-103; Nolan 78-90, 93-95). Retailing was lauded and associated with the activities undertaken in the CBD; it was a critical mass of shops that collectively presented the city as both prosperous and well serviced.

By the early 1970s however, de-industrialization of the coal and railway industries began to have a direct impact on the fortunes of CBD retailers. Ipswich was a 'blue collar' city that had carved much of its identity through its extensive coal mining operations. Increased mechanization of the industry and competition from the Central Queensland coalfield meant many Ipswich family-owned and operated mines were swallowed up by larger mining corporations (Ipswich City Council "Ipswich yearbook" 116-117). The wealth that these families once generated from their mines was no longer guaranteed to be spent locally because they no longer received income from their mines. Furthermore, with fewer employed miners, the loss of their wages eroded another valuable source of CBD retail income. The new mining corporations had little need of the retail services offered by the CBD. Ipswich was also renowned statewide for its Railway Workshops, which at its height employed several thousand local workers in close proximity to the CBD. When the Workshops began transferring operations to Redbank in 1957 many employees were also relocated. By the 1970s a new Workshop community had become established, one that did not have the affinity of previous generations for the old CBD.

From the mid-1970s diminished industrial concerns brought the importance of retailing – now a growth industry – to the attention of the Ipswich City Council. The Council argued in its 1975 *Statement of Policy* that tertiary industries like retailing had been part of a city-wide change that had helped Ipswich develop from a “small rural town largely dependent on the mining industry, into a much more comprehensive urban centre” (1). The Council, through its planners, believed it best to “consolidate, and if necessary enlarge existing commercial nodes, rather than creating new centres which could affect the livelihood of the existing centres” (13-14). The only area in which the Council envisaged major retail development were the rapidly expanding suburbs of Goodna and Redbank Plains; it noted however that even these large developments would remain secondary to the CBD. In order to maintain that primacy it also acknowledged that the CBD was being remoulded “to provide a City Centre that will work efficiently, be a delight to those who use it, and which will be equipped to draw trade from the entirety of its service area” (16-17).

The CBD however, was not well placed geographically to provide centralized shopping to an expanding population. Michael Fagance argued that the “formlessness” of the city, a product of its “haphazard pattern of administrative extension”, worked against it achieving further growth (13-14). The city was shaped like a meteor, with a tight cluster of suburbs that formed a ring on the western side and a long tail of suburbs that trailed in a thin line eastward, blurring the boundary where Ipswich ended and Brisbane began (see illustration one). Furthermore the city centre was almost entirely surrounded on its west side by the much larger Moreton Shire over which the Ipswich City Council had little planning control. The Ipswich CBD had once been the main commercial centre for Moreton’s rural towns but improved shopping facilities in the latter and traffic congestion and parking problems in the former had eroded the rural tradition of a day in town.

Despite perceived deficiencies in 1977 the Ipswich CBD attracted significant new retail development. Two examples warrant special attention. The first was the decision to build a Coles supermarket in Limestone Street. The site on which it was proposed to built had for some time been enjoyed by shoppers and commuters as a

valuable source of free parking in a city where formally allocated parking spaces were at a premium. However, despite its functionality it was not aesthetically well regarded. The *Queensland Times* editor thought it “almost criminal” that the site, so close to the city’s business heart, had remained undeveloped for so long (“Editorial” 6). Member for Ipswich Dr Llew Edwards was similarly cutting when he referred to it as “an unfortunate eyesore at the entrance to our city centre” (*Queensland Times* “Coles Decision Welcomed” 9). Independent Alderman Georgie Conway went one step further and threatened to boycott Cole’s Nicholas Street premises if the company did not immediately build a store on the site or sell it so that it could be developed (*Queensland Times* “Project” 1).

The announcement in December 1977 that Coles would proceed with a supermarket development created a sense of euphoria in a CBD that had not seen major retail development for quite some time. Mayor of Ipswich Alderman George Hastings announced that a “development of this magnitude is a vote of confidence in the future of the city” (*Queensland Times* “Development Plans”). The *Queensland Times* editorial echoed his sentiments and pronounced it “one of the most welcome industrial developments in years” (“Editorial” 6). The story of its development was reported avidly through the paper, generating a level of interest that contrasts strongly with Humphrey’s view that by the 1970s the concept of the supermarket as an object of excitement had begun to pall (*Queensland Times* “Council approves Coles Project!”; *Queensland Times* “Coles Ready” 1; *Queensland Times* “Work Starts” 4; 119-120). By the time it opened for business early in 1979, the supermarket had become an icon of CBD progress. Coles, although a Melbourne based company, was lauded for its boost to Ipswich’s profile, as a source of valuable employment opportunities, and for providing a local outlet for modern goods and services. Operating under Cole’s promotional ‘New World’ banner, the supermarket displaced traditional grocery stores with its promise of one-stop shopping amidst spacious aisles, conducted behind an uncompromising geometric concrete-box façade that represented retailing in its most futuristic form.

The second example was the development of Ipswich's first substantial drive-in shopping centre and mall. The unimaginatively named Ipswich Centre was promoted as "the biggest provincial retail and commercial complex in Queensland" and combined impressive engineering with futuristic retailing (*Queensland Times* "The Ipswich Centre" 20). Building of the Centre coincided with the redevelopment of the Ipswich railway station and the two developments proceeded together. The existing station building, an impressive Victorian edifice, had no reason for being demolished other than it was perceived to be old-fashioned. With the impending electrification of the Brisbane/Ipswich line, building the Centre provided the excuse to replace the station with a more modern building. Developers and engineers were faced with an unusual request because the retail component of the Centre was intended to form a seamless interface with the railway station while at the same time taking into account the vastly differing elevation levels and lack of flat land on which to build a foundation.

When it was completed the Ipswich Centre altered the streetscape and created a new retail nexus that rivaled the surrounding old-fashioned strip shopping. The building was a cavernous structure that burrowed half way into the ground to accommodate the level of the existing train tracks; the remaining half protruded above street level in a geometric straightjacket of glass and reinforced concrete. The station building now formed part of a larger complex that contained 56 shops, an internal mall and an eight-storey office block and it was compared favourably to the Valley Centre in Fortitude Valley because of the similar fusion of retailing and transport uses (*Queensland Times* "Ipswich \$14m Centre" 1). The Ipswich Centre established its retail supremacy through its access to transport: a rail line ran underneath' bus and taxi ranks were conveniently located outside the street entrance; and it possessed its own multi-storey car park. However, it also integrated with the existing retail hierarchy by linking via pedestrian overbridge to Reids department store, the acknowledged retail heart of the Ipswich CBD, and by offering the first tenancies to local businesses that were relocating. It was monolithic and imposing and indelibly stamped on the CBD a form of modern architecture that residents would also see reproduced in the city's new civic and hospital buildings.

From the late-1970s to the mid-1980s commercial development mania fuelled a spate of CBD building that physically transformed the streetscape. Notable retail examples include the development of Nolan's Plaza, a collection of shops built on a former metal works site, and the Caesar's Palace office and retail development that replaced the financially ailing Palais Royal Hotel (*Queensland Times* "Plaza" 11; *Queensland Times* "Nolan's Plaza: 17-19, *Queensland Times* "Still" 53). While smaller retail centres were also developed in the suburbs⁵, it was most noticeable in the CBD where the concentration of existing retail building stock contrasted strongly with the new additions. By the end of 1984, the Ipswich CBD's commercial building program had created a city that was neither old nor new, but somewhere uncomfortably in-between.

⁵ A shopping centre was completed at Brassall in 1979 and a Target Shopping complex at Booval in 1981 (now the site of Bunnings). Plans were also unveiled during the early 1980s for a large centre at Redbank (eventually to become Redbank Plaza) and extensions to the existing Big W Centre at Booval (now Booval Fair).

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Chapter 2

“And now the old girl is gone...”

The Reids’ Fire of August 1985 and its effect
on the Ipswich CBD



Lyle Radford’s photograph of the aftermath of the Reids’ fire.

Source: *Queensland Times* 17 Aug 1985: 7.

Reprinted with the kind permission of the *Queensland Times*.

“ARSON!”, a headline of three inch-high letters, informed *Queensland Times* readers on Monday 19 August 1985 that something dire had befallen Ipswich. The pictures looked as if they were from a war-zone, yet the captions and minimal copy assured the readers that this was all that remained of the local Reids department store (see illustration two). The extent of the fire was quantified and reported without embellishment: it had gutted the store, melted the face on the town hall clock, and boiled paint, sealed in tins, through the plate glass window of an adjacent hardware shop (*Queensland Times* ‘Arson!’ 1-2). What became increasingly harder to comprehend, despite media saturation over the next few months, was how the fire had affected the community’s relationship with its CBD and the retailing institution it had lost.

The fire obliterated the CBD’s last tangible link with prominent Ipswich retailing firm, Cribb and Foote. The burnt Bell Street buildings had occupied the site of Benjamin Cribb’s ‘London Stores’, a local retail operation that had traded continuously since 1849. It had been renamed as Cribb and Foote in 1855 when Benjamin Cribb went into partnership with John Clarke Foote, trading under that name until taken over by Walter Reid and co. Ltd. In 1972. Through the years, as Cribb and Foote evolved from a Victorian universal provider⁶ to a modern department store, business growth outpaced the company’s space in its Bell Street store. As a consequence several large departments had to be housed in other buildings around the CBD⁷. However, despite the store’s multiple locations, and new owners Walter Reid and Co. Ltd. Changing its name to Reids in 1977, the Bell Street premises remained synonymous with the Cribb and Foote trading empire through a combination of the latter’s longevity of operation, prominent corner position, and memories of its reputation of extensive range and quality of merchandise (Jubilee History 139-147; Jarrott1-10).

⁶ Universal providers were the nineteenth century precursors to the department store. As their name suggests, they stocked a wide variety of goods demanded by their colonial customers and did not attempt to specialise in any one area. Merchandise was stocked in store wherever it would fit with a trading emphasis on easy attainability, not aesthetic presentation!

⁷ Examples include the stove department, located in the old Flour Mill in Brisbane Street, and the motor garage department housed in the top end of Brisbane Street, a building that still displays a ghostly outline of the Cribb and Foote trading logo.

The relationship of Ipswich people with 'their' Cribb and Foote was too strongly wrought to be destroyed by fire. The firm had built up a reputation as a family business that employed local people and was affectionately known as Cribb's. Local individuals boasted decades of employment and service, part of a tradition that carried on from one generation to the next. The enduring familial connection was misleading, however, as neither members of the Cribb or Foote families had directly owned the business since it incorporated in 1937. Although some family members continued as Directors on the subsequent corporate Board of Management, Cribb's continued to rely on the reputation of its name as its greatest trading asset (Jarrot 85-92, 97-101, 105-108, 113-114).

The irony was amply reflected in the *Reids 'Memories' Edition of the Queensland Times*. Possibly written as a media response to the "crowds of Ipswich people ... on a sentimental pilgrimage to the still-smoking remains of Reids store", the memories all related to Cribb and Foote, not Reids, with each story crooning a sentimental tune about a past that now appeared immutable ("Store Blaze" 1).

Profiles of the founding patriarch Benjamin Cribb, and John Foote, his former store manager and subsequent business partner, cemented the foundation myth of the business's origins ("Partners" 6). Cribb and Foote's reputation as a long-standing local employer was demonstrated through a biography of Jacob Born, employed for an impressive 65 years ("German" 7). Reminiscences from two former staff linked between this documented past and that part of Cribb's history added through living memory. Vic Hoerlein's and Ken Ponti's recollections, in which promotion was gained by starting at the bottom and working upwards and a twelve hour working day was not uncommon, spanned most of the twentieth century. Their stories stopped short of the Reid's takeover and suggested a retail past that was altogether more preferable than present trading conditions allowed for ("Vic Started" 6; "Ex-staff" 3).

The fire ensured that Cribb's history would remain especially reliant on and susceptible to the vagaries of memory. It destroyed most of the firm's twentieth

century records; all that remained were the minute books and private ledgers of the first four decades of business and wages books from the early 1900s. This created a cumulative diminishment of written material as all of the records from the firm's inception to 1885 had also been destroyed around the beginning of the twentieth century in an unidentified catastrophe, possibly another fire! (Jarrott v.) Like a eulogy for a recently departed friend, the newspaper reports recycled only the good times – the Christmas displays, the royal visit, the sales, and the record bar of so many furtive teenage romances – safe in the knowledge that they were unlikely to be contradicted by an *written source* (*Queensland Times* "Store Blaze: 1; *Queensland Times* "Reids Say Thanks" 2-3; *Queensland Times* "Student Haunt" 28).

Regardless of the overwhelming sentiment for the past generated by the fire, the future was undoubtedly grim for Reids' staff. With no store to work in and no stock to sell, 160 staff were left without employment. When suppliers and deliverers of goods were subsequently added to that figure, the estimated number reached 500 (*Queensland Times* "Staff Jobs" 27). As the city's largest retail employer this was a catastrophe. The Reids' employees did not experience the same media interest as the profiled former Cribb's employees and did not have their views about their hardship reported; they remained nameless and faceless in subsequent newspaper reports about the fire. Their fate, delivered through the *Queensland Times* on the Wednesday after the fire, was a two week stand-down, without pay, until alternative arrangements could be made. While a few staff were retained to cope with the consequences of winding down the store's administrative commitments, lay-bys and warehoused Christmas stock, the majority were urged to consider alternative employment. Local member for Ipswich West Dave Underwood urged CBD businesses to take on the staff as they (the businesses) would now be profiting from the lack of competition (*Queensland Times* "Doubts" 1; *Queensland Times* "Job Futures" 2).

Local retailers however understood the business dynamic somewhat differently. In major shopping centres the department store or supermarket is acknowledged as the 'anchor' tenant; the Ipswich CBD traders acknowledged that "Reids was the

nerve centre for Brisbane Street retailers” and brought “foot traffic” to the smaller stores (*Queensland Times* “Small Business” 2). The fire left the small retailers like pilot fish without a host. Their concern compounded with the announcement of the imminent opening of Redbank Plaza, a major new shopping centre only ten kilometers away. Well anchored, with two supermarkets and three major variety retailers, the Plaza was feared for its potential to create a financial eastern business flow (*Queensland Times* “Small Business: 2’ *Queensland Times* “All the Best” 1-8).

The problem however had as much to do with the scene of desolation that the CBD had gained since the fire. The charred remains of the Reids building remained highly visible to CBD shoppers despite attempted mediation through a series of insubstantial wire mesh safety screens. Ash drifted in the air for days, coating the surrounding buildings and marring all wherever it lay. The site had the feel of a graveyard; the outside carcass of the building and its supporting pillars were the only remnants left standing, acting as ghostly grey sentinels over the formerly bustling area. Demolition of what little remained was delayed because of insurance difficulties; Reids’ company secretary Stan Mogg assured the public that “We’ll do it if we have to get up there with a chisel and hammer” (*Queensland Times* “Demolition” 5). The old tower, which ironically had once housed a water tank for Cribb and Foote’s in-store fire brigade, was the last to fall. It took over a month to finally clear the site and turn it into a vacant lot and it would take many more months before the whole area was substantially boarded up in preparation for redevelopment (*Queensland Times* “Old Tower” 2; *Queensland Times* “Nothing Left” 6).

Despite the promise of a new beginning, there were no happy endings for Reids. The company was given trading space inside the Old Town Hall and opened up a new concept store, the Walter Reid Centrepoint Shopping Plaza, a hotchpotch combination of their most popular areas comprising women’s, children’s and men’s fashion, and homewares. The trading results were disappointing, with the store’s incongruous surroundings doing little to alleviate its diminished status (*Queensland Times* “Reids’ Resurrection” 3; *Queensland Times* “Reids Back” 1). Although Reids

traded for a few more years (see Chapter 4), posterity remembers them because they broke the city's link with Cribb and Foote.

The fire continued to generate notoriety even after it was disassociated from its retail underpinning. The court case to convict the suspected arsonists continued well after the site was cleared, reminding the city of the senselessness of the premeditated actions that caused such destruction (*Queensland Times* "Trial" 1). The fire in turn provided the inspiration for a painting, donated to the Ipswich Fire Brigade by an octogenarian former fireman-turned painter (*Queensland Times* "Moss Delivers Masterpiece" 4). One of the suspected arsonists even planned to write a book about his conviction while in prison, although there is no record that the project was ever commenced (*Queensland Times* "McGeough Plans Book" 2). The fire again became a source of interest when the *Queensland Times* ran a special six-part, ten-year anniversary issue in 1995; it remains to be seen whether the fire is still of such local significance as to warrant a twenty-year special in 2005.

The fire's greatest legacy remained, however, the extent of the damage it caused to Ipswich CBD retailing. Cribb and Foote had been an integral part of the successful functioning of the Ipswich CBD, and a valuable source of retail tradition. Even though Reids had maintained it, the destruction of the tradition's physical embodiment effectively severed the store's link with the past and the reason people had shopped there. With Ipswich's most substantial retail outlet destroyed, it was only a matter of time before the ties that had bound the CBD retail community and its customers together began to unravel.

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Chapter 3

“Almost like rebuilding a city”

The development of the Ipswich Mall and Ipswich City Square from 1985
to 1988



Artist's impression of the mall and Kern's shopping complex.

When Ipswich Mayor Des Freeman announced that the Kern Corporation was holding “a gun at our heads”, it marked the lowest point of a turbulent relationship that desperately needed to work (*Queensland Times* “A Gun: 1). Kern had agreed in March 1985 to redevelop the four inner city blocks that formed the retail heart of the Ipswich CBD, but one year later had still not managed to conceive a workable plan on which everyone could agree. Business closures, in hasty preparation for the new complex, began to compound the problem in a CBD that was already suffering a retail slump. Having dealt with myriad financial and planning problems inflicted by Reids’ fire, and a recalcitrant heritage lobby, Kern threatened to withdraw for the second time since their announcement to build. The story of Kern’s oscillating involvement and the eventual realization of its retail creation marks this pivotal period in the history of Ipswich CBD retailing. Construction of the complex severely tested the limits of civic intervention and challenged Ipswich people to think about their retail buildings as an expression of their civic identity, not only in the ‘new’ that they were embracing but also in the ‘old’ with which they were prepared to dispense. When completed, the complex changed the visual profile of the CBD and introduced new and untried retail formats and businesses, binding them under the auspices of a corporation that was beholden only to its shareholders.

The Kern Corporation first met with the Ipswich City Council in February 1985 to present its credentials and discuss the Council’s needs. Kern brought an extensive portfolio to the bargaining table, having constructed retail mall complexes for the councils of Townsville, Newcastle, Perth, and the Wintergarden and Hilton complex in Brisbane; a fifth mall development was currently underway in Wollongong (Phillips Public Relations 3). Kern’s Managing Director and Chief Executive Barry Paul took an abiding interest, spearheading a corporation about to record its twenty-fourth consecutive profit increase (Kern Corporation “Annual Report” 1). Robin Gibson was chosen as project architect because of his work with Kern on the Wintergarden concept; in private practice he had achieved renown for the design of the expansive cultural centre at South Brisbane. The Council wanted to exploit Kern’s experience to create a complex that would maintain activity in and use of the CBD when the shops closed, that would act as an inducement to surrounding businesses to upgrade

their premises, and which would halt the retail drain⁸ (Ipswich City Council “Notes”; Phillips Public Relations 1-4).

The Council was particularly keen to let Kern oversee construction of the physical retail premises while Council staff took responsibility for planning and building the pedestrian mall. Private developers had bandied around a mall concept since the late 1970s, when it was envisaged that the second stage of the Ipswich Centre would involve pedestrianising Bell Street (*Queensland Times* “The Ipswich Centre” 20-21; *Queensland Times* “Top Priority” 8). More recently, Woolworths had been involved in two failed bids to build a shopping complex and mall in central Ipswich (*Queensland Times* “\$10 Shops Plan” 1). The Council however was eager to take control and inaugurated a mall development sub-committee to oversee proceedings. A high-level delegation consisting of the Mayor Freeman and Mall Committee Chairman Alderman John Kinnane were accompanied by the city administrator, city engineer and city planner on a visit to Armidale in January 1984. The group examined traffic, parking conditions to determine the ‘pluses and minuses’ of such a development. Kinnane stressed that it was a long term process to accumulate all the necessary research the Council needed, adding that “our mall will be no instant coffee job” (*Queensland Times* “Council to Probe” 4). While the group conducted a similar visit to Ballarat and continued to plan throughout the year, it was the Kern development that provided the impetus to convert the group’s plans into a physical reality.

When the joint development was announced in March 1985 the complex was depicted as a futuristic shopping fantasy. The *Queensland Times*, in a fit of front-page euphoria, excitedly divulged a list of well-proportioned statistics: over 60,000 square metres of retail space sited on over 3.2 hectares of CBD land, an employment potential of about 300 to build the complex and around 700 people to staff it upon completion, and most importantly, an eighty-five million dollar price tag that lent both credence and respectability. The artist’s impression visually interpreted the

⁸ Estimated at the time to be \$50 million dollars from the Ipswich region.

complex as a geometric expanse of space, glass and suspended creeping plants (see illustration 3). Ironically hardly any shops had been drawn in, aside from occasional cylindrical kiosks, and readers had to imagine the much-vaunted department store and accompanying specialty stores (“New Shop Centre” 1; “Giant 700” 1). The hyperbole about what the complex could do for the future of shopping in Ipswich was clearly based on premise, however Barry Paul’s comment, “it is almost like rebuilding a city” did prove to be prophetic (Phillips Publication Relations 3). Opposition to the implications of Kern’s plan was immediate. A postscript article on the development resignedly acknowledged that three prominent, long-standing businesses – Whitehouses Café, the North Star Hotel, and Reids – would all have to be demolished. The National Trust wrote to Kern demanding that the buildings housing the North Star and Reids be retained and reused *within* the overall development (National Trust of Queensland “Letter”). Barry Paul offered to meet with Trust representatives to explain the plans but he argued that it would be impossible to incorporate the buildings as the three-storey complex required continuous levels of shopping space as well as roof-top parking (Kern Corporation “Letter”). However, a few weeks later he openly ridiculed the Trust’s identification of the North Star’s contribution to the streetscape, calling the contents of the Trust’s letter “shocking” (*Queensland Times* “Kern Rejects” 4). Despite such open hostility the Trust did meet with Kern but understandably found no common ground, resolving instead to directly petition the Council and the community (*Queensland Times* “Hotel” 3).

The Trust’s stand generated a variety of responses. Mayor Freeman argued that his Council could not withhold a demolition permit because a developer could easily argue their case with the State Government and win. He regretted losing the buildings but felt that they shouldn’t stand in the way of development (*Queensland Times* “Heritage Reply” 7). A Heritage and Development (HAND) lobby group formed to argue that it was not simply a case of either being for or against the development, but rather that Ipswich should develop with “a unique and distinctive character” (*Queensland Times* “HAND Out to Save Buildings” 4). A 750 signature petition handed to Alderman Stuart Rea reaffirmed the group’s support for the development

and called upon the Ipswich City Council “to do whatever is in its power and influence to retain the historic North Star Hotel and the Cribb and Foote (Reids) façade” (HAND n. pag). The *Queensland Times* organized a “Demolish or Save” campaign, the results of which overwhelmingly showed that respondents would *not* support the retention of the two buildings if it meant Kern would not proceed (“Demolish” 1-2: *Queensland Times* “Kern Gets Nod’ 1). Mayor Freeman did not understand the subtlety of difference between the two views. In assuming that one stood against and the other for the development he emotively branded those in opposition as “anti-progress, anti-Ipswich or anti-Council” (*Ipswich Advertiser* “From the Desk” 2).

The Trust, however, saw the issue as a problem with two distinct facets, neither of which was necessarily anti-development in nature. Diane Weidner, President of the National Trust, felt compelled to argue that unless development controls were put in place immediately “the unique character and beauty of Ipswich will be gradually eroded away one or two buildings at a time” (National Trust of Queensland “Media Release”). Without consistent Council guidelines developers would gain control over how Ipswich’s infrastructure would be designed and executed. Second, while the issue of retaining Reids’ became irrelevant⁹, the Trust and its supporters could lose more listed buildings than first suspected. An additional city block was being considered for development and included Reids Heavy Hardware (formerly the Cribb and Foote Bulk Store) and Waltons (formerly the T.C. Beirne and Co. building). The Trust responded by organising a free walking-tour of the CBD to open people’s eyes and highlight the importance of heritage, not only as places retained, but also the physical impact of their demolition upon the streetscape (*Queensland Times* “Kern Blasted: 5; *Queensland Times* “Trust Plans Tour” 5). Robin Gibson, however, saw the problem as an opportunity, and argued that Ipswich people should not worry about possible demolitions but rather the *quality* of the buildings that would go up in their places (*Queensland Times* “Trust Hits” 5). He appeared to have little architectural sympathy or appreciation for the function of the places he was intent on replacing,

⁹ See chapter two which examines the Reids’ fire of August 1985 and the demolition of its store.

and it was cold comfort to the Trust when the Council confirmed that Kern did not own either listed building in the enlarged area. No plans had been submitted for their redevelopment and no demolition permits had been issued (Ipswich City Council "Letter to National Trust). The deadlock remained.

Towards the end of 1985 the Council also began to encounter significant problems of its own with Kern. Despite lengthy negotiations, Kern had still not produced a definitive plan for the complex with which the Council staff were satisfied.

Admittedly, while the Reids' fire had been an initial setback for both the Council and Kern planners, the ensuing legal battle over insurance compensation between Kern's and Reids' insurers meant further delays as the site had to be indefinitely excluded from the overall design. Furthermore, difficulties arose because part of the development straddled land that belonged to Queensland Rail and the Queensland Department of Transport. The Council found that by this stage it was simply one of many competing parties clamouring to have its needs heard by Kern (*Queensland Times* "Kern Seeks" 3; *Queensland Times* "Kern Chases" 1; City Engineer; Ipswich City Council, letter to Coordinator General).

It was, however, the relatively minor issue of cost-sharing that proved to be the biggest problem. Deputy Premier Bill Gunn had called a meeting of the Council, Kern, and relevant state government departments to finalise traffic flow arrangements around the proposed developed area (*Queensland Times* "Plan Delay" 3). A week later, Kern and the Council were publicly squabbling over who should pay for the road upgrades. Kern believed that Council should pay for part of the cost as prospective shoppers would be drawn as much to the mall, which was Council's responsibility, as they would to the new shopping complex. Council disagreed, believing that it could not use Council income, in the form of a rate levy, to subsidise what it believed what it believed was a private-enterprise development (*Queensland Times* "Kern Wrangle" 1).

The issue became personal as both sides competed in a game of media invective. Barry Paul threatened for a second time to call off the whole development; calling it

“one of the most frustrating projects I have ever been involved in” (*Queensland Times* “Plan Delay” 3). A few weeks later Mayor Freeman claimed that Kern “did not come to Ipswich out of any love for the ratepayers of this city”, but that they were “a smart, aggressive operation attempting to apply some extra smart pressure” to get what they wanted (*Queensland Times* “Mayor Blasts” 2; *Queensland Times* “A Gun” 1). When Freeman further claimed that Kern was “holding a gun at our heads” he was emotively describing his opinion of the Council’s current relationship with Kern. The Council rejected Kern’s offer to let the Coordinator-General Sir Sydney Schubert adjudicate the matter and dismissed Kern’s claim that the Council was “difficult” to deal with, adding “It’s no use Kern trying to play the innocent little girl now, because its reputation as a big, bad wolf precedes it” (*Queensland Times* “City Say No” 1); *Queensland Times* “Council Rejects” 2). Freeman’s comments, impulsive and potentially defamatory, underscored the reality of the Council’s weak position; profit-hungry corporations like Kern and an equally compliant development-minded State Government were now moulding and controlling the Ipswich CBD’s retail future.

For the second time that year the Ipswich CBD redevelopment was held up for State Government scrutiny. While Cabinet decided that Council had the right to see the plans first before making any commitment, it fully expected the Council to proceed and pay for its share of road costs once the development was underway. Both Kern and the Council claimed victory, although it was Bill Gunn who reserved the right to claim the solution was achieved through his initiative (*Queensland Times* “Gunn Asks” 1; *Queensland Times* “Kerns Agrees” 3). What was more important was that Cabinet’s decision was binding on both parties. The precedent meant that Kern, closely allied to the National Party-led State Government, would inevitably get what it wanted in preference to a Labor-led Council and the ratepayers it represented.

The local retailers found themselves barely treading water in a rapidly changing retail environment. They had greeted Kern’s initial announcement with enthusiasm, but the twin disasters of Reids burning down and the opening of a nearby suburban Redbank Plaza meant that businesses saw an immediate and sharp downturn in

custom. Kern exacerbated the problem by closing down the businesses it had purchased within the development area; some were closed for good, while others were temporarily relocated to nearby vacant premises. Indeed, the growing list of the deceased, published at irregular intervals in the *Queensland Times*, read like a war record of the fallen heroes that had made the ultimate sacrifice for a more economically viable CBD.¹⁰ As many retailers who traded out of these shops did not even have a lease, Kern was able to deal directly with their landlords when negotiating options over properties and had no obligation to consult the lessees or consider their future (*Queensland Times* "Small Shops" 3: *Queensland Times* "City Heart Determined" 14: *Queensland Times* "Traders in Crisis" 1).

The CBD development also represented the largest single consolidation and ownership of commercial premises in the history of the city and further impacted on the local retailers. There was an expectation that retailers would do whatever was necessary to cooperate with Kern to make the complex a reality. When construction work commenced the traders' retailing spaces merged to become part of an expanding building site, ensuring that shoppers found using the CBD a disorienting experience. When this was combined with the continual bombardment of demolition images in the *Queensland Times*, many shoppers were encouraged to stay away altogether. Ironically when the National Trust staged a demonstration over the demolition of the listed buildings it was Kern that drew the community support because it was seen to be actively pursuing the CBD's revitalization program (*Queensland Times* "Protest" 1). The retailers waited anxiously for the time when they too could take their place in that program.

The approval of Kern's plans on 13 June 1986¹¹ caused a dramatic reversal in the portrayal of the CBD. Without the distraction of heritage protesters or the growing complaints of local traders that nothing was happening, tangible expressions of negativity seemed to melt away overnight. Relief, even optimism, accompanied

¹⁰ From May 1985 to May 1986.

¹¹ The plans had been deposited with much publicity nearly two months earlier on 24 April 1986 (*Queensland Times* "Kern Plan In" 1)

McDonnell and East's decision to sign on as the major department store 'anchor', and building soon commenced behind huge barricades marked with the distinctive Kern logo (*Queensland Times* "Kern's Plan" 3; *Queensland Times* "Major Retailer" 1). However, it was only when Kern put a model of its plans on public display, after nearly six months of intensive building work, that the community could start to visually comprehend the rapid changes to their CBD (*Queensland Times* "Centre Plan" 1; *Queensland Times* "Kern Project" 4). In addition, regular readers of the *Queensland Times*, already literate in reading images and articles about decay and demolition, were now presented with a new genre – the building article ("Kern Changes" 3; "Future" 1; "Work" 5). Previously unseen vistas of their CBD, shot through the evolving skeleton of the new centre, were accompanied by excited updates on how the work was progressing. When the barricades finally came down at the end of May 1987, users of the CBD, unmediated by wooden screens or media hype, could finally visualize for themselves this new creation's retail possibilities (*Queensland Times* "Kern Brings" 3).

The "Kern Countdown" reached its conclusion in August 1987 and heralded the opening, to a spectacular local response, of the first stage of the development and new mall (*Queensland Times* New Centre" 5). The sense of unity was almost visceral as congratulatory messages from business, government and community leaders presented an impenetrable façade against any suggestion that the complex might not have eventuated. Metaphors of rebirth and renewal abounded in the publicity and in the speeches, with Wil Mitchell's cartoon capturing the mood perfectly; a 'doctor' Paul Barry pokes his head around the Maternity Ward door and tells expectant 'father' Des Freeman that "It's a bouncing new city centre".



Wil Mitchell's Cartoon "It's a bouncing new city centre".

*Source: Queensland Times 17 Aug pp1987: 1.
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Queensland Times.*

The CBD proudly boasted over 500 new retail positions, 60 new specialty stores, and a quality, full-line department store.¹² The opening celebrations attracted tens of thousands of shoppers who took advantage of the specially sanctioned extended trading hours, and all traders interviewed reported “huge” increases in sales, the likes of which they had never experienced before. In a CBD for which demolition, construction, clogged traffic and falling sales had become a way of life, it was a welcome change (*Queensland Times* “Ipswich City Square” 1-8; *Queensland Times* “Stamp” 21; *Queensland Times* “Long Wait” 3).

The story, however, has a second ending. The complex, initially christened the “Ipswich City Square”, metamorphosed with the subtitle “the Pride of Ipswich” when, upon completion of its second stage, it was relaunched in November 1988. Three weeks of festivities, in a State still recovering from the excesses of Expo 88, were a timely continuation of the celebratory atmosphere (*Queensland Times* “City Rebirth 2”; *Queensland Times* “City Heart Pumped” 1; *Queensland Times* “Pride Returns: 1”). The square, with its emphasis on marketing and new forms of retailing, had been conceived to bring the Ipswich CBD out of the retailing ‘doldrums’. In the eagerness to make the development happen, Kern had demolished four city blocks and built a monolithic complex, that along with the Council’s mall, represented the largest provincial CBD redevelopment ever undertaken in Australia. When considered in this way it was hard at the time to look critically at the manner in which it was conceived and built. However, it was completed just before the retailing euphoria of the 1980s began to evaporate and barely had time to reach its potential before a harsher retail era began to emerge.

¹² This had not been available in the city since Reids had burnt down over two years earlier.

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Chapter 4

“Dilapidated shells of their formerly bustling selves”

The stagnation of the Ipswich CBD: 1989-2000

When Barry Paul called a noon press conference on 12 September 1991 it precipitated his imminent announcement that Kern was about to go bankrupt (*Courier Mail* "A Tangled Flag" 9). Paul described it as "the worst day in my business life" as he struggled to articulate how disaster had caught up with a company that had, until the previous year, posted thirty consecutive years of profit (*Courier Mail* "A Tangled Flag" 9). Reporting of the press conference, published on Friday the thirteenth, was a twist of irony lost on both Paul and the reporter. Kern's demise signaled to the broader business community that even the strongest could become a victim to the recession, a recession that would claim more companies trading in Ipswich before it had run its course. The economic downturn meant that the much hyped retail golden age that the Ipswich City Square was supposed to facilitate never materialized for the CBD traders; instead, they were ushered into an era marked by retail stagnation and decline. Efforts to revitalize the remaining retail heritage streetscape in the early 1990s and a pickup in consumer spending by the mid-1990s did not reverse that decline. In contrast the 1990s were a decade when suburban shopping centres such as those at Brassall, Booval and Redbank emerged as the retail stellar performers for Ipswich shoppers. By the end of the decade CBD retailing had settled into a resigned despondency, with empty shops commonplace and the most recent retail additions looking hopelessly out of date.

Initially the decline was a product of a weakened Australian economy during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The stock market crash of 1987 challenged the stability of publicly listed companies on the Stock Exchange. In the hope of minimizing the fallout shares were traded, changing the composition of the shareholding public that owned these corporations. The loyalty of shareholders was further challenged as ailing companies became the target of aggressive takeover bids. Shareholders supported companies by shopping in their outlets using shareholder discount cards but new management boards had mandates to rationalize, not expand. The nationwide recession added to the economic decline. Interest rates climbed to the highest recorded in financial history and Australian shoppers devoted more of their incomes to paying off substantially increased mortgage payments, leaving a smaller percentage to spend in the shops. Supermarkets did not fare to badly – groceries

remained essential purchases – but department stores and upmarket retailers found they were competing over a shrinking retail dollar (Stutchbury 16-23; Brian 46-66).

The earliest retail casualty was Reids. Their substantial decline started with the fire in August 1985 which forced them to reopen in the diminished surroundings of the old Town Hall¹³. They had managed to secure a five-year lease with the intention of reestablishing the 'Reids' name. However, without the association of the building that had tied them to the city's premier retailing institution, Cribb and Foote, they were just another shop (*Queensland Times* "Reids Back" 1). In July 1986 Reids parent company Walter Reid and Co. Ltd. was purchased by the New Zealand-based Renouf Corp. Ltd; Renouf had no interest in retailing and wanted the company for its stock exchange listing through which it could set up financial operations. Renouf's parent company, Ariadne Australia Ltd., quickly divested itself of its retail encumbrances. Six Walter Reid hardware stores, one of which traded in Wharf Street in Ipswich, were sold to the Queensland-based Campbells Hardware and Timber in September 1986. The following month, eight department stores were sold to the Victorian-based Retail Investments Pty Ltd (*Queensland Times* "New Broom: 10; *Queensland Times* "Reids' Sale" 1). The latter acquisition was short-lived and a brief announcement made two days before Christmas 1987 was the only warning shoppers had that Reids had decided to close its doors for good in Ipswich. After a 138-year link with the city, via its association with Cribb and Foote, this local institution had closed because "basically it proved unprofitable" (*Queensland Times* "Site's Future" 3).

McDonnell and East, despite their unusual company setup and aggressive positioning, also ran into trading difficulties. Department stores in CBDs around the country had fared badly since the introduction in the 1960s of their suburban counterparts as anchors for the new suburban shopping centre phenomenon. CBD stores struggled to compete, both in sales and appearance, and when the recession descended, many were already "dilapidated shells of their formerly bustling selves" (Reekie 169). McDonnell and East were at first insulated from this predicament for

¹³ See Chapter two.

two reasons. Unlike rivals Myer and David Jones, they were part of a larger group of companies for which retailing was only a minor operation and were therefore not as vulnerable to changes in the retail economic climate (McDonnell and East "Annual Report 1984" 6). Furthermore, they initially operated from a relatively small number of stores that were either new or had recently been refurbished, and did not compete in a suburban/CBD dichotomy. However, their vigorous building program¹⁴ couples with their vision to move up-market and have "profitable stores in every major population centre" eroded their previous immunity (McDonnell & East "Annual Report 1987" 1). When consumer spending started to decline in 1989 in the face of rising interest rates and a depressed economy, McDonnell and East felt the downturn as much as their retail rivals.

The Ipswich store was caught up in this vicious economic cycle as the company's fortunes witnessed a dramatic downturn. By 1991 the directors were openly admitting that it had been a mistake to challenge the national department stores. McDonnell and East's Chairman and Chief Executive John Gibbs, who had little retailing experience, took direct control of all retail operations by closing most of the company's regional stores and radically downsized the Brisbane George Street and Ipswich operations (McDonnell & East "Annual Report 1991" 5-6). In the Ipswich store he decreed the closure of the 'token' departments¹⁵, for example books, records, stationery and confectionery, and then later homewares; shoppers were left with little more than a glorified fashion outlet (McDonnell & East "Annual Report 1992" 3). To accommodate these changes the store closed its lower level and concentrated all its merchandise on a refitted upper level. The trading area decreased even further as the walls that bounded the merchandise continued to move closer together when various lines sold out. It was not long before the shrinking store had more empty space outside the partitions than on its trading

¹⁴ This commenced in 1984 when McDonnell and East directors decided to rationalise the company's piecemeal selection of fashion and homewares stores to concentrate on its department stores.

¹⁵ In retailing, token departments are individual departments in a multi-department business that are expected by the public and form part of the overall service of the company offering them but which on their own do not generate either the profit or turnover that characterises the overall trading operation.

floor. At a corporate level the situation also worsened when McDonnell and East, having bought out its parent company two years previously to form North Quay Limited, was faced with subsidising its retail arm's losses. When, in 1993, the bankers of the new company refused to continue sanctioning the losses, the Ipswich store was forced to close. One year later North Quay Limited was declared insolvent (McDonnell & East "*Annual Report 1993*" 31-31). Without one department store, the Ipswich CBD was faced yet again with a hole in its retail infrastructure.

It was the untimely liquidation of the giant Kern Corporation however that had the most-far reaching impact on Ipswich's CBD retail viability. After the opening of the Ipswich City Square in November 1988, Kern purchased the adjacent Ipswich Centre Plaza from Suncorp with the aim of incorporating it into an extension of its City Square development (*Queensland Times* "Kern Confirms" 2). While stop-gap upgrade was completed in time for Christmas 1989 trading, it was Kern's subsequent reluctance to proceed as promised with a more substantial facelift that hinted at the first sign of trouble (*Queensland Times* "Facelift" 1). Speculation however remained restrained, with the full extent of Kern's diminished business position only made public on 12 September 1991 when Chairman and CEO Paul Barry voluntarily placed the company into receivership. A report on the collapse acknowledged that Kern's share price had plummeted from \$2.40 to 0.07c and attributed the failure of the company, in Paul's words, to the director's expectation that there would always be a market for the prestige properties Kern were building; "We borrowed against that. The downturn was more severe than anyone could imagine. Our profit was not sufficient to cover the interest bill" (*Courier Mail* "A Tangled Flag" 9). Receivers Ernst and Young were charged with liquidating the Ipswich City Square. Tenders were called for its purchase but by the end of August 1992 none of the six tenders they received were deemed suitable and the property was offered for private sale. It sold on 21 September 1992 for thirty million dollars – a quarter of what it had cost to build – to an overseas family investment company (*Queensland Times* "Six Bidding" 5; *Queensland Times* "City Square" 5).

Ironically, despite the national retail downturn, it was precisely the kind of retail clout that centres such as the Ipswich City Square wielded that provided the impetus for the State Government's adoption of the *Main Street Program* early in 1990. The program originated in the United States of America as a methodology for reviving traditional downtown shopping strips and had already been successfully trialed in New South Wales the previous year (Department of Planning 1-3). The Queensland Small Business Corporation (QSBC), under the umbrella of the Department of Business, Industry and Regional Development, tailored the program and focused on its ability to "revitalize, refurbish and promote the traditional commercial area of cities and town throughout Queensland" (QSBC 4). The QSBC recognised that the deterioration of these areas was "primarily because of the development of shopping centres" and aimed to transpose the latter's successful elements, "pleasant shopping environments, convenient mixes of business, and coordinated marketing and promotional strategies" into traditional main street shopping districts (QSBC 2).

The *Top of Town*, the highest part of Brisbane Street and the western retail boundary to Ipswich's CBD, was nominated by the Ipswich City Council as a potential trial site. The QSBC made it a mandatory requirement that the program be community driven and a public meeting was called on 17 June 1991 to gauge local support (QSBC 4; *Queensland Times* "In Brief" 5). Alderman John Kinnane championed the problem, commenting at the meeting that trading in the area had reached a "crisis situation" because of a lack of patronage, due mainly he felt to the retail gravity of the Ipswich City Square as well as the continuing appeal of nearby suburban centres (*Queensland Times* "City Traders" 3). Local business owners were quick to support the initiative and established a steering committee to work directly with the Council to formulate a funding submission and action plan for the QSBC to consider (*Queensland Times* "City Traders" 3).

The submission was approved on 3 June 1992, the culmination of a year-long arduous campaign by the steering committee. The greatest difficulty faced by committee members was trader cooperation. Not all the traders attended the subsequent committee meetings; consequently, their perceptions of the Main Street

program were based on word-of-mouth speculation and what they read in the newspapers. The idea of centralized marketing and image-creation for the area was alien to them, and it was a brave trader who boldly declared, after six months of committee negotiations amid a national recession, “if we want help we’ll ask for it – in our own democratic fashion” (*Queensland Times* “Top of Town” 2; *Queensland Times* “Kinnane” 2). While the committee survived a no confidence vote, it showed clearly that some retailers had a minimal understanding of what modern retailing had become; if your business was not trading as a brand name, within a readily identifiable shopping centre, or as part of a ‘destination’ based on tourism or some unique distinguishing shopping feature, then you would lose custom to those that were. Committee members voluntarily pursued the funding because they believed that their commercial precinct could offer something special and was worth conserving.

The program’s completion in June 1993 achieved a marked aesthetic improvement yet ultimately struggled to compete with the corporate retail culture of big names in big shopping centres. The aesthetic changes emphasized the Top of Town as a destination rather than a thoroughfare. A reduction in the speed limit to 40km/hr, frequent speed bumps and plenty of on-street parking encouraged shoppers to stop and take a look. Continuous tree planting and upgraded street lighting gave the area a brighter feel, as did the freshly painted facades and improved street furniture. Most importantly the revamped area gave the impression of visual and retail unity. The traders promoted their efforts through a newly installed heritage festival and showcased both the history and present day offerings from the Top of Town. However, once the program was completed, for a variety of reasons some business owners moved, and the sense of unity dissipated. Without further maintenance, the physical veneer that the program had assisted to create slowly began to chip away (Top of Town Heritage Revival Committee 1-2).

The remainder of the decade was marked by deterioration in the CBD shopping facilities in stark contrast to the success enjoyed by Ipswich’s suburban shopping centres. The Ipswich City Square visually remained entrenched in the 1980s and

clusters of shops remained unlet. The Ipswich Centre was denuded of shops and turned into Queensland Health's Ipswich service-centre. By the end of the decade the Top of Town had become characterized by a profusion of "For Lease" signs and charity shops. However, it was also during the mid-1990s that the major suburban shopping centres Redbank Plaza, Booval Fair and Brassall Village successfully remodeled their trading spaces with new colour schemes and aggressive new images. These centres re-energised their retail position as convenient and comprehensive up-to-date shopping venues and by doing so strengthened their retail effectiveness. Suburban centres retained a high level of patronage so that by the end of the 1990s they were the favoured choice of shopping location¹⁶, with further challenges to the viability of the CBD coming from a substantial shopping centre at Winston Glades, the St Ives Centre at Goodna and shops in the fledgling suburb of Springfield.

By 2000 the Ipswich CBD's shopping facilities were an anachronism in the new image the city was building. The amalgamation of the Ipswich City council and Moreton Shire Council in 1995 created an entirely new physical entity that geographically changed the position of the CBD in relation to the new city boundaries. Although more centrally positioned, the Ipswich CBD could not compete with an enlarged established network of suburban and rural shopping centres that had come under the planning control of the expanded Council. The city was anxious to establish a new identity and a significant building program in the late 1990s, including the new Council Library, Global Arts Links Art Gallery and The University of Queensland Ipswich campus was used as an exemplar of the constitution of the 'new' Ipswich. In contrast the prominent image CBD retailing projected was one of decay. Empty shops and peeling paint were only the outward physical manifestation of a retail fraternity that was failing to maintain a sustainable level of custom.

¹⁶ An indicator of the growth of suburban shopping centres is evidenced by entries in trade directories. The 1980 *Directory of Australian Shopping Centres (Queensland)* contains over 200 entries, mostly in suburban areas.

As the city prospered elsewhere¹⁷ it became evident that it needed a CBD retailing establishment that matched its ambitious new identity.

¹⁷ In 2000 Ipswich began to take part in the housing boom that spread throughout south-east Queensland; in 2003 the boom remains a hallmark of this decade.

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Chapter 5

River Heart

The evolution of a new CBD from 2000 to the present

“It is accepted that the Ipswich CBD has been struggling for years. It has been the determination, courage and hard work of CBD traders and dedicated Councillors that have kept it alive – but just – it needs energizing now” (Quinn). With these words Ipswich City Council’s CEO Jamie Quinn defended the Council’s latest vision for the future survival of CBD retailing. The catalyst had been the May 2000 Riverlink proposal from Wingate Properties to develop the north bank of the Bremer River directly opposite the existing southerly-positioned CBD; while the plan as a whole was openly welcomed, a component that included a huge new retail space comparable in the size to the CBD trading area generated vitriolic arguments from CBD retailers. After various adaptations to Riverlink the Council sought a compromise solution through its River Heart vision. River Heart attempted to unite both sides of the city by focusing on the river that divided it, allowing for an expanded CBD that envisaged retail, service and recreational areas as an integrated whole. Although at the time of writing both Riverlink and River Heart remain in the realm of ideas, their intersection and coexistence will undoubtedly define the future of retailing in the Ipswich CBD.

Riverlink attracted immediate controversy because of the proposed large allocation of retailing space in such close proximity to the traditional CBD retailing centre. The area earmarked for development is a contaminated site which owners Queensland Rail called for expressions of interest to develop in July 1999. Wingate responded in May 2000 with a master plan that included a rail museum, aquatic centre, rainforest park and commercial and retail village (*Queensland Times* “Traders Divided On New Centre” 3). Although the site had lain dormant for years, CBD retailers made public the threat they perceived the potential new retail space would have on their businesses. CBD retailers pointed out that the current shop vacancy rate of over 30% would be exacerbated as struggling traders were likely to be enticed over to the other side of the river with its perceived better trading conditions (*Queensland Times* “Plan Scares” 3). Tom Edwards, owner of the highly successful local chain of electrical appliance stores RT Edwards, believed it would “gut” the CBD because the proposed retail space was equal in size to a regional shopping centre (*Queensland Times* “Traders Divided On New Centre” 3). Wingate’s Director Stephen Williams

attempted to mollify the retailers and organized a meeting to explain the benefits of the development; however, the responses ranged from 'cautious optimism' at best through to 'abject horror' for those most affected (*Queensland Times* "Traders Divided On New Centre" 3).

It was only when the Ipswich City Council entered the debate – in anticipation of receiving a formal development application – that the dissent began to be actively tackled. Councillor Paul Tully, in an effort to allay the retailers' fears, supported Wingate's master plan "with the provision that it is developed in partnership with the CBD, not in competition with it" (*Queensland Times* "Council Supports" 3).

Councillor Paul Pisasale went one step further and argued that businesses needed to start envisioning the CBD as an entity that worked together rather than as a series of precincts perpetually in competition (*Queensland Times* "Dept Store" 7). President of the Ipswich Region Chamber of Commerce Neil Harding conducted a survey of members in January 2001 and found that 70% of respondents now supported the development. He did however, qualify that many members were still concerned about how the proposed development and the existing CBD would link together, and acknowledged "an informed minority of industry people and high profile businessmen" who continued outright opposition to any retail component (*Queensland Times* "Business Warms" 5' *Queensland Times* "Dept Store" 7). The sale of the proposed development area in February 2001 made concerns about solving the dissent all the more relevant as the development became more likely (*Queensland Times* "Historic Railway Site Sold" 1).

Debate about Riverlink's proposed link – the physical means by which the proposed development and existing CBD would join – soon eclipsed the retailing concerns that had generated the initial discussion and brought into question traditional perceptions of CBD usage. Member for Ipswich David Hamill announced that "the city heart's position on the south bank of the river was an accident of history" because the "supremacy" of the railway workshops on the opposite side had always ensured the CBD boundary had encroached no further (*Queensland Times* "Project Links" 9). Stephen Williams ruled out building another road bridge to link the two

sides, primarily because of the estimated three million dollar price tag. His planning team opted instead to utilize the existing rail bridge for a steam train link, with an adjacent pedestrian/cycle-way bridge (*Queensland Times* "Riverlink, CBD" 1). Second, he did not want to destroy the visual heritage of the river and echoed David Hamill's sentiments that the CBD should focus on, rather than obstruct or turn its back on, the river. Debate about the link caused consternation within the Council, even though no formal application had yet been received. Councillor David Pahlke felt compelled to reject Wingate's proposed link and he questioned whether people would "push their shopping trolleys between the two [sides]" (*Queensland Times* "Foot Bridge" 3). However, when he further argued that Council's endorsement of the link would cause it to be blamed for "creating a desert heartland in the *middle* [italics added] of the city" he had missed the point that the proposed development opened up the possibility of creating a new middle centered on the river (*Queensland Times* "Foot Bridge" 3). Newly elected Member for Ipswich Rachael Nolan propelled the Council out of its prevarication and criticized the councillors, in Parliament, for what she believed was their short-sightedness. She argued that Riverlink could "solve Ipswich's major shopping dilemma by bringing a department store to town" and labeled as "bizarre" the Councillors' continual wrangling over the form the new link should take (*Queensland Times* "Councillors Wring" 5). The indictment pushed the debate into the realm of personal abuse; the issue of the link and the overall development remained unresolved.

Despite amendments, the lodgment of Wingate's revised Riverlink development plan in July 2001 still met with determined resistance from CBD retailers. Ironically the issue of the link, which had previously caused so much angst, appeared resolved; Wingate's solution utilized the existing steel rail bridge by including an adjacent one-way car lane and pedestrian walkway (*Queensland Times* "\$100 million" 1). However, concern this time fermented around Wingate's pre-approval endeavours. Despite the fact that Council had allowed a lengthy consideration process – the closure for public submissions was set a year ahead in June 2002 – it became apparent that during this process Wingate had enticed Kmart and an unnamed supermarket to enter into negotiations to open new stores. Stephen Williams

defended his company's move and argued that these stores were vital to the development. He believed that the retail/commercial village, of which they were to be a part, had to be included to offset the costs of cleaning up the contamination left by Queensland Rails' previous use of the site. He also pointed out that by attracting a major discount department store (Kmart) his company had succeeded where more than ten years of CBD promotional efforts had failed (*Queensland Times* "Riverlink In Doubt" 1). CBD retailers countered that the State Government should clean up Queensland Rails' mess and turn it into riverside parkland like Brisbane's Southbank, thereby obviating the basis for the whole retail development. They reiterated their support for the other components of the development, but added a further caveat that regardless of the issue of contamination, the whole proposed retail development went against the Council's *Ipswich City Centre Structure Plan*. The plan advocated that "The [North Ipswich Railyards] will not be permitted to develop as a rival office or retail location to the CBD" (Ipswich City Council 137; *Queensland Times* "Traders Fear" 1). Tom Edwards had the last word when he retorted, "we should never be apologizing for protecting the CBD" (*Queensland Times* "Trade Too Small" 3).

The Council's solution to the deadlock was to engineer a radical new vision for the CBD through which it hoped all disparate parties could harmoniously co-exist; River Heart. Councillor Paul Tully gave an outline of the Council's reasoning in mid-September 2002 when he stated "there is a clear need to re-profile the CBD, reconnect the city to its historic riverfront and, in doing so, bring economic stimulation and tourism to the city" (Ipswich City Council "Media Release" 1-2). River Heart envisages the CBD as the "living room" of the city in which retailing was promoted and conducted in harmony with the CBD's other defining characteristics as a place to live and as a source of recreation and entertainment (Ipswich City Council "*Ipswich Central*" 3-10). The Council wanted overriding control to determine how the CBD was to evolve and asked Wingate to resubmit its plans in line with the aims of the vision. Wingate responded, at least publicly, in a positive way, by declaring that River Heart would advance "further growth of the existing CBD in harmony with Riverlink" (*Queensland Times* "Riverlink Plans" 3). While CBD retailers also

responded positively to the vision, there was still no evidence that they were prepared to endorse Riverlink as a legitimate component. The closest concession came from Ipswich Events Corporation's Paul Casos. He acknowledged that while the vision had a long way to go to becoming a reality, it had strong retail potential because it could "create a point of difference that [would] separate the CBD of Ipswich from other normal shopping centres" (*Queensland Times* "Future Vision" 1). Despite not being tested in practice, River Heart's greatest strengths are its recognition of and adaptation to current successful retailing trends. The CBD has always been a place to meet as well as to shop, and by defining the centre of Ipswich as a destination in its own right, River Heart recognises that the CBD has to recapture its traditional role in order to compete. This adaptation is endorsed by Liz Dangar, writing on behalf of the shopping centre council of Australia, who believes that "shopping has become a genuine recreational pastime for many Australians" (30). She argues that in order to meet that demand the most successful retail spaces are characterized by their ability to seamlessly combine shopping, entertainment and recreation (24-25). This echoes Rachel Bowlby's distinction between "doing the shopping" – epitomized by the routine of supermarket – and the more pleasurable notion of "going shopping" that elevates the experience over the purchase (8). If River Heart proceeds it will have to be used to assist Ipswich CBD retailing to adapt to meet the current demands of those who patronize its outlets.

At the time of writing, both River Heart and Riverlink remain ensconced in the realm of ideas. River Heart is still a draft vision, and while the Council continue to use it as a practical framework through which to assess Riverlink and other potential CBD developments, it has yet to be ratified as an official Council and given the same authority as the *Ipswich City Centre Structure Plan*. This inconsistency will remain a valid reason for CBD retailers to continue to block retail development within the Riverlink site as their support is vital if the River Heart vision is to become a reality. The most current incarnation of the Riverlink plan has yet to be approved by the Council and remains on public display. While other projects within the CBD are

being undertaken¹⁸ it is the development associated with new retailing space that, despite the ready availability of developer's money, has the hardest passage through to completion. If Riverlink fails through not being supported as an integral component of the River Heart vision, it will join the previous unsuccessful retail schemes that have been a hallmark of the Ipswich CBD since the early 1990s. If it succeeds, it will undoubtedly provide the next chapter in the CBD's retail history.

¹⁸ A new visitor information centre has recently been completed, alongside landscaping works at two of the city's entrances. Existing retail infrastructure has also been upgraded at the Westway Centre in Limestone Street.

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Conclusion

The retail history of the Ipswich CBD from the mid-1970s to 2003 is part of a series of research papers that aim to enhance the city's historical record. The essay has argued that the Ipswich CBD developed its physical composition through a combination of its belated experience of national retail innovations, their rapid application once adopted, and the mitigating influence of local business factors. This evolution has been demonstrated by 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 streetscape of the CBD and its image as a retail destination. These four themes have been elaborated through a historical narrative that has examined the introduction of the corporate supermarket and shopping centre, the impact of the destruction of Reids Department Store, the revitalization of CBD shopping with the completion of the Ipswich Mall and the Kern Corporation's Ipswich City Square shopping centre, the negative effects of the recession and the subsequent competition from suburban shopping centres, and the debate surrounding the proposed Riverlink development and the adoption of the River Heart vision in planning for future CBD retail development.

However, this study has only considered the recent individual retail history of the Ipswich CBD and has not attempted to analyse broader issues within retailing or examine beyond the geographical confines of the Ipswich CBD and those parts of the city affecting it. There is enormous scope for a similar retailing study of Ipswich's suburban shopping development, either as a standalone study or, as is increasingly relevant, in conjunction with a study of the suburbs' relationship to the CBD. It would also be valuable, given the dynamic relationship between Ipswich and Brisbane, to consider Brisbane's retail development, its effect upon Ipswich and Ipswich's ability to maintain a separate civic identity. In terms of future growth the evolution of Ipswich as a city of centres will have a dramatic impact on how people continue to use the CBD. With the rapid expansion of Springfield and the concurrent growth of existing suburbs into larger centres it will also be valuable to examine

whether Ipswich will continue to evolve around its traditional CBD or as a series of interconnecting centres based on the idea of a city whole.

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