

# Can Brisbane Remain a Subtropical City?

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As the seasons change, public and private gardens become a riot of colour. Winter shows the scarlet flags of poinsettia - Brisbane's emblem, which, if really a Mexican beauty, has made itself very much at home. The lavender glow of jacaranda and the gold of laburnum, the green umbrella of poinciana crowned with gleaming scarlet, the massed magnificence of magenta bougainvillea, the creamy blossoms and heavy tropical scent of frangipani filling the air with sweetness, the glare of cannas, the pink and white of bauhinia, the old-gold feathers of silky oak and the red and green of hibiscus - these are but a few of the array of colours.

*C. C. D. Brammall<sup>1</sup>*

Brisbane has been relentlessly cleared since the first British soldiers and convicts set up at Redcliffe and then moved to the site we know as Brisbane today. As in other Australian colonies the new settlers were keen to grow crops and to exploit the timber both as a building material and later as a rich source of export income. While early explorers and botanists recorded the richness of the vegetation most new settlers saw the landscape as a resource to be exploited, not a pristine environment to be treated with respect.

Today Brisbane is the product of land booms and busts, with houses in the inner suburbs still being predominantly of timber and tin, many raised to catch the breeze and to create a cool under house environment. This is the Brisbane celebrated in autobiographies and novels, from David Malouf's *12 Edmonstone Street* (1986) to the musings of many younger novelists. This is the Brisbane of subtropical ambience with flowering trees, rainforest plants under front verandahs, remnant tank stands and ferneries. These are also the suburban areas under the highest pressure for redevelopment as medium density and high rise apartment blocks.

With brick veneer replacing wood as the dominant building material since the 1960s the subtropical feel of the city - with many houses perched in the landscape - began to change. Two story brick homes on concrete slabs spread like a rash across the middle ring suburbs, with two and three storey walk up brick blocks of flats replacing both grand homes and, with site amalgamation, workers' cottages in the older suburbs. Although many rather decrepit Queenslanders have been converted

from boarding houses back to grand homes, the development now permitted on small blocks in the inner suburbs will not see the subtropical ambience of the city increase as the large flowering trees are the first to go.

The high rise residential boom did not come to Brisbane until the 1990s but Torbrek, on Dornoch Terrace in Highgate Hill, remained Australia's tallest apartment building for some years after it was completed in 1960. Brisbane's current high rise residential development constitutes a retreat from subtropical forms to embrace a building style which is energy intensive and requires expensive air conditioning to be habitable in summer. This undermines Brisbane's claim to be a subtropical environment, other than in its weather patterns. The high rise blocks dominate the river, 'smelly mangroves' have often been removed to sanitize the private grounds of the high rises and the mandated concrete Brisbane City Council walkways in front of them run the risk of turning the river into a leisure spectacle rather than an active waterway.

While central Brisbane, the Gold Coast strip and the Sunshine Coast now host hundreds of high rise apartment blocks, low lying river flats and mangroves to the north and south of the city have been turned into canal estates over recent decades. Starting on the Gold Coast and jumping Brisbane these estates now infest the landscape to Noosa. They have gobbled up the wallum country north of Caloundra and on the Gold Coast councils have allowed artificial islands to be built in the mouth of the Coomera River. There is nothing subtropical about the gated estates on Sovereign Islands, save a couple of palm trees waving in the breeze at the security gatehouse. The Hyatt resorts at Sanctuary Cove and Mt Coolum try hard to merge golf courses with manicured tropical plantings.

In the tradition of 'See Queensland Before Joh Sells it'- a popular car bumper sticker in the 1980s - more of south-east Queensland is held in private hands than any other major population centre in Australia. Only 17 per cent of the area from Noosa to the Tweed and west to Gatton is held in national parks or state forests, compared to 43 per cent of a similar area in Sydney.<sup>2</sup>

### **Clearing the Tangled Mass of Jungle**

The soil near the first convict outpost at Redcliffe on Moreton Bay proved dry and not very fertile. With the move in May 1825 to a river site, 27 kilometres inland the British found a cliff of rock on the river suitable for building purposes and on the southern bank a fertile flood plain, rich with subtropical jungle:

This jungle was a tangled-mass of trees, vine, flowering creepers, stag-horns, elk-horns, towering scrub palms, giant ferns, and hundreds of other varieties of the fern family, beautiful and rare orchids, and the wild passion-flower. Along the river bank were the water lily in thousands, and the convolvulus of gorgeous hue ...<sup>3</sup>

The explorers Cunningham and Oxley both commented on the luxuriant plant growth, with its Moreton Bay figs and hoop pine, a landscape rich through flood silt and fallen debris.

Early buildings were mostly of wood, but the windmill and the imposing Commissariat Store were of local stone. To order a straggling settlement, Surveyor Robert Dixon undertook a proper survey of the town and in 1840 laid out streets in the gridiron pattern of a provincial English town, originally to be one chain wide (66 feet, approximately 20 metres). They were soon replanned at 80 feet (approximately 24.5 metres), but even this did not allow for rows of shade trees. Governor Gipps, on visiting the town in 1842, objected to the wider streets 'wasting a lot of land for a street in a place that will be nothing else but a paltry village', so he ordered a return to 66 feet widths as buildings on a narrower thoroughfare have the advantage of keeping out the sun.<sup>4</sup> Both soldiers and convicts found the new colony hotter than anything they had experienced other than their ocean voyage out. In 1843 Dr Simpson, the Commissioner for Crown Lands for the Moreton Bay District, estimated there were 3,000 'coast blacks', 1,500 'wild hill blacks' and 'some two hundred hanging around Brisbane'. Aborigines were certainly in evidence because at the time the European born population of the settlement numbered only 800, about half of these convicts and government officials.<sup>5</sup> Transportation of convicts ceased in 1851.

Most travel writers and adventurers, like almost all newcomers during the nineteenth century, approached Brisbane by steamer. The township stood on a 'noble stream' twenty miles from the coast, at which point it narrowed, with swampy banks below some high ridges, some of which boasted 'pretty wooded crests' and imposing private residences. Surrounded by hills, the city's high ridges had been termed 'terraces'. The city's water supply came from an artificial lake at Enoggera, fed by a number of small creeks, but shooting and land clearing had seen the number of native birds decrease.<sup>6</sup>

While the city centre became grander and more elegant, out in the raw suburbs - made possible by the building of railways to hinterland towns in the 1880s and electric tramways from the late 1890s - the sound of land clearing and the smell of burning windrows of trees and bush pervaded the air. Inspecting Brisbane from Windmill Hill in 1888 the observer could see, in the immediate foreground, the terraces, with their long lines of villas and cottages, embellished with shrubbery and climbing verdurous plants. The nearby declivities, broken by ragged gullies dipping towards the city, had been 'long denuded of forest' and the resulting after-growth of bushes looked naked and forlorn, demanding to be civilised with grottoes and verdant shrubs so they could compete with the beautiful Botanic Gardens on the riverbank.<sup>7</sup> The gardens offered both exotic and native trees, including the curious bottle-tree, from Queensland's western plains.

By the 1880s most of the 'mean wooden shanties', tumbledown wooden stores and weatherboard huts with shingled roofs had disappeared along with any notion of Brisbane as a bush town.<sup>8</sup> In 1886 Carl Feiberg, a local journalist of European origins wrote:

The use of timber for buildings is very general in Brisbane. Pine is abundant on the coast of Queensland, and the easily worked timber is cheap... The dwelling-houses also are nearly all detached, standing each one in an allotment of its own, so that the residential part of the town straggles over an immense area, stretching out in fragmentary streets for miles from the main city. There are hundreds of neat cottages and trim villas scattered over the low hills and valleys, on the river bank, or nestling under the range of hills which lie to the west of the town.<sup>9</sup>

In the space of fifty years Brisbane's subtropical environment, a mix of dry sclerophyll forest and rainforest, had been transformed to create land for Europeans and their children to start a new life in the world's last 'undiscovered' continent. Writers such as E.E. Morris wrote of the clearing with a tinge of regret, but with a population hungry for land - for both agriculture and housing - 'progress' could not be stayed:

The vegetation about Brisbane and Ipswich consists of gum-tree bush and heavy scrubs; the one with its varieties of eucalyptus and acacia, the other abounding in scores of species of more tropical type, in fig-trees and pines, while over and around all twine wonderful vines hundreds of feet in length, reaching from the tree tops to the ground. In the warm, moist shades of these scrubs, many lovely members of the wonderful orchid family luxuriate ... There used to be many of these scrubs about Brisbane in the old days, but they have vanished from near town. The rich alluvial soil has been gladly cleared for agriculture, and every suburban ridge affords its quota of village sites.<sup>10</sup>

Grand villas with formal gardens appeared on both sides of the river, usually some way up from the river flats as the river flooded every few years. The hot summer of 1892-93 gave way to days of rain, a cyclone from the Coral Sea and by 3 February much of the city centre was under water, along with the New Farm flats and the hollow at Milton. Almost a metre of rain fell in the Conondale Range in just one twenty four hour period.<sup>11</sup> The flood did not deter land-hungry agents who continued to feed the demand for new housing lots. By 1895 the colonial government became so concerned by the practice of ringbarking that they advocated a policy of tree planting. The fate of Brisbane's proud gums had already been the subject of a 1889 oil painting by Isaac Walter Jenner of tree stumps and a burnt-out tree at Taringa, which he titled prophetically *A Martyr to Civilisation*.<sup>12</sup>

### **City of Brick and Stone, Suburbs of Timber and Tin**

Building continued in the longer established suburbs, accessible by rail, tram or ferry and within easy reach of employment on the wharves, and in the factories, offices and shops in South Brisbane and the city centre. The city's churches and

major government buildings were of local sandstone, although sometimes to cut costs they used brick as well. The retailers of the city and The Valley built in brick, but most warehouses and wharves were still timber and tin. Timber and tin also remained the most popular building material for suburban houses. They could be cheaply added to and firms specialising in decorative elements - blinds, shutters, lattice - flourished in the inner suburbs. Some of these firms still survive today to service the restoration market.<sup>13</sup> By the 1890s Brisbane had been so denuded of forest that timber-getting moved to the Brisbane Valley and the border ranges. Cedar, particularly from North Queensland, remained the colony's biggest export. Timber mills at Roma Street and South Brisbane continued to service the demand for new houses.

When William Bustard, a trained stained-glass artist who migrated from England to Brisbane in 1921, undertook a mural style painting of one hundred years of Brisbane's history for the Redbank Hotel, he placed Aboriginal figures in a setting of indigenous plants and an out-of-scale, formal gunyah. The vista beyond, of the wharves and warehouses of the city and the spire of the City Hall, then being built, showed the city's progress. There is a hint of the pioneering spirit shown in the aeroplane, but neither the European pioneers nor the modern day residents of Brisbane are represented.<sup>14</sup>

By the 1930s there were two main places for seeing Brisbane. Visitors to the city centre got a 'splendid bird's eye view of the metropolis' from the lofty tower of the City Hall, over 100 metres above the river. The other vantage point, Mt.Coot-tha, (its 'pleasing aboriginal name' meaning 'wild honey'), had seen the erection of a handsome kiosk in 1928. From here, wrote Clem Christensen, a young journalist working for the Queensland Government Tourist Bureau, one could immediately see that while Rome was founded on seven hills, 'Brisbane is built on seventy' with every suburb affording magnificent residential sites, offering delightful panoramas from lofty eminences'. To Christensen, Brisbane represented the 'Gateway to Tropical Australia'. He asked who would 'willingly contend with the rigors of a Southern winter - wildly erratic climate, biting winds, sleet and slate-grey skies' when here, even in late winter, 'peach blossoms opened, gardens were a riot of sweet-pea and marigold, poinsettias unfolded over the landscape,' followed by tumbled, frothing cascades of bougainvillea and 'The heady scent of early stocks drifted among the softly threshing palms, while the shadows of the bunya pines were lengthening across the lawns.'<sup>15</sup>

One of Brisbane's few remnant convict structures, the Windmill, dating back to the 1820s, helped frame many a tourist brochure and poster. Melbourne artist Percy Trompf used it for his *Brisbane: River city of the North* poster, commissioned by the Queensland Government Tourist Bureau in the mid 1930s. Trompf's poster also featured the imported poinsettia, (Brisbane's floral emblem), with a verdant middle ground of bunya pines and Moreton Bay fig trees. The river, the recently completed Grey Street Bridge and Mt Coot-tha took up the background. The lawns around the Windmill remained manicured and depicted in European green.

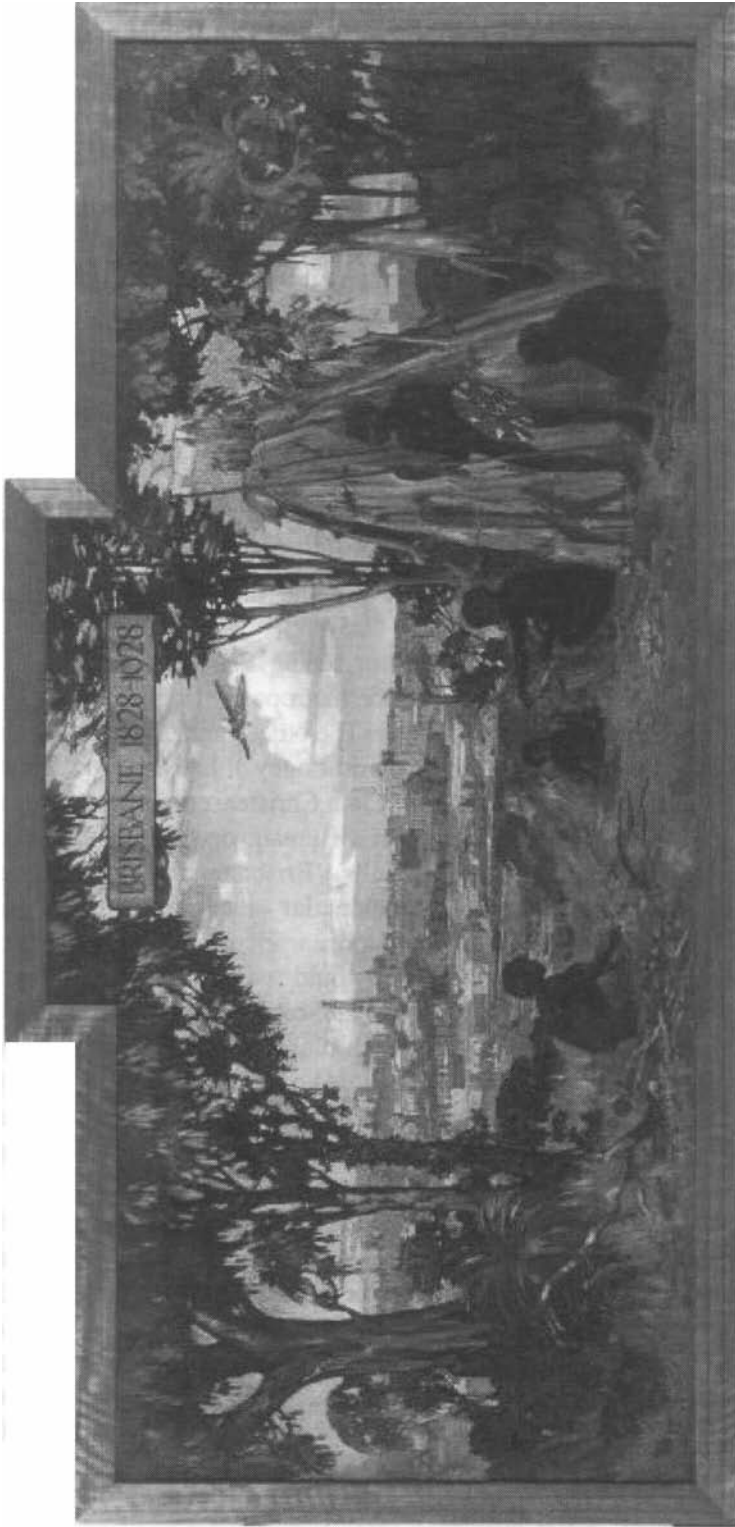


Plate 1. William Bustard (1895-1973). *Brisbane 1828-1928*, 1928. Oil on canvas. Bustard's mural, commissioned for a hotel in suburban Redbank, is a symbol of Brisbane's progress. It documents the transition from the Arcadian Aboriginal past to the construction of the Brisbane City Hall (opened in 1930) and the modernity of the era of flight. Courtesy Brisbane City Collection, Museum of Brisbane.



**Plate 2.** Percy Trompf (1902-64) *Brisbane: River City of the North*, c1936. Purchased 1986. This poster was commissioned by the Queensland Government Tourist Bureau to promote a visit to Brisbane during the winter months. The poinsettia, recently chosen as Brisbane's floral symbol, is then in full bloom. Courtesy Brisbane City Collection, Museum of Brisbane.

By 1959, when Queensland celebrated 100 years of its separation as a colony from NSW, *Walkabout* magazine reflected on a city with a population over half a million, and the largest river port in Australia. With a power station and a sugar refinery on its banks at New Farm, wharves, freight and factories remained the main use of the river from Bulimba and Teneriffe to the city centre and West End. Nonetheless, *Walkabout* created a picture of a city where vegetation was often paramount.

'Many streets are lined with palms, bauhinia, and other trees; and tropical poinsettia, poinciana, jacaranda, bird of paradise, weeping fig, cocos palm, and frangipani flourish in profusion'.<sup>16</sup> All the plants that create the vibrant, subtropical environment of Brisbane are exotics. But apart from the 51 acres of the Botanic Gardens, the Mt Coot-tha Botanic Gardens (1970) and the Brisbane Forest Park (1977), Brisbane's immediate city area has since shed much of its vegetation.

Patches remain of what was once a subtropical city, around the Windmill on Wickham Terrace and in new installations, including the Roma St Parklands. But much of the city's vegetation has been lost as colonial buildings, often with accompanying gardens, have given way to high rise office and apartment buildings, where the only vegetation is to be found within enclosed atriums and where giant air conditioning units create an artificial environment at odds with a subtropical river city. Concrete encases much of the river bank, though the new Brisbane City Council walkways do give the public some access to the river. Harry Seidler's Riparian Plaza, a 53 storey structure for millionaire residents, has eight storeys of above ground parking, so that the residents can offer their Porsches and BMWs good views. Such flaunting of wealth undermines Brisbane's image as an egalitarian city. Brisbane has Australia's least distinguished set of skyscrapers, yet much of its promotion still relies on skyline shots that could be anywhere in the world. Its characteristic spreading fig trees have all but vanished from the central city area, but are still to be found in some inner suburban parks and backyards where their roots create fewer problems to sewerage lines.

### **The Subtropical Capital of Queensland**

When the Brisbane City Council published its lavish coffee table celebration *Brisbane: City in the Sun* in 1960, it told of a rapidly growing city, with 20,000 newcomers per year bathed in sunshine, 'still with thousands of acres of expanding room to accommodate new residential areas and new factories'. With the 'finest winter climate in the world' its river could be blue, silver or brown, 'always bordered by evergreen trees and lawns running right up to its edge'. The Brisbane Development Association, who commissioned the book, claimed that modern architects had created 'designs for homes to harmonise with the sub-tropical landscape'.<sup>17</sup> Many of these houses, with patios, large window areas and internal courtyards did attempt to reach out into the environment, to directly interact with it. They were usually single storey, and if architect designed, often had separate wings. Their subtropical feel was enhanced by an increasing use of electrically powered ceiling fans, increasingly common from the 1960s to the 1980s. By the 1980s air conditioning had become ubiquitous in new office blocks, hotels and the more expensive apartment blocks. By the 1990s more and more households were installing air conditioning as well. Instead of staying open to the breeze, and using ceiling fans to enhance circulation, the occupants now hide behind double glazing in their enclosed, refrigerated environments.<sup>18</sup>



Architect designed houses of the 1960s and 1970s were a marked contrast to the traditional Queenslander, perched on stilts between one and three metres from the ground, depending on the lie of the land. The Queenslander created an internal environment, with the larger of the genus boasting verandahs on two or more sides. The environment thus created, with verandahs to keep out the sun, nonetheless retained a remarkably open feel. Lattice rather than glazing often separated the verandah from the outside world, and the houses had only one layer of floorboards between the house proper and the underneath area, so residents retained an immediate link to their environment. With walls made of one outside layer of weatherboards and one internal layer of lining boards (some houses were just a single layer of wood, with exposed cross beams) the outside world, especially the wind and the rustle of palm trees, tree ferns or leopard trees retained a hint of subtropical rainforest.

Subtropical Brisbane and its two more temperate coasts are in danger of becoming a sprawling morass of energy intensive apartment blocks and neo-Tuscan villas, dominating the landscape on their concrete slabs.<sup>19</sup> No room for the little ferneries that once flourished underneath grand and modest Queenslanders. Today the environment is increasingly given over to reverse-cycle air-conditioning, so the inhabitants can pretend they are living in a temperate climate, without humidity. Less intrusive and less energy intensive forms of climate control, such as dehumidifiers, are almost unknown in Brisbane, though widely used in Asia. If masonry and concrete continue as the dominant building materials in Brisbane, then the subtropical river city will soon be no more than a memory from a more verdant past.

Notes

- 1 C. C. D. Brammall, 'Brisbane, the City of Go-As-You-Please', *Walkabout*, Jul. (1937): 32.
- 2 K. Gum and P. Spearritt, *The Greenspace Audit*, (Brisbane: Brisbane Institute 2003). On the destruction of mangroves and river mouths by canal development see P. Hutchings and P. Saenger, *Ecology of Mangroves*, (St Lucia: UQP, 1987): 175, 305-6. On land speculation see J. Forbes and P. Spearritt, 'The National Hobby of Property Speculation' in *Griffith Review*, Summer (2003).
- 3 Quoted in R. Johnston, *Brisbane, the First Thirty Years*, (Boolarong Publications 1988): 19.
- 4 Op cit: 34.
- 5 Garran's *Australasian Illustrated*, (1888): 45-46, reprinted in Brisbane History Group, *Brisbane by 1888: the public image*, (Brisbane 1988).
- 6 Garran, op cit: 46-47, 36-39. See also G. Washington Power, in Cassell's *Picturesque Australasia*, (1887), reprinted in *Brisbane by 1888*.
- 7 W. H. Traill, 'Historical Review of Queensland' in *Australasia Illustrated*, (1888), reprinted in *Brisbane by 1888*: 109-110.
- 8 Op cit: 101.
- 9 H. Willoughby, ed. *Australian Pictures*, (London, Religious Tract Society 1886), reprinted in *Brisbane by 1888*.
- 10 E. E. Morris 'South Queensland' in Cassell, op cit: 122.
- 11 J. G. Steele, *The Brisbane River*, (Adelaide: Rigby 1984): 49.
- 12 On Jenner see Gavin Fry and Bronwyn Mahoney, *Issac Walter Jenner*, (Sydney: Beagle Press 1994). The illustration is reproduced in Peter Spearritt ed., *Seeing Brisbane 1881-2001*, (Brisbane: Brisbane Institute 2002).
- 13 See R. Fisher and B. Crazier B. eds, *The Queensland House*, (Brisbane: Queensland Museum 1994); see also Ian Evans and the National Trust of Queensland, *The Queensland House: history and conservation*, (Mullumbimby: Flannel Flower Press 2001).
- 14 On Bustard and Trompf see *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. On the use of Aboriginal figures and imagery by European painters and graphic artists see Roman Black, *Old and New in Aboriginal Art*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson 1964), Peter Spearritt: 'Australian Iconography in Poster Art' in *All the Rage: The Poster in Victoria 1850-2000*, (State Library of Victoria 2001): 25-32 and 'Western Australia in text and image, 1920s to 1960s' in *New Norcia Studies* 11 (2003): 12-17.
- 15 *Queensland Journey: Official Guide of the Queensland Government Tourist Bureau*, (Brisbane: Meehan 1939). Born in Townsville in 1917, Christensen wrote this landscape format 272 page illustrated guide in his early twenties. He went on to found *Meanjin* in Brisbane in 1940. The guide was published in two different formats, the other with 146 pages. Both had paid advertisements.
- 16 Clem Lack, 'Australia's third city celebrates', *Walkabout*, June (1959): 16. The umbrella tree (*Schefflera actinophylla*), is the only native tree that was commonly planted in Brisbane.
- 17 Published by Oswald Zeigler for the Brisbane City Council.
- 18 See Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Qld chapter, *Buildings of Queensland*, (Jacaranda Press 1959). The increasingly popularity of building directly onto the concrete slab and the spread of the neo-Tuscans is well documented in residential property magazines including *Queensland Homes*, (1985 to the present) and the Saturday property supplement in *The Courier Mail*.
- 19 On the extent of private land holdings, population densities and land clearing in South East Queensland see SEQ 2021.qld.gov.au and updates.



**Plate 3. Mt Coot-tha kiosk with the view to the north of Brisbane. Photograph by Jan Seto**