

BRISBANE'S BOOM

No longer in the shadows of Sydney and Melbourne, the Queensland capital has evolved into an incubator for forward-thinking art and design—with a quirky point of view all its own.

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The New Farm
Riverwalk, looking
toward the Central
Business District.

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IN THE DIM, INDUSTRIAL DEPTHS of Brisbane's Powerhouse arts center, a crowd of bronzed socialites and well-heeled art fans shuffled around a cotton-candy-pink neon electric chair, part of a collaborative design-art show. "It's called *BarbieQue*," said the work's creator, Jason Bird, who was giving me a personal tour of the former power station, now the turbine of Brisbane's cultural life. "Imagine that Barbie sat in the chair, someone pulled the switch, and she melted," he told me, pointing out the piles of dripping silicone on the floor.

The evocative piece is a sly flip-of-the-bird at Sydney and Melbourne, who refer to the Queensland capital as "Briz Vegas," a playground for overly suntanned Barbies and Kens that lacks sophistication and culture. It's a perception that Bird and others in Brisbane's emerging creative class are keen to eradicate. "Sydney and Melbourne want to be New York or Los Angeles," he told me, "but Brisbane would rather be the Australian San Francisco, Seattle, or Austin."

I first met Bird, the founder of the Brisbane-based furniture company Luxxbox, at a design expo in Los Angeles. He was there with Quench, a Queensland-sponsored consortium whose designs won best in show. "Brisbane punches above its weight, mate," he said then. I wasn't convinced. Having spent a wondrous holiday in

Sydney and a miserable weekend in humid Cairns, I was sure my next journey down under would take me to Melbourne or even Tasmania. But Brisbane?

The city hardly registers with most travelers, overshadowed by Sydney's beachy glamour and Melbourne's gritty cool. And those two cities always considered Brisbane to be the backwater of Queensland, tucked inland between touristy beach towns to the south and the Great Barrier Reef to the north. From 1968 to 1987, the controversial and conservative Queensland Premier Johannes Bjelke-Petersen governed the province with an iron fist, bringing in prosperity—and casinos—but turning its capital, Brisbane, into a corrupt police state.

"A year after the premier resigned, we hosted Expo '88—it was the first time we realized Brisbane's potential," Bird recalled of the technology-focused world's fair, which drew more than 15 million visitors. With a new, liberal government in place, the city blossomed throughout the 1990s, embracing progressive policies and artistic expression. After the Powerhouse opened in 2000, the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA)—Australia's largest contemporary art museum—followed in 2006. And as the city evolved, so did its design



sensibility: a blend of steampunk nostalgia and sunny, color-saturated modernism. In 2014 Brisbane hosted the G20 summit, ushering in another wave of development. Now the city has become an incubator for contemporary art and design, with a booming café and culinary culture and a vibrant indie music and fashion scene. Cool new hotels like Tryp keep popping up, along with black-tiled gastropubs and flashy flagships for Brisbane fashion labels. So when Bird kept insisting that I check it out, I figured he was right.

One of the first things I noticed about Brisbane is its Queenslandian sense of humor. In the courtyard of the M&A Apartments, where I had a flat, I looked up to see a massive geometric metal stag's head hanging upside down above my head. And at a small café on one of my first mornings, I declined a "shlong" (a double espresso with hot water, but not so much as to make it a "long black") in favor of a

flat white. Outside, a sign declared that "Awesome things will happen today if you choose not to be a miserable cow."

With this turn-everything-on-its-head spirit in mind, I set out to explore the city on too little sleep and not enough caffeine. Founded as a penal colony in 1824, Brisbane has grown with little urban planning. But the river, which wiggles like the letter W through the city, provides an easy geographical and socioeconomic division. The South Bank is lined with museums and parks that adjoin funkier precincts like the West End and working-class Woolloongabba. To the north is the Central Business District (the CBD) and the more upscale neighborhoods: suburban Paddington, chic Fortitude Valley, and New Age-y New Farm, home to the Powerhouse and Spicers Balfour, the city's best boutique hotel.

In 1999 the Queensland government instituted an Art Built-In policy, requiring that a percentage of building construction be dedicated to public works. The project has

From left: GOMA, Australia's largest contemporary art museum; vases by Erin Lightfoot at her shop in Eat Street Markets; the view from the rooftop bar at Spicers Balfour Hotel.



'SYDNEY AND MELBOURNE WANT TO BE NEW YORK OR LOS ANGELES, BUT WE'D RATHER BE SAN FRANCISCO.'

employed thousands and has helped to recognize the importance of artists in the community (which inspired creative industries like Brisbane's Urban Art Projects, a world-renowned art-based manufacturer, where that upside-down stag was made).

This well-meaning civic policy hasn't always resulted in very pleasing architecture. When author Alain de Botton proclaimed that Brisbane's rampant waterfront development had produced "chaotic ugliness," he had a point. But the showcasing of culture in the city is impressive. On Brisbane's South Bank, the civic buildings of the Queensland Cultural Center couldn't be more glorious. At the Modernist Queensland Art Gallery, contemporary Chinese sculpture is displayed in an indoor reflecting pool, and the galleries have installations of tribal totems and ornately decorated emu eggs. Next door, at the black-aluminum-and-glass GOMA, I saw an exhibition of LP cover art and toured the permanent collection of 20th-century indigenous Australian paintings.

Despite the nearby CBD's jumble of skyscrapers, the neighborhood is hardly intimidating and easily navigable. A service alley called Burnett Lane is part of downtown Brisbane's secret life. Following in the footsteps of Melbourne's revitalized laneways, it's a gritty counterpoint to the glistening buildings of the city's thoroughfares and is full of street art and cool-crowd hangouts. I discovered a bar winningly named Super Whatnot and a groovy vintage-vinyl shop, along with provocative murals by the famed Brisbane artist and activist Richard Bell. One depicts an Aboriginal man holding a placard that reads: "Pardon me for being born into a nation of racists." The city is full of these bold public proclamations. Liberal expression, whether political or personal, is celebrated everywhere—on streets and in galleries, shops, and restaurants.

I stopped for lunch at the Survey Co., which has brick walls, cork floors, and plywood benches covered in leather hides. "We serve dude food," the whiskered waiter said to me, bringing out foie gras profiteroles, *merguez* lamb cigars, and the daily "death row" meal, a nod to Australia's convict past that's presented on a metal tray accompanied by a ginger drink in a Mason jar.

Later that night, I met up with Bird and his wife, Kara, for an art show at Artisan, a Queensland crafts emporium. On display was a sculpture made from bicycle seats and antlers, along with rain-forest tribal basketry and silk screens in blazing colors. Bird introduced me to John Stafford, a director at the arts consulting group CreativeMove; he explained Brisbane's particular ethos. "The cool intellectual art comes from Sydney and Melbourne," Stafford said. "In subtropical Brisbane, it's too hot to think deeply, so the art is more expressionist." Not to mention expressive. I told him about seeing Richard Bell's in-your-face mural on Burnett Lane, and he smiled, telling me how, as a judge for a prestigious arts competition in Brisbane, he once decided on the winner by simply flipping a coin.

After a couple of "tinnies" of beer, the Birds took me to James Street Up Late, where the fashion and design

Clockwise from top left: The lobby at the Brisbane Powerhouse arts center; designer Jason Bird at Luxxbox design store; the "Burst Open" exhibition at Artisan; inside Easton Pearson boutique.

shops stay open until 9 p.m.—or whenever the booze runs out. Kara, who owns Idlebird, a women's après-swim collection, gave me a crash course on Australian fashion as we strolled down a stretch of James Street: it all goes back to Easton Pearson, the 26-year-old label that popularized bold prints and

ethnic textiles—a look that continues to influence the designs at local stores like Camilla, Sass & Bide, and Gail Sorronda.

The next day, Jason invited me on a tour of the up-and-coming Paddington district, where he lives in an enclave filled with native Queenslander houses. Set on stilts with broad verandas and decorative rails and trellises, these metal-roofed timber homes are reminiscent of Hawaiian plantation villas designed for subtropical heat and rain. The neighborhood itself has vintage clothing stores, an antiques center housed in a 1929 cinema, and a Paleo Diet café, all of which draw a weekend brigade of bicycles and baby carriages. We broke bread—well, \$18 bacon waffles—at the Kettle & Tin. "A few years ago, Brisbane discovered good coffee and breakfast," the owner and street artist Asa Boardman told me. "Now we serve it all day."

A whistle-stop on El Bulli chef Ferran Adrià's recent book tour, Brisbane is rapidly working its way up the Australian food chain with restaurants offering elaborate tasting menus and its own spin on the food-truck fad. Eat Street Markets, housed in graffiti-splashed shipping containers in Hamilton, dish out *(Continued on page 135)*

the place was filled with families. Children sat at picnic tables, laughing and talking as loudly as they wanted while adults ate and drank heartily around them.

Pulker emerged from the kitchen. A tall man in his early thirties with a heavy beard, he was wearing black-rimmed glasses, a white shirt, and ornate lederhosen. He balanced six or seven plates in his arms, and distributed them with ease. Eventually, he brought me two kinds of sliced sausage, a salad of yellow potatoes in vinegar, and plump Austrian beans, each the size of a postage stamp, served cold with chives.

I devoured every bite, along with hunks of dense bread. I'd heard stories of Pulker's enthusiasm for wine, and they proved to be, if anything, understated. Every few moments, he'd appear with a fresh glass and a bottle, and pour me something invariably compelling.

These were wines made for the *Heuriger*, low in alcohol and thirst-quenching, perfect for a Sunday afternoon. But Pulker is also a collector, and his cellar of 3,500 bottles is renowned in the community. "Guests say, 'Make me some food and give me a little Henri Jayer Burgundy' or whatever it might be," he said. "And they sit here in shorts and T-shirts and have an unforgettable meal."

I'd had plenty of fine lunches and dinners over the course of my trip, but he was right: this was the one I won't soon forget. What set it apart, more than anything, was Pulker himself, an oversize presence who embodied the enthusiasm and hospitality of the region.

I can see him now emerging from the kitchen. He's roaring with laughter, looking slightly preposterous yet altogether fitting in his traditional costume, striding toward my table, weaving between a runaway toddler and a stack of dishes, holding up a bottle he's eager for me to try. I'm pretty sure it's a Riesling. +

T+L Guide Austria

WHERE TO SIP

Wineries in the Wachau, Kremstal, and Kamptal are hospitable and beautiful. However, their visiting hours can be uneven. Appointments may be necessary: it's always best to inquire first.

Franz Hirtzberger A

13th-century winery that turns out especially rich Grüners. *hirtzberger.at*.

F.X. Pichler The futuristic winery might appear jarring, but Lucas Pichler's traditional Grüners rank with the region's best. *fx-pichler.at*.

Loimer Known for intense Rieslings—and a controversially

modern winery. *loimer.at*. **Nigl** Supremely balanced Rieslings with 50-year life spans. *weingutnigl.at*.

Nikolaihof The pinpoint-precise wines are almost as memorable as dinner in the courtyard. *nikolaihof.at*.

Prager Complex wines with fine detail. *weingutprager.at*.

STAY

Loisium Wine & Spa Resort Langenlois *loisium.com*. \$\$\$

Schloss Dürnstein *schloss.at*. \$\$\$

EAT

Heurigenhof Bründlmayer *heurigenhof.at*. \$\$\$

Landhaus Bacher *landhaus-bacher.at*. \$\$\$\$

Pulker's Heuriger *pulkers.at*. \$\$\$

locally caught oysters, wood-fired pizza, and spiral-cut deep-fried potatoes on sticks, a hearty Aussie specialty. The weekend event has a carnival atmosphere but is also a serious retail outlet for local artists like Erin Lightfoot, who creates 1970s-influenced patterns on ceramics and silk. I picked up two vases and a stack of greeting cards.

That night, I found myself in an entirely different scrum. At the corner of Ann and Brunswick in Fortitude Valley, Saturday night fever was raging. I couldn't beat this mass of people, so I joined them, embarking on a bar crawl to dimly lit bordello-style bars, English pubs redone as sleek lounges, and a massive indoor-outdoor gay dance club.

Crossing the river in the early morning hours, I headed for the West End to meet clothing designer Lydia Pearson, who started her business with Pamela Easton in 1989. "Mediterranean immigrants originally lived here, but now there are Asians, gay girls, students, and hippie-trippy liberals," she said as she guided me through the area. "Though Brisbane was small, it always had an underground." Much of it still thrives in the neighborhood, where there are comic-book stores, music lounges, and cute rustic boutiques like the Happy Cabin, which carries local labels such as Three of Something. Pearson treated me to a vegan version of Australia's national desert, the lamington, a chocolate-dipped and coconut-sprinkled sponge cake said to have been invented in the city more than a hundred years ago. I ate mine Brisbane-style, sitting outdoors on bright, ultramodern stools probably made by a local designer.

We drove toward the blue-lit Story Bridge, eyeing the graffiti that is embraced by Brisbane's design-conscious citizens as a stamp of urbanity, in a city that Pearson considers "a big country town that's starting to grow up." Indeed it has, and the signs were everywhere. I looked to the right and someone had pulled a Jenny Holzer on the concrete wall of an underpass and written a statement in big red capital letters that, for me, said everything about Brisbane's evolution: "THE MORE I THINK ABOUT IT, THE BIGGER IT GETS." +

T+L Guide Brisbane

STAY

M&A Apartments *m-aapartments.com.au*. \$

Spicers Balfour Hotel *spicersretreats.com*. \$\$

Tryp Fortitude Valley *trypbrisbane.com*. \$

EAT

Kettle & Tin *kettleandtin.com.au*. \$\$

Super Whatnot *superwhatnot.com*.

Survey Co. *surveyco.com.au*. \$\$\$

SHOP

Easton Pearson *eastonpearson.com*.

Erin Lightfoot *erinlightfoot.com*.
Happy Cabin 58 Vulture St.; 61-7/3844-9989.

James Street Up Late *jamesst.com.au*.

Luxxbox *luxxbox.com*.

DO

Artisan *artisan.org.au*.
Brisbane Powerhouse *brisbanepowerhouse.org*.

Eat Street Markets *eatstreetmarkets.com*.

Queensland Cultural Center *arts.qld.gov.au*.