

Re-employing *the literary*: the use of *the literary* in city identity formation in Brisbane

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The *Downtown Brisbane* and *Experience Brisbane* tourism campaigns of 2001 through 2003 sought to brand the city of Brisbane internally and, to a lesser extent, externally using the *literary*, particularly the identity and work of local novelist Nick Earls. While the cultural identity of some early modern cities, especially London¹, are contiguous with their literary heritage or a literary identity, the usefulness of literary components (such as authorial identities, literary events, and literary narratives connected to place) is underemphasized in accounts of contemporary cultural policy-making². Of interest then, is the case of Brisbane’s use of Nick Earls in its branding campaigns (and it might be said, Nick Earls’s reciprocal use of the city in intermingling his own authorial identity and narratives with the identity and narratives of Brisbane) in i) the usefulness of literature in broadening the dimension of place, ii) the renovation of literature as a tool of cultural policy, but ii) the necessary subservience of the radical potential of literature to other functions, such as city marketing and the marketing of books.

The campaign addressed perceived problems in Brisbane’s local and wider identity. Brisbane, the capital of the state of Queensland, is a subtropical city of 1.3 million people on Australia’s eastern seaboard. Since 1970 it has been the fastest growing major city in Australia, and one of the fastest growing on the Pacific Rim³. It is sometimes taken to together with the Sunshine Coast urban developments to its north and the City of the Gold Coast developments to its south to constitute the “200 kilometre city” with a population of around 2 million people. Despite rapid growth in recent decades, Brisbane, historically, has

1 Lawrence Manley, *Literature and Culture in Early Modern London*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995)

2 Stuart Glover, *Literature and Cultural Policy Studies*. (Unpublished Thesis Uni of Queensland 2006) p.135–68.

3 Bernard Salt, “Brisbane - It's booming, it's brilliant, it's downright sexy” *The Australian* 3 Nov 2005. Available at <http://www.brisbane-australia.com/103334.php>.

been viewed as something of a cultural joke. For example, in an episode of the *Dr Who* television programme in the 1970s, Brisbane is described by Dr Who's assistant as "a negative interface to the universe"⁴. This is a problem not just for international tourism, but also for the identity of the city nationally, and for its residents. At the level of tourism, this "negativity" takes the form of Brisbane functioning mostly as a stopover city, with many locally believing this is because Brisbane lacks a major attraction. Tourists tend to spend only a single night in the city before heading off to the Great Barrier Reef or to the Gold Coast beaches.

In order to address these local and wider perceptions, Brisbane Marketing, an organization representing and funded by the city government and city retailers, conceived of the need for a campaign to re-brand the city. Its specific aims were to i) create coherent civic pride around a positive rather than negative identity for the city, ii) move perceptions of Brisbane in other Australian states from "sleepy city" to "happening city", and iii) present Brisbane as a hub from which the "in-bound market could explore surrounding areas"⁵. Only the first of these did not have an immediate commercial dimension.

With the help of a local advertising agency, Junior, two brands were created: i) *Downtown Brisbane*: which served retailers interests by emphasising the diversity and accessibility of downtown spaces, and ii) *Experience Brisbane*: which emphasized the diversity of "world class" attractions close to Brisbane. The campaigns had television and print advertisement components.

Significantly, both campaigns employ author Nick Earls as their front person and putative author. Earls had become one of Brisbane's best known identities on the back of the success locally, nationally, and, to a degree, internationally of a series of "lad fiction" novels—or *twenty-something* romances written from a male perspective mainly for a female readership—including, *Zigzag Street*, *Bachelor Kisses*, and *Perfect Skin*⁶. The *Downtown Brisbane* campaign for television, featuring 30 second and 60 second TVCs shown in high rotation, was built around a lad fiction narrative parodying one Nick Earls's own. In it, Earls, appearing as himself at a press conference, narrates the story of a gormless young local Brisbane man's attempt to romance a young Norwegian woman backpacker through a sequence of major downtown sites⁷.

In the print campaign, *Experience Brisbane*, which took the form of an eight page A4 sized colour brochure distributed to Brisbane house holds, Nick Earls is called upon to re-describe the city and nearby sites as simulacra for more famous tourism locations⁸. Significantly, this campaign added cultural or creative dimensions to city narratives that traditionally had resisted the celebration of Brisbane cultural identity. Previous state tourism campaigns had emphasised the physical attractions of the area (beaches, reef and rainforest), while internal city campaign emphasized sport.

This *Experience Brisbane* campaign leant less on the structure of Earls's lad fiction narratives than had the *Downtown Brisbane* campaign and more so on his identity as an "author". It seems to take this function literarily, in asking him to re-narrate the city. Perhaps regrettably, instead of suggesting a distinct identity for the city and distinct locales and attractions within it, the print campaign emphasises Brisbane and its various locales as stand-ins or simulacra for more famous locations: Australia Zoo stands in for Kakadu; dolphin

4 Gerard Lee "HARPO", *Hot Iron Corrugated Sky: 100 Years of Queensland Writing*. Eds Robyn Sheahan-Bright and Stuart Glover (St Lucia: U QLD P) p. 56.

5 Junior "Case Study: Brisbane Marketing" Pdf file available from http://www.junior.com.au/html/folio/folio_bris_mkting.htm.

6 Nick Earls *Zigzag Street* Sydney: Arrow 1996; Nick Earls *Bachelor Kisses* Ringwood: Penguin 1998; Nick Earls *Perfect Skin* Ringwood: Penguin 1999.

7 See http://www.junior.com.au/html/folio/folio_bris_mkting.htm for TVC footage.

8 See http://www.junior.com.au/html/folio/folio_bris_mkting.htm for images from the print campaign.

feeding at Moreton Island for Monkey Mia, Dreamworld for NASA; and Brisbane Forest Park for the Daintree Rainforest. As most of these locations are a day-trip away from the city centre, they were presented as “spokes” to Brisbane’s “hub”⁹. Despite the downside to presenting the city as a second best attraction, the use of the literary in the negotiation of city identity was new. The previous emphasis on only the physical dimensions of the city was augmented by a concern for the cultural. This was timely, as it came during a period when the city had become more introspective about its identity and seemed keen to re-negotiate the negative images of the 1970s¹⁰.

Not surprisingly, the city and the advertising agency have claimed the campaign was a success¹¹. The campaign recognition was high: i) 50% of Brisbane residents claim to have seen the *Downtown Brisbane* campaign, ii) 90% of these agreed that the advertising suggests that *Downtown Brisbane* is a lively place, and iii) 40% of Brisbane residents claim to have seen the *Experience Brisbane* campaign. Correspondingly, stakeholders reported themselves as “extremely happy”. Likewise, the campaign reinforced the high local recognition factor for Nick Earls. While Earls had often been featured in the local press and radio media, the opportunity for sustained, positive, self-authored television exposure is an almost unheard of thing in contemporary publishing¹².

As a conclusion to this short paper, three brief comments can be made about these media campaigns in its transmutation of the city, and of the relations between the city and the literary.

Firstly, the use of the literary broadened the dimensions of the city. The literary focus of the campaign was novel for Brisbane. It repaired to the city’s identity something of its literary heritage (which also includes David Malouf, Steele Rudd, and Judith Wright) and a sense of the importance of its contemporary literary life (that includes well-known authors such as John Birmingham and Andrew McGahan)¹³. This seemed to be welcomed by the community. It suggested cosmopolitan and cultural dimensions to the city, which had been underplayed until recently.

Secondly, the campaign suggests a potential for *the literary* as a tool in cultural policy-making and place-making. Literature as an early, mostly pre-digital, media and creative industry tends to be marginalised as part of the ‘arts agenda’ in contemporary cultural policy-making¹⁴. The success of these campaigns suggest a use for mediated versions of *the literary* in the formation of city identity beyond its established employment in literary tours, literary festivals, ideas festivals, and the circulation of literary texts in their print format.

Thirdly, and more negatively, the campaigns risks the reduction of *the literary* into a simple a function of marketing. On one hand, it would seem a positive that, after decades of literary works and public commentary critical of Brisbane, that Earls’s books celebrate the city, representing it as a life-style orientated middle-class metropolis—a representation that is mirrored in the tourism campaigns. On the other hand, the decision by Brisbane Marketing to use Earls and parodic versions of his narratives to represent the city, rather than a more

9 Junior “Case Study: Brisbane Marketing” Pdf file available from http://www.junior.com.au/html/folio/folio_bris_mkting.htm

10 Stuart Glover and Stuart Cunningham “The New Brisbane” Artlink 23.2 (2003) p.16–23.

11 Junior “Case Study: Brisbane Marketing” Pdf file available from http://www.junior.com.au/html/folio/folio_bris_mkting.htm

12 For an account of the difficult relationship between literature and television see Graeme Turner “Australian Literature and the Public Sphere” *Australian Literature in the Public Sphere* Eds. Alison Bartlett, Robert Dixon and Christopher Lee. N.p. Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1999. p.1–12.

13 See *Hot Iron Corrugated Sky: 100 Years of Queensland* writing eds. Robyn Sheahan-Bright and Stuart Glover (St Lucia: U QLD P).

14 Stuart Glover, *Literature and Cultural Policy Studies*. (Unpublished Thesis Uni of Queensland 2006) p.98–107.

politically attuned writer¹⁵, while not surprising for a retail and tourism based campaign, negated the radical potential of literature. While the institutions of literature and publishing, and the authors operating within them, have long established strategies for celebrity-making and book-marketing, these campaigns reduce *the literary* from a critical function to a simple marketing function¹⁶. Even where there is a wider utility in the re-branding of a city, there would seem, in the function and operation of such marketing campaigns, to be a cost in the potential undercutting of literature's sometimes, but not always, more radical possibilities.

15 It is hard to imagine the city taking up and using the fiction of Andrew McGahan who has written widely about Brisbane's underclass, or Melissa Lucashenko who has written about Black-White relations in Brisbane.

16 See Joe Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* (London: Pluto Press).