

# Wither Local History and the Status of Community Education & Research? What is Happening for 2023-2025 Brisbane-Queensland Commemorations

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## WHITHER LOCAL HISTORY

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### The National and Global Context

At the 2021 AHA conference, the author argued the promises of the 1990s local studies field collapsed before the historiographical challenges in the history wars of the Prime Ministership of John Howard, and escalated into the cultural war of the Trump era.

A few items of observations need to be recalled from the 2021 AHA conference paper. The state of play for local studies had been greatly redacted at Australian universities in the last two decades. The University of Queensland had abandoned the Centre for Applied History, although the powers of the university would argue that it was transformed into the Centre for the Queensland Government with a large million-dollar grant from Premier Peter Beattie. The only funded regional-local project is the ARC Linkage Grant, The Queensland Atlas of Religion, where community scholars ended up out of the process, left high and dry. The State Government and the Brisbane City Council has shown no interest in the work of Associate Professor Geoff Ginn and his team.

The state of affairs demonstrates a deeper philosophic and political problem, in that sandstone universities, while shifted in naming to the multidisciplinary approaches, generally fail to consider local and regional factors in sufficient multidisciplinary scoping.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The last line of defence offered in the apology of the curriculum and research direction has been in the emerging field of public history. While the Australia and Aotearoa NZ Public History Network promises flourishing research, there is still the strong sense of the university schools of doing regional-local studies for the community benefit, rather than any true community engagement where local historians on the ground are involved. The 2021 AHA conference paper concluded with a demonstration that the Australian scene among history academics, is an out-

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## The Obstructions to Pathways for Professional Local Studies

This paper for the 2023 AHA conference, proposes to tell another side of the story – the battle over the status of community education and research while institutions obstruct pathways for serious or professional local studies.

An important research question of examination over the past years is whether the intellectual histories of Brisbane contributed to the obstruction. The histories of municipal government in Brisbane offer a partial answer. The late John Lavery contributed to the intellectual critique of the Brisbane City Council through a very detailed examination of the pre-1925 Brisbane Municipal Council (1859-1902). It seems some of that legacy has continued and some obstructed. The reading of the histories is very mixed.

Pugh's Almanac 1904 reveals a pre-1925 Brisbane Municipal Council culturally in touch with the local communities with the municipal balls, the erection of public baths, and interacts with the Brisbane School of Arts and the Brisbane Musical Union. However, searching through the Brisbane City Archives Records reveals a thinning out, over time, of the Council's concerns with the cultural life of the city.

Examining the Council minutes, from 1925 to 1937, there are no references to *concepts* of the urban, community, nor educational interests, except for rate and tariff exemptions or reductions for educational institutions and applications to show educational films in council-owned halls. Hence, the Council was able to have control over educational processes without making contributions to municipal education. The completion of the Brisbane City Hall in 1930 gave the City a formative cultural profile. However, it seemed in the mid-century the closest that the Council got to understanding the intellectual issues of the suburbs was the support

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of-touchness with the global trends (the contemporaneous academic literature) in thinking about the sociology of the local, community education, and of higher education and discontents, which all demand to be critically addressed.

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given to the Brisbane and Suburban Night Tennis Association; a very upper middle-class cultural pursuit.

Any significant mentions of “the past” in the Council minutes pertain to such egotistical matters as the photographs of ‘Past Council’ or the accounting of past employees. Ideas of future policy were limited to gardens, land usage, roadside, gas service, water supply and funding. Thinking on ‘Commemoration’, ‘Research’, or ‘the World’ was almost absent. We find in the Council minutes communications with other Australian municipal entities, such as the Metropolitan Local Government Association in Perth, and in that sense “the world” did exist to some small measure.

Local Authorities Association of Queensland was active in the interchange with the Council from 1925. Delegates were appointed from the conference to attend the Association. Competing with those agendas of the association was the Local Government Clerks’ Association (later, Municipal Officers’ Association) and the Local Producers’ Association. The policy of preference for locally manufactured articles for municipal use was there from 1925, but the challenge has been the opportunity for corrupt practices of favourism. In the last quarter of the century the Council did become globally conscious, but again the intellectual outlook was very mixed.

Lord Mayor Bryan Walsh, and Roy Harvey with Lady Mayoress Pearl, focused on the 1982 Commonwealth Games in the same ethos of the current administration on the 2032 Olympics. The place of local culture returned with Sallyanne Atkinson as one of the most intelligent Lord Mayors and the first and only female Lord Mayor of Brisbane. A history graduate, Sallyanne was a good friend to several members of the Department of History at UQ during her tenure. As an intellectual, the former priest, Lord Mayor Jim Soorley, made “a shift from Brisbane Council being only concerned with ‘rates, roads, rubbish’ to taking on issues such as drug use, homelessness, domestic violence and social justice.” Tim Quinn followed Soorley’s direction with Urban Renewal being an important intellectual theme, and that connected with the sociology of urban gentrification for the inner-city.

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The current long LNP administrations of Campbell Newman, Graham Quick, and Adrian Schrinner has brought the administration back to the local historical theme of large transportation infrastructure. Margaret Cook's work has demonstrated that no administration has adequately recognised the major environmental and infrastructure issue of flooding. And thus for 20 years, there has been a failure in Council for intelligent policy and for public education.

## **The Role of the Brisbane City Council**

The objections from Council when faced with large cultural proposals has centred around an odd argument that education has nothing to do with the affairs of Council. [slide 32]. The paper is an argument for Council-supported Community Education. [slide 33]. The purpose of such a community education program is to properly educate in local studies. The plan starts with the concept of a cultural dialogue for deep understanding on the landscape of Brisbane, which would include and prioritise the sociological exchange between intellectual history and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

A method would be multi-cultural workshops on Brisbane histories and including first nations persons. The aim, and hopefully the outcome, is that the Council and the Brisbane public will have clear ideas and their fit as schemas (intelligently) on the local histories for 'all of us' including the current indigenous movement for The Voice. This plan was put to Council several times from 2017 until recently under the proposed contract titles and in different forms. [use slide as summary] Most recent has been a reminder to the Lord Mayor of the triple commemorations from 2023 to 2025, indicating that five years before the Council rejected my proposal for a program in a Council's sponsored commemorative series. The reply from the Mayor clearly indicated he was not interested.

The Council's public relations machine treats persons in the machine thinking. But person's thinking is not made for singular messaging. A person's thinking is layered in full or partial schemas for viewing the world.

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Furthermore, integrated into the descriptive worldviews, is local history, local sociology, and local philosophy, and where scholars in work in the space of the metatheory. The work shows why the Council's thinking fails intelligently.

## **The State of Affairs in Brisbane Local History Organisation**

The only way to bring the connection with understanding Brisbane history is through the local history organisation, but with a specific geographic and conceptual methodology.

The local history organisations in Brisbane are not merely the Brisbane History Group Inc., nor the sole providence of the Royal Historical Society of the Queensland, even though the bubble thinking conservative would like it to be the case. The landscape is made up of the Brisbane Southside History Network with 16 groups south of the river, and 17 groups on the unnetworked northside.

There is a great gap between the Council's, with the general public's understanding of local history, and against the municipal knowledge of local history organisations.

Several attempts have been made by the author as a history consultant to draw the attention to how local studies organisations are struggling, and support required for large thematic-scoping projects to lift the field to a sustainable level. This included 'The Looking to the Future for the Past' rejected Project, in August 2018 to prepare for the 2023-2025 commemorations.

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**Community Historical and Sociological Research: A Brief Report for University Academics who are Lost in that Silence Space (“The Twilight Zone”, a Nietzschean reference of pop culture).**

Since 2012 the Mapping Brisbane History Project has been making the connection with understanding Brisbane history. It has established a suburban pattern of regional groupings which has been much more effective in understanding than the many changes in ward boundaries and the production of new wards. Unfortunately, what is difficult to understand – since our primary, secondary, and universities schools have stopped teaching intelligently, pathways into geography and local history – are the different conceptual mapping involved. Here we must consider the roles of the university school and academic scholarship.

## **The Role of Academic Scholarship: A Conclusion**

The status of community education and research is the abandonment of the universities and municipal councils for reasonable levels of local studies, while history consultants, such as the author, are negotiating international business in the field.

Recently, in an online group called, The Foundations of Logic, a colleague quoted “Awareness of Ignorance is The Beginning of Wisdom,” from Socrates. I commented that I was more or less in the Socratic tradition, but for my own workings out, I believe the awareness must come from scoping out in thought beyond the established bubble thinking.

My AHA paper today is the history of municipal governance in Brisbane and the thinking which structures the council planning, asking the question how does that connect the idea to local history and commemoration.

Cushing Strout stated, “Writing history is a perpetual exercise in judgement.” Added to that thought is...

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Bernard Williams' judgement was that "History is central to my argument not just because history is central to the humanistic discipline, but because, I am going to argue, philosophy has some very special relations to it."

Unfortunately, this is not how Council members, past and present, and the members of the communities, past and present, have thought through their own local histories.

It seems as if the Council and the public do not understand the idea of philosophical states of affair as the histories. It is really straightforward but persons uneducated keep tripping up in the thinking. A state of affair is a situation or set of circumstances. In other words, it is the contextual analysis of historiography.