Brisbane's breathing space: Mt Coot-tha

Janet Spillman

Mt Coot-tha lies to the west of Brisbane's CBD, an area known as One Tree Hill when the government declared it a Railway Reserve in 1873.¹ In 1880, One Tree Hill became a 'Public Park for the recreation, convenience, health and amusement of the inhabitants of the City of Brisbane ... and for no other purpose whatsoever'.² The land was held in trust and the board of trustees included members of the colony's political elite (e.g. Sir Thomas McIlwraith, Sir Arthur Palmer and Sir Samuel Griffith), so funds were available to fence the reserve, build roads, pay a caretaker and provide picnic facilities. Queensland's financial difficulties forced cuts to the reserve's subsidies after 1893, and the trustees agreed to demands from the government to allow logging, gold mining and quarrying on the reserve. Further funding crises in 1919 forced the trustees to transfer the responsibility for the Deed of Trust to Brisbane Council, which became part of Greater Brisbane when the metropolitan municipality was formed by an Act of the Queensland Parliament in 1925.

The 1924 *City of Brisbane Act* created a unified authority with a size and powers that made good management possible. Brisbane City Council had wide powers to legislate by ordinance, although state powers of supervision and inspection made it subject to the political whims of whatever party was in power in Queensland.³ The new council faced financial problems, having inherited council and utility debts, while it was required to expand services for the growing city, using limited rates revenue.⁴ The Labor government supported the municipality as a vehicle for social reform, providing subsidies and facilitating the raising of loans.⁵ Initially funds were available to buy land for parks and reserves, but the depression of the 1930s and a change of state government forced the council to cut expenditure.

Because lord mayors were chosen directly by the electorate, those who had ability and popular support wielded considerable power. Brisbane's first lord mayor, William Jolly,

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¹ I thank Peter Spearritt for assistance with this paper.
² Lands Department, Queensland Government, 'Deed of Trust, Reserve 476, Record of grants and certificates of title held by the Brisbane City Council, Book No. 1', Brisbane, Queensland State Archives, (QSA), BR1/1; SRS3615/2/1.
demonstrated good administrative and financial management skills. His 1924 policy speech promised to set up a town plan for the future development of the city that would extend and improve parks. Jolly bought ‘breathing spaces for the city’ while the opportunity to do so remained at relatively low cost.

The importance of ‘breathing spaces’ came from the City Beautiful ideals of the 1890s. Planners like Olmstead designed New York’s Central Park to provide a large area of urban green space because:

> Cities are now grown so great that hours are consumed in gaining the ‘country’ and, when the fields are reached, entrance is forbidden. Accordingly, it becomes necessary to acquire, for the free use and enjoyment of all, such neighbouring fields, woods, pond-sides, river banks, valleys or hills as may present ... fine scenery of one type or another.

Brisbane suburbs predated Garden City ideals, developing before the centres were built up, because land was relatively cheap. The original municipalities were small, expensive and inefficient, but, as the state governments provided some roads and railways, expensive suburban developments took place. Private developers benefited from this hidden subsidy. Brisbane’s western railway provided easy travel to work from the suburbs, allowing the expression of a cultural preference for homes with large gardens.

The ideal of the villa suburb found support from the major religions, reinforcing the idea of the family as the focus of religious and moral life. Urban congestion was undesirable compared with the privacy and decorum of suburban living. Romantic ideals emphasised the possibility of creating an oasis of peace and calm in which people might experience the spiritual values of nature, so suburbs with their vegetated landscapes came to be seen as places of retreat and renewal. By 1898, green space was seen as essential to Australian cities:

> Are sufficient breathing spaces provided for these rapidly increasing urban masses? ... Have convenient and attractive health resorts been provided for necessary outdoor recreation? ... The proper use of boulevards, parks and squares is for the necessary ventilation of cities; they are air-holes through which the urban masses breathe ... the facilities afforded for recreation ... raise the moral and intellectual tone and promote physical vigour and development.

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7 Minutes of Brisbane City Council, 1925, p. 78. Brisbane Courier, 5 November 1924, p. 7.
British Garden City ideals of harmonising city design with natural topography, while providing vegetated open spaces, came to Australia with the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association and the local Queensland Town Planning Association. Successful city planning depends on economic and political conditions. During the depression of the 1890s, Australia gained a reputation for advanced social legislation, with governments guiding and directing the economy, and it was in this period that the planning movement emerged. Australian cities were built by both public and private enterprise: public authorities provided essential services and private business did the rest. This pattern was interrupted by the depression and two world wars.

Charles Chuter represented Queensland at the Town Planning and Housing Conferences of 1917 and 1918, with papers promoting town planning for a Brisbane destined to carry a much larger population. Like John Sulman, he advocated fixing a minimum size for building lots, extensive open spaces between suburbs, and streets that curved in harmony with the contours of the land. His ‘City Beautiful’ values of ‘convenience, utility, and beauty’ informed Labor Party action to improve working-class housing. Brisbane’s civic survey and a zoning plan were in place by 1929, but the depression, the election of a conservative state government, the drying-up of capital works funds and mounting opposition from the Property Owners Association led council to shelve the town planning scheme. The planning movement petered out in the face of the depression and its aftermath, when securing employment became the priority.

The 1920s gave Australian capital cities a brief opportunity to implement planning ideas, and the move to create green spaces in Brisbane included the extension of Mt Coot-tha’s park area. Popular opinion of the 1930s moved on to debate the issue of land use in terms of the divide between town and country. This debate reflected the conflicted thinking of a largely suburban society that imagined a bush ethos for the Australian way of life. Providing bushland recreation space for suburban life helped to resolve this tension. Increased demand for outdoor recreation, caused by shorter working hours and improved public transport, maintained the rationale for forest reserves.

**Land Acquisition**

When William Jolly urged the Parks Committee to buy Simpson’s Range on the northern boundary of the reserve, he was adding freehold land to land already held in trust. The deed of trust for the reserve had passed from the Board of Trustees to Brisbane Council and thus

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to the new municipality. The previous council had accepted an offer of two acres of land further along the ridge which included the Summit.  

A 1912 survey had recommended the two ridgelines of the Simpson Range for addition to the reserve, ‘as the country is very broken and steep ... it is not grazing land and is too precipitous for building sites, such an area can have no appreciable value except as a park’.  

The owners of this land had been approached by developers, so William Jolly bought the 640 acres, as ‘it would be calamitous for Brisbane to lose the opportunity of retaining these ranges in their sylvan state’, and then instructed officers to acquire small blocks that were in the hands of various owners. A mayoral minute of July 1925 urged that ‘steps be taken to negotiate for the acquisition of the whole of the town side of the range and the crown of the hill’.  

The city valuer reported that some portions were practically valueless, with potential residential blocks expensive to clear for sale. He recommended buying the 24 acres that included the area known as The Pinnacles. Smaller portions were more expensive, and the council haggled over prices, refusing some offers. William Jolly was keen to purchase Defence Department property on Taylor Range:

I made an arrangement with the Commonwealth Government, that the trees on this Range should not be cut down, and if land at any time in the future was not required for military purposes, the Council should have the first opportunity to acquire it. 

During 1926, council acquired 15 areas covering 937 acres in different parts of the reserve. Two hundred and forty acres near the kiosk included two southern spurs. When council found that the reserve was separated from 18 acres of crown land by four blocks of privately owned land, Jolly had council buy the private land, and persuaded the government to grant the adjoining land. During 1929 the Queensland Lands Department vested more than 26 acres in Mt Coot-tha Reserve. When Brisbane Council took over the reserve in 1919, it had

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15 William B Little, ‘Coronation Drive beyond Mt Coot-tha Reserve to Simpson’s Scrub Road’, in *Public Lands Department*, Brisbane, Queensland State Archives, 1912, p. 3.  
16 1925 memo, Parks Department file D0249, Brisbane City Council Parks Department (BCC).  
17 BCC file D0249.  
20 Minutes and Proceedings of Brisbane City Council: Mayoral Minute 1926; 1929 item 810, p. 224; item 1,178, p. 342.
comprised 1,500 acres. By 1930, Brisbane City Council had increased the area by more than 1,067 acres.\textsuperscript{21}

During the 1930s depression, the Planning Department was abolished, and work on reserves and parks was cut back. The Greater Brisbane experiment had ‘accomplished an achievement in civic government without parallel anywhere in the world’.\textsuperscript{22} William Jolly knew why Mt Coot-tha was worth preserving:

> We citizens of today are deeply indebted to the foresight of the men who in 1880 reserved 1,800 acres at Mt Coot-tha for the people ... a panorama of imposing grandeur, the beauty of which it is impossible to adequately describe ... The Greater Brisbane City Council has added to the area by securing the rest of this range, and the total area of this park is now 2,560 acres. It is important that we should retain these tree-clad hills for all time in their sylvan state, not only for the pleasure which it affords for those who visit them, but because if these hills were sub-divided and the trees cut down, it would destroy the beautiful background with which nature has endowed the city ... It will be of untold value to future generations.\textsuperscript{23}

Brisbane Council improved facilities in 1922, building the kiosk and toilets and adding a small viewing gazebo that housed a telescope. World War I veteran Hugh Deviney became Park Ranger, with his four sisters running a successful catering business at the kiosk. Local people continued the tradition of taking visitors to the lookout for a meal and a chance to admire the view, and, as more people came to use motor travel, walks and picnics on Mt Coot-tha became part of Brisbane’s lifestyle.

Thus, it is not surprising that there was public furore over a 1928 council proposal that private enterprise build a new restaurant and give it over to the council at the end of 20 years.\textsuperscript{24} The attached dance hall aroused fears of noise and impropriety, despite reassurances that council would maintain proper control. At best there would be ‘vulgarization’ of a place ‘so beautiful, so quiet, and so restful’.\textsuperscript{25} At a time of prohibition in the United States, there was concern that alcohol would be involved, because, although alcohol was banned at the Kiosk, large quantities were consumed by people who were quite capable of bringing their own.\textsuperscript{26}

Many citizens believed that development would spoil Mt Coot-tha. A lonely and beautiful park was not the place for a dance hall:

> Why spoil this sylvan retreat with the blare of jazz? The charm of Mt Coot-tha lies in its nearness to the city, and yet it still retains its natural beauty. Then why spoil it by bringing the city to the hill?\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{21} Minutes and Proceedings of Brisbane City Council, 1931 item 1,348, p. 432, and letter of Town Clerk to the editor of the Brisbane Courier, 30 April 1930, BCC Parks file D0249.

\textsuperscript{22} Brisbane Courier, 24 March 1931, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{23} William Jolly, Greater Brisbane, Brisbane, Watson Ferguson, 1929, p. 69.

\textsuperscript{24} Minutes of Brisbane City Council, 1928 item 1732, p. 315.

\textsuperscript{25} Gerald Sharp, Archbishop of Brisbane, Brisbane Courier, 14 September 1928, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{26} Brisbane Courier, letters to the editor: Anti-wowser, 12 September 1928, p. 5; Fred W Taylor, 14 September 1928, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{27} Brisbane Courier, letters to the editor, Koala, 7 September 1928, p. 5.
Mt Coot-tha was one of the few places of rural beauty accessible to everyone, so “its principal charm, that of rural quietness, should not be destroyed”.28 ‘All over Australia natural beauties are being discounted by all sorts of hucksters’, complained Randolph Bedford, MLA. ‘Mt Coot-tha should remain as it is – the eyrie of a city destined to carry its millions of people ...’29 Having extended the reserve, Lord Mayor Jolly now proposed to grant a financial monopoly of its facilities to private enterprise.

Ultimately, there was a legal reason for refusing a contract. Council could not grant an option to the company for renewal, as this would contravene Section 185 (2)(ii) of the Land Act 1910. Acting as trustee for the land, council could not dispense with the future exercise of its powers by itself and its successors; it could not give the lessee sole rights over any part of the reserve that was held in trust. As a result, the proposed agreement was changed, with the kiosk held thereafter under a tenancy agreement.

**Exploitation**

The 1930s depression brought renewed interest in Mt Coot-tha’s goldmines, with Brisbane City Council allowing miners holding goldmining leases to work the area, providing that abandoned shafts were filled in or securely fenced. The Minister for Mines, Mr TA Foley, reported that the exploration of Gold Mining Lease 37 revealed good mineral deposits. ‘Apparently the reef is of enormous size, and only fair values are required to make it a decent proposition,’ he said.30 This estimate of Mt Coot-tha’s mineral wealth contrasted sharply with reports by successive government surveyors, starting in 1894 with Robert Jack, who advised prospectors to explore quartzite outcrops rather than ‘sinking deep shafts on imaginary reefs’.31 Surveyors AK Desmead and LC Ball continued to warn prospectors to undertake reef mining only where gold showings warranted the expense.32 Surveyor TD Dimmick produced a map of the workings that showed relatively little mining took place between 1893 and 1950. Mt Coot-tha’s mines were worked mainly during times of economic depression, with assay samples showing poor returns.33

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28 *Brisbane Courier*, editorial, 10 September 1928, p. 6.
29 *Brisbane Courier*, Randolph Bedford MLA, 12 September 1928, p. 5.
30 *Brisbane Telegraph*, 3 February 1939.
From 1895, the trustees allowed Toowong Council to quarry road metal, with Brisbane City Council continuing to blast granites in 1925. The quarry’s history is marked by frequent promises that operations would cease at some time in the future. Public unrest erupted in 1952 when daily removal of tons of rock created a scar on One Tree Hill. Council hid the scar with plantings of native trees, and reminded ratepayers that the opening of a new quarry further from the city would mean higher carriage costs. Two years later council extended the quarry through the ridge along Mt Coot-tha Road. The Wool Street walking track was covered with a 20-foot-high pile of rubble, provoking a storm of protest. Council responded by re-routing the main road and planting more trees to hide the quarry, and promised to close down operations at some time in the future. The Lands Commissioner, J Hickory, expressed concern, but the government did not take up the matter, and the quarry’s area has been extended at regular intervals since then. In 1976 the Queensland government again questioned the quarry’s legality under the Deed of Trust, but, when Town Clerk Thornley claimed that operations were carried out by Brisbane City Council on Reserve R 476 under the provisions of Ordinance 10 of Part III of the City of Brisbane Plan as an ‘existing non-conforming use’ of such land, the matter was dropped.

Brisbane CityWorks, a business unit of Brisbane City Council, continues to quarry for road stone, solving problems of noise and dust nuisance with modern technology, such as the reverse pulse dust collector, developed in 2004 by Donaldson-Torit Dust Collection Equipment. The Mt Coot-tha Botanic Gardens opened on a disused quarry site in 1969. The quarry’s life has currently been extended from 15 to 30 years, and Brisbane citizens are promised extensions to the Botanic Gardens as quarrying operations make new space available.

World War II saw Mt Coot-tha and some adjoining privately owned land taken over as the US Seventh Fleet’s Naval Magazine and Mine Depot. The area at The Dams, now known as JC Slaughter Falls, was the campsite, with facilities for the assembly of mines and torpedoes, and 38 magazine storage huts were positioned around the circular drive on Mt Coot-tha. Explosives were stored in prefabricated steel Armco huts set on concrete bases. The Armco depots were located in gullies and covered with up to six feet of soil, to keep the explosives cool and absorb any explosions. The camp, with storage huts and roads cut through the bush, meant a considerable loss of timber, which was left lying in gullies creating

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34 Courier-Mail, 17 December 1952, p. 2.
35 Courier-Mail, 2 July 1954, p. 7, and Brisbane City Archives file 0016.
36 J Hickory to Town Clerk, 17 December 1954, Lands Department file, QSA, TR 1726/1/Res 73-34 part 2, Department of Natural Resources and Water, and Lands Commissioner Memo, 19 March 1956, Lands file, ibid.
37 Thornley, Memo to Land Administration Commissioner, 13 December 1976, ibid.
a bushfire hazard. An army anti-aircraft company and searchlight station also operated on Mt Coot-tha.

**Postwar Development**

After the war, the council renovated the kiosk and rebuilt the lookout. From 1948 the kiosk's new tenant, Robert Chapman, ran cabarets and functions, transforming the café into a function room at night. But Mr Chapman's 38-year tenancy was full of uncertainty, with short-term leases preventing long-term bookings and renovations.

Clem Jones' Labor Council was part of Queensland's postwar 'drive towards development at virtually any cost'. In 1966, council received government permission to set aside a portion of Mt Coot-tha as a building reserve under the *Lands Act 1962–1965*, with a new deed of trust. A project put out to tender included a restaurant, a café, convention and wedding reception rooms for up to 5,000 people, professional offices, a lounge bar, a dancing and cabaret-style entertainment area, a public kiosk and four fountains. Lord Mayor Clem Jones said, 'We must get something better than elsewhere in Australia because the setting there is better than anything else in Australia.' Architects touted their visions. Naturalists pleaded for the natural values of the area. Citizens presented petitions.

The closure of the kiosk, with the loss of amenities for a year, led to a public outcry. Robert Chapman paid off staff and sold all furniture and stock. There was only one tender, which failed on the issue of negotiable additional items. Water, electricity and car-park costs added an extra $200,000, which had not been listed in the original tender. When negotiations over the tender broke down, Mr Chapman agreed to stay on. A new call for tenders for 'one of the most dramatic tourist developments in Australia' included car-parking. The closing date was extended twice, but no tenders were received. In 1969 the council again opened the tender process but received no proposals.

In 1971 the council announced that a multistorey building trade display centre at the kiosk would be built by a Valley firm, Building Materials Display Centre Pty Ltd. The work would...

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41 *Courier-Mail*, 1 October 1966; *Sunday Mail*, 31 July 1966.

42 Brisbane City Council, Mount Coot-tha Kiosk, BCA 1642.

43 *Courier-Mail*, 26 February 1967, p. 1; *Courier-Mail*, 27 February 1967, p. 2; Brisbane City Archives, BCA1642.

44 *Courier-Mail*, 4 March 1967, p. 3; *Courier-Mail*, 1 April 1967, p. 3.

45 Brisbane City Council, Mount Coot-tha Kiosk, BCA 1642.
cost $10 million and three acres would be taken from Mt Coot-tha Park. Opposition to the proposal came from many quarters, including the Queensland Conservation Council. The Architecture Department at the University of Queensland described the plan as 'visual pollution', and argued that a rebuilt kiosk should 'blend with mountain forest scenery. Size and materials should be in sympathy with the natural environment'. Opposition to the scheme reiterated familiar tropes: the Summit needed new facilities but Mt Coot-tha should be preserved as a place where families could enjoy a picnic away from the urban environment; as Brisbane grew, the need to preserve Mt Coot-tha would become greater; cities throughout the world recognised that they could not afford to lose their open spaces.

Mr Mealy, chairman of the development firm, claimed that Mt Coot-tha could not compare with beauty spots like the great fir forests of Canada:

> the road up is narrow, winding, and a traffic hazard. The steep and stony area for which our complex is planned is not the sort of country through which people stroll for pleasure ... [People would be proud to take visitors from overseas up a modern road, rather than] sit at home watching television while this wonderful asset at our doorstep lies fallow.

Groups lobbied the Lands Minister, Mr VB Sullivan:

> There would seem to be complete abnegation of custodial duties where title to land is transferred from public to private ownership. Any authority holding land directly from the Crown is accountable for its stewardship.

Mealy told the government that Clem Jones had obtained in-principle council approval for the scheme. Council was willing to surrender the land on the same basis as the sale of land to the television stations. He described himself as a public benefactor, as his scheme would be of tremendous benefit to the state.

The Lands Minister put to Mr Mealy that he was looking for a grant of crown land which would form the asset for the company. When asked why he did not buy freehold land elsewhere, Mr Mealy said that this was the only site in Brisbane where success could be guaranteed, and that it would be sacrilegious to let the land go for any other purpose. He claimed that Queensland had a terrific asset but the government was not exploiting it. He stated that his company required three acres that were no good for any other purpose, and that, if the company could get the land, it could get the finance.

Minister Sullivan disagreed, accusing the council of creating a dangerous precedent by alienating public land. Charles Porter, MLA for Toowong, accused the council of starting

50 Letter, Lands Minister Mr VB Sullivan to Premier J Bjelke-Petersen, 10 March 1972, Lands Department File, QSA, TR 1726/1/ Res 73-34 part 2.
work on the trade centre without government permission. Colonel Miller, MLA for Ithaca, warned that, if the development was allowed, commercialisation of the mountain would not stop. Brisbane residents petitioned that Mt Coot-tha be kept for public recreation and the conservation of native flora and fauna, free of any privately owned business. The Lands Minister ultimately disallowed the trade centre.51

Meanwhile, protestors challenged Brisbane’s changing use of green space. The Queensland Conservation Council summarised the poor state of Brisbane’s parks: libraries, RSL clubs, senior citizens’ clubs and sporting facilities were built in parks, which meant that the spaces were eroded by roads and car parks. In 1975 there were 736 buildings in 300 parks. Many sporting facilities put into green space became highly developed, enclosed areas that excluded casual visitors. Sir John Chandler, a previous lord mayor, had donated 354 acres of parkland at Long Pocket, but Clem Jones divided this into three sections, to provide a public golf course, a private golf course, and only 12 acres for public space. This represented a textbook example of alienation of a public asset to serve the needs of one sporting interest group. Spending on parks went into fences, building and turf, rather than landscaping or planting.52

Clem Jones rejected claims that he was alienating public land:

> Of course we want open space and plenty of it. We have hundreds of acres of land available for public use; surely it is far better to have an area used by hundreds of young people playing sport ... to help combat the incipient evils of society ... If, because of a lack of public money, we need private enterprise to help us to provide facilities ... then I say ‘let us use them’.53

For Clem Jones, sports grounds prevented the spread of antisocial problems.54 He dismissed the argument that the ‘frustration of not having free and open spaces for recreation is one of the significant causes of vandalism’.55 Alderman Brusasco said, ‘Even if parkland is leased to sports clubs, it is still open space, still breathing space for the city.’56 Responding to criticism of the proposed Mt Coot-tha building complex, Clem Jones said that many communities could not afford to keep parkland unused, that development where the buildings took up only 15 percent of the land had proven satisfactory, and that the Mt Coot-tha scheme was not the ‘thin end of the wedge’.57

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52 Queensland Conservation Council (QCC), Report on a survey of parks and open space, Brisbane, 1975, Brisbane, p. 10 and p. 25.


56 Sunday Mail, 3 November 1974, p. 5.

57 Courier-Mail, 8 December 1971, p. 3.
His personal vision was a significant factor: ‘I am personally not happy with the landscaping in the ... Slaughter Falls section where there has been considerable deviation from my original idea.’ And again: ‘I have received some criticism of the selection of this site for the new Botanic Gardens, but ... when I developed the mental picture initially of this scheme, it was as a whole that I saw it ...’

A memo to Town Clerk JC Slaughter recorded the decision-making process. On a drive around Mt Coot-tha, Clem Jones and Jim Slaughter decided to move the Slaughter Falls entrance to the north, reinstate the top dam, and create artificial waterfalls. They would cut back trees to improve Lookout 2, cut the gully back at the side of Channel 9, and put a central drive through the reserve. The Channel 0 lookout would get a loop drive. More picnic tables throughout the reserve would be named for people who had served the city. They would approve the Astronomical Society’s land application.

Greater Brisbane’s lord mayor and town clerk worked closely together to create and implement policy, coordinating the work of council committees and supervising the administrative organisation. Clem Jones’ popularity with the electorate, based on his ability to deliver sewerage and sealed roads, ensured his continued power base in council. His electoral power and charismatic communication skills enabled him to control a weak executive, as embodied in the Establishment and Coordination Committee. The Planning Advisory Committee, which made decisions about Brisbane’s parks, consisted of the lord mayor, the town clerk, the chairman of the health committee, and six persons who were appointed by the council and were therefore not responsible to the electorate. Technically, these decisions were ratified by full council, but key decisions were seldom discussed in council meetings.

In a period of rapid suburban growth, the state government’s consultant, Wilbur Smith, put forth grand plans for roads, housing and shopping malls. The council and government helped to sell these developments by pointing to improvements such as Anzac Square Parklands, the conversion of City Hall into a cultural centre, and Brisbane’s new ‘international’ appearance as high-rise office blocks appeared. The council also excused the continuing alienation of bushland, by pointing critics to the new Botanic Gardens on the site of the old quarry and the JC Slaughter Falls picnic area on Mt Coot-tha as examples of improved public facilities in a forest reserve.

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60 Greenwood, Brisbane, p. 473.
As Parks Superintendent, Harry Oakman wrote memoranda to Clem Jones on the subject of parkland alienation. Oakman argued that the placement of Brisbane parks was quite haphazard, having been acquired by the council from speculators after non-payment of rates. Where developers were required to provide a percentage of the land for parks, they provided hilly or swampy land. But these problem areas ‘now add quite considerably to the overall landscape’. The alienation process had started as early as 1940 when the Land Administration Board wrote to Brisbane City Council expressing concern that the council’s practice of granting public parkland to voluntary associations would deprive the public of the use of the land. Oakman urged the council to preserve its parklands through a general park policy.

In 1962 there was ‘a sudden attack’ as Clem Jones imposed his views of parkland beautification on Mt Coot-tha. Hundreds of healthy trees were felled and burnt, undergrowth was destroyed and the ground was bulldozed. Wild flowers were wiped out, but areas of noxious weeds, illegal rubbish dumps and stripped-down car bodies disappeared too. Several organisations protested. Eventually Clem Jones revealed a plan to give the area a ‘lawn like forest park effect so popular in the United States’. More than 11 miles of electrified fence would be laid so deer could be liberated in the reserve. The plan had been developed without reference to the Fauna Conservation Act, so the deer proposition was problematic, and when Oakman submitted cost estimates for the electric fence the project was shelved.

Rapid development in the 1970s shocked Mt Coot-tha’s supporters, who realised that nearly 200 hectares of bushland on Mt Coot-tha’s southern slopes were not owned by the council. Hooker Rex bought two farms at Merri Merri for residential subdivision, promising to leave as much rainforest as possible. Most five-acre blocks were later subdivided, with further loss of trees. Lewis Land Corporation developed bushland into house blocks along Bielby Road in Kenmore, and council land at Paten Road was sold for housing development when it could have been added to the reserve. The Western Freeway cut across the southeast corner of the reserve, creating noise and exhaust pollution. Paths from Taringa and Toowong were cut off, so walkers now have to drive to Mt Coot-tha.

Clem Jones’ administration inherited four television masts on Mt Coot-tha, with the three commercial channels’ studios built on leased land beside Sir Samuel Griffith Drive. In 1961

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64 Oakman, memorandum to the Town Clerk, 8 January 1953, ibid.
67 Oakman, ‘Memo to Town Clerk’, 8 August 1962, Harry Oakman Papers, ibid.
Jones obtained government support to sell to the commercial stations the land they occupied. The council held most of this land in fee simple, having acquired it during the Jolly administration’s program of land purchases, but nearly half of Channel 9’s land was held under trust by the Queensland government. The Lands Department advised that the state had no power to sell trust land to the council, so the council would have to sell to the government the freehold half and the Lands Department would give Channel 9 a special lease over the crown land, under section 179(1) of the Land Act. The broadcaster could then convert the land to freehold under the provisions of section 175B of the Act, because it was suitably improved with buildings. The commercial television companies agreed to pay £1,000 per annum to clear undergrowth and reduce fire hazard in the vicinity. Clem Jones praised their cooperation: ‘The three commercial television stations will be playing their part in fire prevention and beautification of the area. This will become the finest park of its kind in Australia.’

In 1983 WH Glasson, Minister for Lands, and Lord Mayor Roy Harvey agreed on the sale of extra land to the commercial stations, after excising the portions from Brisbane Forest Park through the governor’s executive authority. Freehold lands were sold for a nominal sum of $10 each, but land excised from Reserve 476 was sold to Queensland Television Ltd at full valuation.

Development proposals for Mt Coot-tha have included a SkyPoint Tower, a synthetic snow ski slope, a heritage township and a model railway to ferry passengers. Each has been voted down by public outcry. Premier Anna Bligh has suggested a cable car between the Botanic Gardens and the lookout, where a ‘Story of Brisbane’ interpretation centre and new viewing platform would be built. The Mt Coot-tha Visioning Group is now examining all options for the area, which is no longer known as a reserve. It has been reclassified as a ‘precinct’.

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70 Notes of meetings refer to a Land Act but do not give a date for the legislation.
71 Minutes of meeting between AR Fletcher, Minister for Lands and officers of the Lands Department, 3 October 1961, Lands Department file, ibid., and Extract of Conference between the Hon. GFR Nicklin, Premier of Queensland, Mr AR Fletcher, Minister for Public Lands and Irrigation, Lord Mayor Clem Jones, Mr E Sutherst, Member of the Land Administration Commission, and Mr JC Slaughter, Town Clerk, 27 October 1961, Lands Department file, ibid.
72 Brisbane City Council five-year lease to Universal Telecasters Qld Ltd, 2 September 1964, Site for Radio Telephone Station, Australian Archives, QL 1522PT1.
73 Courier-Mail, 2 September 1964.
Mt Coot-tha’s open spaces tempt politicians to fill them with grand developments. The strength of opposition to these plans reveals the extent to which Brisbane people value the green space and its recreational opportunities. The ease with which parkland can be sold, developed or quarried is a cause for concern in a state where national parks cover a mere 4.57 percent of the area, compared with 16 percent in Victoria and 20 percent in South Australia. Urban development is putting the few remaining recreational green spaces at risk, for, although the South East Queensland Regional Plan (SEQ Plan) has identified an ‘urban footprint’ that would contain higher residential densities, over half of all new development will be on greenfield sites. The Queensland government has not purchased additional green space for the region, preferring legislation to prevent tree clearing on privately owned land, along with the expansion of some national parks through the transfer of parcels of land from state forests. The SEQ Plan has not declared a green belt for the region, or for Brisbane.  

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