

— ARTICLES —



**POWER, POLITICS AND PAYMENTS IN POT PLANTS  
SHOPPING CENTRE DEVELOPMENT IN BANKSTOWN, 1955-2005**

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Major shopping centre development is a powerful, culturally influential form of social and economic infrastructure. Given this, one might assume that there has been a rigorous and well-considered approach to its planning and approval. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. Initiative for development has been left in the hands of private enterprise and conditioned by the driving force of profit. Local government has held considerable authority in the approval process, and has been open to corruption, persuasion and significant pressure from powerful companies with substantial resources at their disposal. This has led to decisions being made without adequate consideration, appreciation or concern for their impact on local retailers and communities.

Whilst there is a broad body of academic work that has charted the general history of shopping centre development in Australia,<sup>1</sup> the ‘behind the scenes’ process of centre development proposals and approvals has received little attention.<sup>2</sup> Studies outside of history that have examined urban planning, zoning irregularities and private development have also tended to by-pass the retail industry, focusing instead on other large commercial enterprises, infrastructure and residential development.<sup>3</sup> While debates within cultural studies over levels of ‘consumer’ agency have begun with completed malls without delving into the politics of power from which they emerged.<sup>4</sup>

This article aims to address this gap in the literature. It argues that when large retail and development companies competed to build a major shopping

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<sup>1</sup> The two major works exclusively devoted to Australian retailing history, which include sections on the history and social impact of shopping centres, are Beverley Kingston, *Basket, Bag and Trolley: A History of Shopping in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994); Kim Humphery, *Shelf Life: Supermarkets and the Changing Cultures of Consumption* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Urban historians have discussed shopping centres in broader contexts, see Peter Spearritt, *Sydney's Century: A History* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd, 2000); Graeme Davison, *Car Wars: How The Car Won Our Hearts and Conquered Our Cities* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2004). Spearritt has also dealt specifically with the history of the Australian shopping centre, see Peter Spearritt, ‘Suburban Cathedrals: The Rise of the Drive-in Shopping Centre’ in *The Cream Brick Frontier: Histories of Australian Suburbia*, eds Graeme Davison, Tony Dingle and Seamus O’Hanlon (Melbourne: Monash Publications in History, 1995); Peter Spearritt, ‘I Shop Therefore I Am’ in *Suburban Dreaming: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Australian Cities*, ed. Louise C. Johnson (Geelong: Deakin University Press, 1994). The centrality of women to retail as employees, demographic targets and ‘consumers’ has led to a strong interest by feminists in retail culture. Amongst the best-known feminist works on shopping centres in Australia is Meaghan Morris, ‘Things To Do With Shopping Centres’ in *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. Susan Sheridan (London: Verso, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> An exception to this is Malcolm Voyce’s excellent article on spatial practices in shopping centres, which includes some background into the development approval process of Westfield Hornsby in Sydney’s northwest. My approach differs from his in the extent to which it focuses on development, compared to his concern with the governance of ‘semi-public’ space. See Malcolm Voyce, ‘The Privatisation of Public Property: The Development of a Shopping Mall in Sydney and its Implications for Governance through Spatial Practices’ in *Urban Policy and Research* 21, no. 3, (September 2003): 249-62.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of such work include Leonie Sandercock, *The Land Racket: The Real Cost of Property Speculation* (Sydney: [Hale and Iremonger] for Australian Association of Socialist Studies, 1979); Graeme Neutze, *Urban Development in Australia: A Descriptive Analysis* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent overview of this cultural studies debate, see the introduction in Humphery, *Shelf Life*, 1-17.

centre in or near Bankstown in the early 1960s, their proposals were not subjected to sufficient critical analysis. The power and resources of these companies privileged them in their dealings with the council. And within the council, politics combined with the arbitrary nature of the planning approval process, created an inadequate mechanism for the consideration of the proposed developments. On top of this, the entire episode was marred by a bungling attempt at corruption. As a result, a massive shopping centre was built in the heart of Bankstown. Lacking integration with its surrounds, it had a detrimental impact on existing (and future) local retail trade, and on the general functioning and aesthetics of the commercial district.

Bankstown Square was one in a wave of large-scale internalised shopping centres that swept Australia in the late 1950s and 1960s. These centres were based on American models and followed a progression of retail developments that began with the great department stores of the nineteenth century; continued with the advent of ‘self-service’ grocery shopping and the supermarket; were accompanied by technological breakthroughs in air-conditioning and ‘moving stairs’; and complemented the postwar suburbanisation and spread of car ownership that was occurring throughout Australia and other Western countries. By the 1960s, shopping centre construction was becoming the major form of all new retail development in the country. And it was predicted that this would remain the case for some time to come.<sup>5</sup>

With the lure of big profits, department store companies and property developers began scouring the suburbs of Australian cities for suitable sites to locate centres.<sup>6</sup> It was not simply a matter of finding available land. The site had to be close to public transport routes, and within easy reach of a large and prosperous population that had yet to be sufficiently tapped by a rival centre.<sup>7</sup>

In the late 1950s, the southwestern Sydney suburb of Bankstown beckoned as just such a site. Prior to the Second World War, it had been a relatively small suburb. But when wartime aviation industries were converted into peacetime manufacturing, the resulting employment caused rapid expansion. Bankstown’s population grew from 42,600 in 1947 to 150,000 in 1961, by which time it was the biggest municipality in Australia. The size of the population within twenty minutes drive was larger than that of Perth and all its suburbs at the time.<sup>8</sup>

Adding further incentive to development was the area’s prosperity. The average family had a relatively high percentage of wage earners and a second car was within the financial reach of many. Research by the development company Lend Lease showed that significant numbers of ‘housewives’ were

<sup>5</sup> Editorial, *The Retail Trader* 44, no. 3 (October 1962): 3.

<sup>6</sup> One *Bulletin* article described company directors studying maps of Sydney and its suburbs with ‘the intensity of ... Napoleon[s] carving up Europe’. See Patricia Rolfe, ‘Revolution in the suburbs’ in *The Bulletin*, 19 December 1964, 25, quoted in Spearritt, ‘I Shop Therefore I Am’, 134-5.

<sup>7</sup> Industry literature coming out of the United States constantly reiterated that: ‘The location of a centre is possibly the greatest single factor in success or failure of the development’. See James B. Douglas, ‘The Future of Regional Shopping Centres’, *The Retail Trader* 39, no. 8 (March 1958): 44.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Murphy, *Challenges of Change: The Lend Lease Story* (Sydney: Lend Lease Corporation Limited, 1984), 108.

obtaining driving licenses.<sup>9</sup> In terms of public transport, the town was ideally situated on the Bankstown railway line and between the Hume Highway and Canterbury Road, both of which were major southwestern traffic routes from Sydney.<sup>10</sup>

Lend Lease's research also showed 'a leakage of spending money to areas outside the municipality'. Where Bankstown had more than six percent of the country's population, it held only three to four percent of retail sales. This contrasted with nearby Parramatta which took a higher percentage in sales than it held of population.<sup>11</sup> It was estimated that nearly £20 million in retail expenditure was 'escaping' from the Bankstown area.<sup>12</sup> If this expenditure could be captured, contained and even expanded, then a centre in Bankstown would reap considerable profits.

Lend Lease was not the only company to recognise Bankstown's potential for retail development. Waltons opened the suburb's first department store in September 1961. Designed on 'modern' lines by 'a leading American department store architect', it was air-conditioned throughout; had a rooftop car park for 85 cars; and used escalators to convey customers to and from the first floor.<sup>13</sup> Adjacent to Waltons, Lend Lease began their entry into Bankstown with a mixed office and retail development called the Compass Centre.<sup>14</sup>

While these developments were underway in the centre of town, department store giant Myer was also making moves in the area. Acting through a secondary company, it had bought green belt land six kilometers away at Bass Hill in 1958. Green belt land had a similar function to the radial rural corridors established in Melbourne in the early 1970s.<sup>15</sup> It was land that had been set aside by Sydney's planners to limit the urban expansion that was putting such pressure on the service infrastructure of the city. Speculation in such land was common, with each new green belt release containing land already owned by development companies.<sup>16</sup> A local paper questioned Myer's purchase noting that:

Green belt land can be used for little more than growing a few potatoes, but our informant claims that the prices received by the former owners for the many blocks involved suggest that something a lot more lucrative than 'spud-growing' is proposed for the area ...<sup>17</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1966, Special Feature, 1.

<sup>10</sup> James E. Deger (Associate Director of Richardson and Wrench Ltd. and consultant to Lend Lease Development Pty. Ltd. on retail projects), 'Retail Expansion and Development', *The Retail Trader* 44, no. 1 (August 1962): 50.

<sup>11</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1966, Special Feature, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Murphy, *Challenges of Change*, 108.

<sup>13</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 January 1961, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Murphy, *Challenges of Change*, 108; Deger, 'Retail Expansion and Development', 49-50; *The Retail Trader* 44, no. 3 (October 1962): 39.

<sup>15</sup> Sandercock, *The Land Racket*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> P.F. Harrison, 'Planning the Metropolis' in *The Politics of Urban Growth*, eds R.S. Parker and P.N. Troy (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1972), 74, 96.

<sup>17</sup> *Torch*, 3 April 1958.

The land, although valued at only £71,400, was purchased for £187,000.<sup>18</sup> It was released from the green belt late in 1960 and was zoned to provide land for housing. Myer then applied to have this zoning changed from residential to commercial in order to build a fifty-seven-and-a-half acre shopping centre. The methods that the company employed to persuade council of their proposal's merits offer us an insight into the processes behind rezoning decisions.

Myer offered to fly members of the council to Melbourne to observe its groundbreaking Chadstone shopping centre. Pre-empting local opposition at Bankstown, it argued that businesses surrounding Chadstone had not suffered, but had actually profited since its opening twelve months earlier.<sup>19</sup> Eight aldermen made the trip south, with at least some of them recording a change of heart favourable to Myer as a result. This caused a bitter public fight amongst council members. Councilman D. B. Caruthers was opposed to the trip and made comments that his furious opponents claimed 'reflected on [their] integrity'. They in turn declared that he was against the development because of personal business allegiances. While there is nothing concrete to verify this allegation, Caruthers was later a strong supporter of the rival Lend Lease proposal in Bankstown.

The council agreed to repay Myer for the bill, but this then angered some members of the community. The local Progress Association declaring that:

To have accepted the invitation – to have enjoyed Myer's hospitality whilst in Melbourne – and then suddenly to realize the implications of such acceptance – suggests to the average person a naivety beyond comprehension.

And then to have the audacity to suggest that if Council pays the bill they are relieved of any allegiance to Myers, is too much to believe.<sup>20</sup>

After the Melbourne trip, Myer then pressed its case: tempting the council's hip pocket; tickling some civic vanity; and positioning itself as a generator of growth and provider of services. It argued that the municipality (or the council) would benefit from the 'considerable' rates that the centre would have to pay; that surrounding property prices would increase; and that local employment would grow. Myer also promised that in addition to providing the area with 'Australia's largest and most modern Regional Shopping Centre', it would include in the development 'an Auditorium, a children's play centre and possibly some further' facilities, including 8-acres for a civic community centre to be developed 'by interested bodies'. Myer's sound planning of traffic flow at Chadstone was emphasised, as were the positive benefits to surrounding commercial districts. Retail in Bankstown itself, Myer insisted, would 'continue to more than hold its own'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Quotes of the exact purchase price vary, but are all around this figure. See, *Torb*, 16 November 1961, 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Torb*, 30 November 1961, 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Torb*, 14 December 1961, 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Torb*, 7 December 1961, 15-6.

In regard to the promised services, Kingston has pointed out that in the general experience of centre construction, these public facilities were more often than not abandoned, either during development or at some time after opening.<sup>22</sup> In regard to surrounding retail areas, again the general experience has been that small shopping strips simply cannot compete with the concentrated power of major shopping centres. It has been a standard argument of shopping center developers that their proposed centres will not adversely impact on surrounding local trade, and even that such trade will benefit from the drawing power of the big centre. But at the same time, they offer tenants a market unavailable to outsiders that they claim will generate profits to justify their high rentals. To create this market, they design strategies explicitly directed at maximising their take of the area's retail expenditure. The greater their percentage of this take, and correspondingly, the weaker the commercial presence of retail external to the centre, the more power that centre operators hold over prospective tenants.

Having just opened their department store in the midst of Bankstown, Waltons argued strongly against the Bass Hill project. The company cited the Minister for Local Government, P.D. Hills, who had clearly stated his opposition to speculation of green belt land releases. The purpose of the release, he had said, was to provide for affordable housing. Walton's declared that Myer's proposal would 'strike a deadly blow at all existing commercial development in Bankstown'. Council rezoning of the land, Waltons claimed, would increase its value to over £1 million, for which it could 'immediately [be] saleable to any local or overseas developing company'.<sup>23</sup> Letters to the editor in the local paper included both support and opposition to the project, framed in similar terms to those argued by Myers and Waltons respectively.<sup>24</sup>

In late December 1961, the council rejected Myer's submission for rezoning by eight votes to four. Amongst those who voted against rezoning were Caruthers, who was soon to become Mayor; and councilors C. Little, M. O'Brien and W. Delauney. All four, and in particular Caruthers and Little, were to play a role in the next stage of Bankstown's retail development saga: the proposal and development of Lend Lease's massive Bankstown Square. Proving the fickleness of the approval process, the council later reversed its decision on Myer's application in mid 1962 following a split in its Labor ranks. After more debate, protests from local Chambers of Commerce, and deputations to the Minister for Local Government (led by Caruthers), the new decision stood – although Myer elected not to submit detailed plans because they did not intend to build for a few years.<sup>25</sup>

Lend Lease meanwhile was continuing its plans for a regional centre in the heart of Bankstown. It sent a design team to America to analyse shopping centres and to meet with other designers and developers. Back in Bankstown, it began buying up land and options for more than eighty small properties. With

<sup>22</sup> Kingston, *Basket, Bag and Trolley*, 98.

<sup>23</sup> *Torch*, 7 December 1961, 16-7.

<sup>24</sup> *Torch*, 14 December 1961, 18; *Torch*, 21 December 1961, 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Bankstown Observer*, 6 June 1962, 2; 13 June 1962, 2; 20 June 1962, 2; 30 January 1963, 3.

some of the owners unwilling to sell, much of the property was bought above market prices at an eventual cost of over £1 million<sup>26</sup> – a considerable outlay given that much of the land was yet to be approved for commercial development. This ‘punt’ as Lend Lease project manager Alex McLeod later described it,<sup>27</sup> was especially courageous given the difficulties that Myer had faced in getting approval for its project.

At a meeting in June 1963, Lend Lease asked council for its purchased residential land to be rezoned to commercial; for a long-term lease of some council land at nominal rental; for absolution from paying a council parking levy; and for council to construct a road to assist the project. The company also wanted to buy a section of a street called The Mall that crossed its land, with the intention of closing it as part of the development. The meeting referred the proposal to the town planner who was to return a report to the council on 6 August.<sup>28</sup>

On the day that the report was due, Alex McLeod received a phone call requesting an appointment for a man calling himself Fitzgerald who had an ‘interest’ in Bankstown. Earlier phone calls had also been made to Lend Lease staff with ‘various undefined [but suspicious] suggestions’. McLeod spoke to Lend Lease founder and Chairman, G. J. Dusseldorp, who approached the police and the Minister for Local Government. Two police officers attended the council meeting that night. There was no incident, but the council deferred its decision on the matter until its next meeting. The next day, Fitzgerald (a pseudonym) came to see McLeod, offering ten of the council’s eighteen votes for sale. In conjunction with the police, Lend Lease went along with Fitzgerald in order to obtain concrete evidence of corruption. McLeod and Dusseldorp met him in a Circular Quay restaurant on 16 August as police waited outside. Fitzgerald gave names of Bankstown aldermen who should be contacted and when asked, gave a price of £5,000 for the ten votes.<sup>29</sup>

In a further part of the operation, police recorded a conversation between Dusseldorp and the now Mayor of Bankstown, D. B. Carruthers, on 19 August. When Dusseldorp told Carruthers ‘about this monkey business’, the Mayor admitted that he had heard something of it but had not reported it to anyone. As reason for his silence, he cited Bankstown Council’s poor record and the fallout from a previous incident when an administrator had been appointed. That experience had taught him that in such matters: ‘Innocent people get involved and the whole council gets tarred with the same brush’. To ease any concerns that the matter might delay council approval, Carruthers stated that:

as far as my group is concerned, we are anxious to get it approved as quickly as possible, but we hate to be associated with anything that

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<sup>26</sup> Murphy, *Challenges of Change*, 108-9.

<sup>27</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 April 1964, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Murphy, *Challenges of Change*, 109; *Bankstown Observer*, 26 June 1963, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Murphy, *Challenges of Change*, 109-10; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 April 1964, 13.



smacks of the improper...I am quite content to use my casting vote on it. I'll be criticised, but that's too bad.<sup>30</sup>

McLeod met one of the Bankstown aldermen, Charles Little, at Canterbury Racecourse on 21 August. McLeod wore a wrist microphone and a tape recorder hidden in a holster under his arm. An arrangement was made, and recorded, for half of the payment to be made up front and the remaining £2,500 to be made after the vote had been decided in favour of Lend Lease. A week later, McLeod phoned Little and arranged a meeting at the councilor's office near Bankstown. With the same recording devices in place, he brought cash that had been provided by the police.

'Where should I leave it?' he asked.

'Just leave it on there and go on your way'.

McLeod left the cash beside a pot plant in the corridor. Police later found it hidden at the back of Little's office premises.<sup>31</sup>

As a result of the operation, five aldermen – William Delauney, George Johnstone, Alfred McGuren, Murt O'Brien and Charles Little – and one other man, Martin Earl Goode (Fitzgerald) – were charged with conspiring to demand and receive money in return for actions pertaining to aldermanic office. Goode and one of the aldermen pleaded guilty. They both had previous convictions and were sentenced along with another alderman to a year in goal. The State Government dismissed Bankstown Municipal Council on 8 November 1963 – at the time, the Local Government Act did not contain provisions whereby some council members could be removed whilst the others remained in office – and appointed an administrator.<sup>32</sup>

There is no suggestion of Lend Lease acting corruptly in this case, but the process that the application went through is hardly reassuring. Caruthers, for example, was a supporter of Bankstown Square and an opponent of Myer's Bass Hill from the beginning. He was quoted on the front page of a local paper saying that Lend Lease's centre would bring in 1,000's of pounds worth of rate revenue, greatly assisting in the 'progress of Bankstown'.<sup>33</sup> He was also vocal in opposing Myer's application and was a member of the committee formed by the Chamber of Commerce to lobby against it to the Minister for Local Government. Assuming that this was all because he believed strongly in the merits of one project and the faults of the other, it still leaves the fact that one person was so instrumental in making a decision that affected an entire community over a considerable length of time. Although democratically elected, did this person have the urban planning expertise; a detailed understanding of retail structures and their impact on communities; or a suitable sympathy for the plight of local shopkeepers to have that degree of

<sup>30</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 April 1964, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Murphy, *Challenges of Change*, 110.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>33</sup> *Bankstown Observer*, 11 September 1963, 1.

power? Further, the corruption attempt appears to have been exposed, but was anything left uncovered? Even putting this aside, how did the revealed corruption colour the ensuing decision? This cannot be described as a straightforward, nor transparent process.

Following the corruption scandal, the council deliberated over two separate reports into the proposal. The town planner J. Gilmour wrote the first. The second, commissioned by the Bankstown Chamber of Commerce, was written by the Senior Lecturer of Town and County Planning at Sydney University, Dr Boileau. In his report, Gilmour, referred to the project as the 'largest single retail development yet proposed in any suburban area in Australia'. He described how it would greatly increase Bankstown's sphere of influence in the surrounding area, and that it promised 'to be a major contribution to the original Cumberland County Council conception of Bankstown as a district centre'. Gilmour noted, however, the importance of integration with the existing shopping centre:

It is essential that the development be treated as an extension of the Bankstown shopping centre both visually and functionally and that there should be a connecting link between the two ... The Bankstown of the future must be an efficient and comfortable city free of all the faults and sub standard conditions that beset the present main centres that Bankstown will now seek to rival.<sup>34</sup>

The Bankstown Chamber of Commerce argued against the proposal. They pointed out that it was unfair for council to spend ratepayers' money constructing roads 'to lead to this shopping centre and withdraw trade from the existing centre'.<sup>35</sup> They argued that whilst this existing shopping centre was not 'ultra modern', it was still 'one of the best' outside of the city. A more important need in Bankstown, it declared, was housing. Lend Lease's project would actually reduce the amount of residential land available which could mean 'a serious drop in trading in the existing shopping centre'. This might force existing shopkeepers 'to open businesses in the new centre – at higher rentals – in order to hold their customers'.<sup>36</sup>

The Chamber's arguments seemed plausible, but the report they commissioned was also generally supportive of the proposed development. Dr Boileau reminded local businesses that it was actually less threatening to have a giant retail power immediately next door than at a greater distance – such as at Bass Hill – from where it would draw customers completely away. But again, his report emphasised the need for cooperation between the new development and existing businesses. Boileau urged the Chamber of Commerce to use its influence to secure the 'closest possible integration' between the two. Through cooperation, he said, 'the new and existing can be merged together in a single shopping complex'. Lend Lease's project might even provide an 'incentive' for

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<sup>34</sup> J. Gilmour quoted in *Bankstown Observer*, 14 August 1963, 1, 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Bankstown Observer*, 11 September 1963, 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Bankstown Observer*, 18 September 1963, 2.

existing traders ‘to modernize premises and equipment’ and through ‘concerted effort’ rehabilitate their part of the centre.<sup>37</sup>

But the commercial strength of regional shopping centres is that they do not integrate with surrounding business. They are fully self-contained worlds in their own right.<sup>38</sup> The whole point of their design is that people conduct all their business beneath that one roof, and all shopping centres are committed to that end. When submitting proposals, developers argue that this is not the case. Lend Lease claimed that the opening of the Waltons department store in 1961 had led to an increase in the area’s overall retail takings.<sup>39</sup> They claimed that the Square would have a similar effect, ‘encouraging local shoppers to spend more in the area and attracting shoppers from outside to spend their money’.<sup>40</sup> Waltons, though, had been a smaller development, and offered the drawing power of a department store, supermarket and hardware, without the competition of additional small specialty shops. It had also been a different culture of development than the fully enclosed, self-contained Bankstown Square.

Two months after Lend Lease had made these claims in the *Retail Trader*, an editorial in the same trade journal stated that the initial success of shopping centres depended upon their ‘ability to pull customers away from traditional shopping locations’. This would often entail ‘a duplication of retail outlets and a growth which economically is ahead of population requirements’.<sup>41</sup> That is, with the introduction of a new centre, there would ‘frequently’ be more retail in an area than could be supported. Unless expenditure increased markedly, some shops would go under. The aim of the shopping centre would be, of course, to ensure that it was not their shops that did so. Dr Boileau had explicitly warned of this potential practice in his report,<sup>42</sup> but had failed to appreciate that it was an embedded principal of major shopping centre development.

A major shopping centre has far more resources than small independent traders who cannot compete against its market pull. They live in its ever-growing shadow. As the centre becomes more powerful, surrounding retail strips tend to decline, further reducing the options of small shopkeepers. The centre can then exploit the massive power differential between the two parties. This highlights a fundamental injustice of market economics that is, ironically, disguised as fairness. Something is offered in the open playing field of the market. Another ‘player’ can choose to accept or to turn it down: tenants are free to rent within the centre, or free to rent outside of it. According to his biographer, for example, Westfield’s Frank Lowy is ‘never slow to remind protesting retailers that they are free to leave and that there are queues of people ready to replace them’.<sup>43</sup> But the reason why there are queues of people

<sup>37</sup> *Bankstown Observer*, 9 October 1963, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Centres are aptly described as castles with tiny entrances surrounded by moats of cars in John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 116.

<sup>39</sup> Deger, ‘Retail Expansion and Development’, 49.

<sup>40</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1966, Special Feature, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Editorial in *The Retail Trader* 44, no. 3 (October 1962): 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Bankstown Observer*, 9 October 1963, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Jill Margo, *Frank Lowy: Pushing the Limits* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2000), 306-7.

is that many other retailing options have been destroyed by the massive power of the larger centres. It is precisely for this reason that the power of these large centres needs to be investigated. If it is fair for small retailers to be subject to market forces, why should big business be granted favours by government through re-zoning or the sale of public land?

Following the attempted bribery and police investigation, and before it was dismissed, Bankstown Council gave approval to Lend Lease's plans. The company's super expensive 'punt' had paid off. Construction began in October 1964 with an excavation the size of six football fields. Below this, a grease trap the size of a house was dug out to take sediment from the Square's food stores. An electricity substation was installed that was powerful enough 'to supply the needs of an average sized country town'. One-and-a-half million bricks, and £1 million worth of special lightweight concrete made up the bulk of the building. Three-hundred-and-fifty miles of electrical cable ran through twenty miles of conduit to supply the massive air-conditioning unit and the 18,000 light bulbs that illuminated the huge internal space. Upon completion, Bankstown Square ranked 'among the biggest shopping centres in the world'. It had cost \$17 million (in terms of the newly-introduced decimal currency), and its thirty-one acres held 755,000 square feet of retail space. In a pre-opening publicity tour, the NSW Premier Robert Askin described it as 'private enterprise at its best'.<sup>44</sup>

The retail monolith was indeed impressive, but as the local Chamber of Commerce had feared, it soaked up the resources that the old retail heart of Bankstown had relied upon for sustenance. The older shopping area could not compete and became increasingly unviable through the course of the 1970s. Property values declined, and shops began closing. Through traffic reached up to 20,000 vehicles a day resulting in considerable congestion and carbon monoxide pollution. There was little parking, it was extremely noisy and large advertising directed at motorists visually marred the landscape. Architects called in by the council to revitalize the area claimed that the introduction of regional shopping centres in and around Bankstown had played a strong contributory role towards all of these problems.<sup>45</sup>

The architects designed an award-winning model for the redevelopment of the old centre.<sup>46</sup> A plaza scheme, it was planned around an 'Old Town' theme that drew on the heritage of the older shops. But despite the project's initial success, and plaudits from the NSW Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, the general decline continued. Issues of management, security, promotion, customer access and commercial viability in the face of Bankstown Square all plagued the redesigned 'Plaza'. Between its opening in 1979 and 1990, 62 established businesses there failed. Many of the businesses that did survive relied on low overheads achieved by families making up entire

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<sup>44</sup>*Sunday Telegraph*, 18 September 1966; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September 1966, 4, 22; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1966, Special Feature, 6; *Bankstown Observer*, 21 September 1966.

<sup>45</sup> Mike Ewings, 'An Environment for People', *Landscape Australia* 1/81, February 1981, p. 56.

<sup>46</sup> *Landscape Australia* 4/80, November 1980, 241.

staffs.<sup>47</sup> Crucially, the Plaza was never integrated with Bankstown Square. Today the two stand clearly distinct from one another.

Proving that integration is not a part of the shopping centre ethos, the Square has continually remodeled itself over its lifetime with the explicit intention of attracting customers away from external retail outlets. Just one example of this was the ‘Grand Market’ that was introduced in the late 1980s to draw a higher percentage of the area’s retail food expenditure to the Square.<sup>48</sup> This activity has all been based on a specific philosophy of business:

If you stick to the old, when people demand the new, your asset (the Centre) will diminish in value, it needs to change with the times. With a large Super Prime regional like Bankstown you need to exploit its dominance as opposed to resting on its laurels.<sup>49</sup>

This quote places the shopping centre as the servant of the ‘consumer’, adapting to their needs and desires. But it also exposes the competitive imperative that lies behind this claim. The ‘dominance’ of Bankstown Square has been constantly reinforced through continual refurbishment, remodeling and promotion – clearly making cooperation and integration with surrounding retail impossible.

In its early days, a blitzkrieg of promotion drew hundreds of thousands of shoppers to the Square. The publicity stunts and advertising campaigns were designed to draw customers away from the nearby rival Roselands centre, but must also have impacted heavily on small local retailers. A grand official opening followed the highly publicised ‘sneak preview’ tour by Robert Askin. Overseen by Lady Cutler, the wife of the State Governor, Sir Roden Cutler, it featured a formation flight of light aircraft over the building – piloted by women!<sup>50</sup> Twenty-page lift-outs in the local press offered incredibly cheap groceries to the first one hundred shoppers. In another promotion, thousands of balloons were filled with tokens bearing cash prizes, with a jackpot of \$500. On the day that the balloons were to be released, a crowd crammed below them ‘packed like sardines’. The Mayor struggled to get through to cut the release string, after which ‘all hell broke loose’. According to one organiser: ‘We spent the next hour dragging out people who’d been squashed and stepped on, while all the time the crowd was crazily bursting balloons and grabbing for money tokens.’<sup>51</sup>

Bankstown’s other retailers were never going to be able to compete with such promotional resources. Today the Plaza remains a functional, but slightly jaded retail environment. It is brightened a little by colourful merchandise spilling out into the mall. People still pass through as they make their way to

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<sup>47</sup> Sue Rosen, *Bankstown: A Sense of Identity* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1996), 157; *The Express*, 17 October 1989, 16; *The Express* 5 June 1990, 11; *The Express* 14 April 1992, 5; *Bankstown-Canterbury Torch*, 4 October 1989, 1; *Bankstown-Canterbury Torch* 9 June 1993, 2.

<sup>48</sup> *Shopping Centre News* 4, no. 7 August 1989, 16, 18-9.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Smith (Managing Director of General Property Trust) quoted in *ibid.*, 18.

<sup>50</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1966, Special Feature, 1; *Bankstown Observer*, 21 September 1966.

<sup>51</sup> Murphy, *Challenges of Change*, 112.

and from the train station, while others browse the largely discount and budget wares on display. On a hot summers day, though, there is little shade, and shopping is not an easy activity. Over in the Square, there is bustle, shelter and cool air. Although its interior is now looking a little dated, it is far busier than the Plaza. Its car park is jammed full, not least because there are few other places in the commercial district to park. Cars crawl around the congested space looking for a space or waiting to get to the exit.

But the massive concrete behemoth has found a home, gradually incorporated into the life and culture of the surrounding area. Today it appears as a natural part of Bankstown – just as enclosed regional shopping centres everywhere are now taken for granted. We do not stop to picture a world without them. But their presence is not ‘natural’. They are part of an historical movement, a particular business attitude, and a public policy philosophy that sees development as good and necessary in and of itself. Not least, the specific locations, physical size, accessibility, and therefore potential power, of major shopping centres are contingent upon key decisions made by individuals. The impact of these decisions on local communities and shopkeepers is enormous. This is especially concerning given that, as we have seen, the decision making process is complicated, political, and potentially corrupt. As Harrison has written:

the discretion available under statutory planning carries with it the possibility of patronage, to be granted, delayed or withheld for a variety of good or bad reasons. With a few notable exceptions, the local councils are ill-equipped to exercise these powers.<sup>52</sup>

This paper has described the planning of Bankstown Square and the approval process that preceded its construction. It has demonstrated the kinds of demands that developers make of councils, the arguments that they use to support their applications, and the potential for corruption of the process. The efforts made by the Square’s operators to maximise their take of the area’s retail trading dollar have been outlined, and the decline of the surrounding retail precinct documented. The importance of sound and sympathetic planning of major retail development is clear. Bankstown Square has been offered as a case study that demonstrates the kind of problems that can and do occur, and hopes that some further debate on retail culture and development may be taken up as a result.

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<sup>52</sup> Harrison, ‘Planning the Metropolis’, 98.