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Reinventing Childers: Small Town Recovery after Tragedy

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As CEO of Isis Shire Council since February 2000, Steve Johnston played a key role in the aftermath of the 'Childers Backpacker Fire' in June of that year - overseeing restoration of the historic Palace Hotel in the heart of Childers and coordinating memorials to the 15 backpackers who tragically died in the Palace Backpackers fire.

Childers is a small town situated in the Wide Bay Region of Queensland, approximately four hours driving time north of Brisbane and about forty-five minutes south west of Bundaberg. The town of about 2800 is the main hub of the Isis Shire Council. The Shire, for much of its 100-year-plus history, has been largely dependent on the local sugar industry for prosperity and stability. A large proportion of the shire's land is rich, red, volcanic soil, along side a reliable water supply, is ideal for the growing of sugar cane and other horticultural crops.

Much of the main street of Childers is heritage listed. Many of the buildings in the CBD were rebuilt after a disastrous fire in 1902 resulting in some uniformity and authenticity of the architectural style of the day. The original Palace Hotel located in the centre of the main street, was one of the buildings destroyed by that fire. It was rebuilt and reopened for business in 1903, and operated as a hotel continuously for some 85 years from that date. During its heyday in the thirties and forties it was seen as the premier hotel in Childers; as well as serving thirsty cane cutters it also offered accommodation, a dining room and at one stage a ballroom. Like many country towns the number of operating hotels has decreased in the last twenty to thirty years and they have been put to myriad other uses. The Palace Hotel was used as an antique shop before being converted to a backpacker building in the early nineties.

The need for accommodation came about from the increasing number of backpackers attracted to the area to pick small crops and fruit when local farmers could not get enough seasonal workers. The Palace Backpackers was a great success in this regard and often had one hundred percent occupancy for months on end when picking jobs were abundant.

On June 23rd 2000 tragedy struck when the Palace Building was gutted by fire as a result of arson and fifteen backpackers, twelve visiting from overseas were killed. Miraculously another seventy escaped unharmed or with minor injuries such as smoke inhalation.

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This tragedy affected on the local community at a number of levels. Firstly there was the support process associated with caring for the seventy backpackers: food, accommodation, clothing, reinstating travel documents such as passports, visas etc., and establishing communication links for them to advise family and friends of their situation. While the Council and many in the community pitched in to help with this process in the first few days, it masked the real impact of the fact that fifteen people had died in the main street of Childers. The community was distraught and the burnt out shell of the Palace Building was a constant reminder to residents and visitors of what had occurred.

There was enormous interest from national and international media. The town was deluged with media representatives from all over the world as Childers was put under the spotlight for all the wrong reasons. In the months before the fire the whole region had been in the grip of a severe drought and water for cane farms had been cut to approximately twenty percent of their allocation. The cane harvest, which started in the week before the fire, was the lowest in a decade in terms of sugar production. The fire and the resultant shortage of backpacker accommodation exacerbated the impact on the rural sector, denying labour to farmers with small crops which at that time of year include tomatoes; capsicums; snow peas and zucchinis, which are primarily shipped to the southern markets.

The fire compromised the structural integrity of the building and the main street was partially blocked as a result of support beams installed on the façade of the building and the hoardings around it. The two adjoining businesses had to be closed as they shared common walls with the backpacker building, and every business in the main street was no doubt disrupted.

This left a number of issues to be addressed with the Council taking a leading role. The local community was dispirited, not only those directly associated with business and agriculture, but many people felt a sense of loss, or that in some way local residents had let down the young people who had come to our town. The media coverage following the fire produced an adverse image of the town and there was concern that we would be forever remembered only as the town where the backpacker fire had occurred. There was a downturn in the local economy, caused of not only the disruption to town businesses, but by the drought and problems of the agricultural sector.

The local shire, in conjunction with the state government, had the difficult job of responding to the families who had lost children in the fire and starting the sensitive negotiations about an appropriate memorial for their loss, and to liaise with those families who wished to visit the shire to see first hand either the building, the town or the region that their children had been visiting at that time.

Council was also faced with the burnt out shell of the most significant building of the heritage listed CBD, with many of the problems associated with being a heritage building in terms of demolition or restoration permits etc. One of the first things the Shire did was to get on the front

foot and discuss the purchase of the building with the then owner. The community recognized in those first few days after the fire that unless there was an injection of government funding then there was little chance of the building being restored or reopened in the short to medium term. The Council's worst fear at that time was that the building would remain a stark reminder of the tragedy that had occurred for years after the event while the then owners, or subsequent owners, tried to work out how to utilise the building and how to fund it.

The first attempt to purchase the building fell over when it was sold for approximately \$50,000 more than the Council's offer to a firm of Sunshine Coast builders about three months after the fire. Fortunately we were able to negotiate with the principals of that firm almost immediately, and whilst we had a few false starts over the next six months, we worked out a plan to satisfy both their commercial objectives and the Council's needs and began the lengthy legal process of putting that in place.

Once we had some security of tenure over the building we could discuss with the families and the State and Federal governments about locating a memorial within that building, which we believed was the most appropriate venue to recognize the tragedy that had occurred there. Through the cooperation of the Department of State Development we were also able to look at options for easing the labour shortage /accommodation shortage in Childers. An incentive package for one of the local caravan parks produced an eighty bunk backpacker accommodation building which was operational 12 months after the fire.

The Council had endorsed a main street program to reinvigorate the town centre in 1998 and had done some work on the southern approach to the town and also in one of the parks in the main street. Ironically, on the morning of the fire I was in Brisbane meeting with the Queensland Heritage Council to get a permit to demolish a brick clocktower constructed in the park in the 1960s which was directly opposite the Palace.

The Council decided that as well as a large financial commitment to the restoration of the Palace Memorial Building it would also continue work on the main street program to try and reinvigorate the town centre and make Childers a 'must see' stop on the Bruce Highway, as well as encouraging visitors into the town for day trips from the surrounding major tourist destinations of Bundaberg and Hervey Bay which also boast regional airports.

In October 2002, just two years and four months after the devastating fire, the Palace Memorial Building as it is now known, was opened by the Deputy Prime Minister in a moving ceremony attended by twelve families who had relatives killed in the fire. The restored building encompassed a glass memorial wall; a portrait of the victims of the fire; Childers Art Gallery, and a Visitor Information centre accredited by Tourism Queensland. The portion of the building retained by the Sunshine Coast builders was subsequently refurbished for use as a *Subway* outlet; the total cost of the project was \$1.8M with the Federal, State and shire governments each contributing approximately one third of the funding. The owners also built a new backpacker building at the rear of the site, opened in 2003 by the Prime Minister, which can house one hundred and twenty backpackers.

Council continued to fast track its main street program including major park redevelopment; outdoor eating areas; repaving the entire western side of the main street; under grounding the power and storm water drainage; and allocating some quarter of a million dollars to a public artworks project designed to tell the history of the shire.

Since opening in October 2002, the Palace Memorial Building has had some 400,000 visitors. Businesses in the main street are thriving and there has not been a vacant shop front in Childers for some three years.

The lessons learnt which may be relevant to others faced with a similar crisis are fairly basic but worth reinforcing. Firstly we had a huge commitment to the project in resource, financial and emotional terms. Approximately fifty percent of my time in that 2 to 3 year period was devoted to the project. We were also proactive in going out and talking to both the private sector and all levels of government to get them involved and to secure external funds.

We weren't worn down by critics: we resisted the call from some to bulldoze the building and build something new on the site like a supermarket! There was at different times during the project, criticism of our actions, both of the amount of money Council was spending and the 'over done' (according to some critics) recognition of the tragedy in the memorial. I can remember talking to Peter Kenyon, who is a bit of a small town guru, who came to the shire as part of an initiative of Queensland State Development to assist us and the local business community in the early stages and Peter confirmed that Council was on the right track in one simple sentence. "In times like this somebody has to take the high moral ground and stick to it". Those words were very reassuring.

Communication was also a large part of our success; particularly in the early stages when we had to talk to the parents and families because there was no way that the memorial was ever going to proceed in any shape or form without their active consent. Dealing with people across six countries (Netherlands, Korea, Japan, England, Ireland, and Wales) and in some cases with real communication difficulties because of language was not an easy task. Shire Mayor, Bill Trevor, took a lead role and communicated directly with many of those family members, including meeting many of them on a trip to Europe in 2001. Fortunately, the father of the West Australian twin girls killed in the fire also played a key role in liaison and helped bring the others with him.

Another thing that was unique about our project was that we were prepared to take risks and were prepared to go against tradition. We were a small rural council. The magnitude of the task we were faced with following the fire was something that most communities would only face perhaps once in their lifetime. There was no model or precedent to draw on. We had to respond in what we thought was the best and most appropriate method. There is no doubt we took risks, although I think in most cases they were calculated.

When we advertised Australia wide for an artist we received some forty responses, none of which we thought suitable, and eventually found an artist (Jo Palaitis) who hadn't seen the advertisement who we flew to Childers, took to the scene of the fire, took out to the small-crop fields to meet backpackers and then felt comfortable with our choice. Sam Di Mauro who was the artist that designed the glass wall used new technology that didn't exist anywhere else. I

remember going to the factory in Melbourne with him where the glass slides used in the memorial were fabricated and the technician asked him why he had chosen their factory to produce the slides and he said that he had come up with an artistic concept and then went out and looked to see if the technology existed to fabricate it.

Finally, I suppose from where I was sitting as CEO of the local shire, the most important aspect was the fact that we had a fantastic team (including the Council staff) who were able to work cooperatively to pull the whole project together. Given that we were starting with the burnt out shell of the building, the team we had to assemble was enormous and diverse; it included heritage architects, architects, structural engineers, the two artists already mentioned, and the builders, while at the same time involving the elected Council, liaising with the families and the State and Federal Governments in relation to funding. We were fortunate in that the people we appointed or engaged seemed always to understand the overriding importance of what we were trying to do rather than let their own professional egos get in the way. As a result of the contacts and associations made there has been many lasting friendships and I am still in contact with most of those people on at least an annual basis. The Building since its restoration has been recognized with the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Qld) awards for both adaptive re-use and public art as well as a National Trust gold award for heritage restoration.

In a recent paper commissioned by the University of Queensland and the Queensland Government called "*Innovation in Rural Queensland – Why Some Towns Prosper While Others Languish*" (Plowman, Ashkanasy, Gardner, and Letts, 2003)¹ The authors tried to pinpoint what the differences were. The question they posed was "Why is it that some towns demonstrate resilience, optimism and growth yet not far away there are other towns faced with similar economic and geographical circumstances that have feelings of apathy, loss of energy, declining populations and empty shops?" The authors concluded that in the least innovative communities when the question was put "Whose job is that?" the answer was "Theirs". But in the most innovative communities the answer is "Ours".

In the aftermath of the tragedy of June 2000 the Council and the local community were prepared to take ownership of the problem and respond appropriately, and some five years later we have not only physically reinstated the building but have restored a sense of community pride and helped ensure the economic viability of the town and the region. Whilst we will always be known as the town where that fire occurred and fifteen lives were lost, we will also be known as a community able to band together, react appropriately and recognize the tragedy with the memorial that has met world wide acclaim.

References

Plowman I, Ashkanasy N, Gardner J, Letts M (2003) *Innovation in rural Queensland, Why some towns thrive while others languish*, UQ Business School & Queensland DPIE
