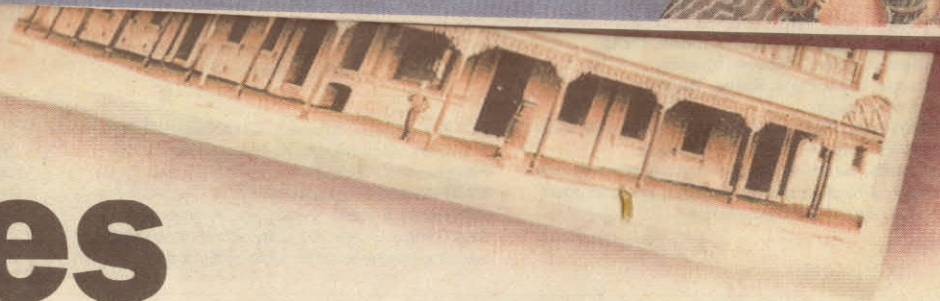


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KING GEORGE SQUARE
THE REGENT YUNGABA



City's stories fade to dust

IT'S a strange feeling, watching your past disappear.

I should be used to it – growing up in Brisbane means I have had ample opportunity to witness its demise.

There one day, as familiar as the giant tennis racquet poised over the Milton tennis courts, and gone the next, footsteps of the giants – Roche, Laver, Newcombe – going with it.

Sometimes it happens accompanied by howls of protest, others with barely a ripple, sometimes it occurs by subterfuge, bulldozers moving in the dead of the night, but each time I feel a keen and aching sense of loss.

Perhaps it's in my DNA.

My father went out in the wee small hours, the night they pulled the Belle Vue Hotel down, and came back shaking his head and shaken.

My mother told me stories of Cloudland, of girls in long white gloves and organza dresses dancing on top of the hill, and I told her mine, of jumping up and down to Midnight Oil and the Angels on a floor that was made for jumping.

It's been 27 years since they pulled the dance hall down, and yet I still raise my eyes to the clouds over Bowen Hills and look for an arch that's no longer there, whispers of girls' dresses in the wind.

I still quicken my steps coming around the corner of Edward St, eager to escape the heat into the cool, walnut panels of the Shingle Inn, where I will turn my sugar bowl towards the restaurant desk to let the waitress know I am ready to order.

Then I remember, and cross the road.

I can't look at the place where the Toowong Pool used to be.

If I do I will see the funny round building that was its entrance way. I will go back into its dark changing rooms and come out to dive-bomb into its waters, even through the sign says you shouldn't.

There's some sort of tower there now, and nobody spreads their towels out beneath it.

When they tore down Festival Hall, rocking and creaking until its very last minute, I stood outside and quietly thanked it. I will never buy a sludgee or a sloshie, or whatever they're called, from the 7-Eleven where the California Cafe in Fortitude Valley used to be, because these are my places, where my stories began.

Everybody has their own. There are those who mourned the last bowling ball thundering down the lanes at Milton, people who still find themselves outside Skinny's to buy a record, even though the music's stopped playing, one man I know who still can smell the coffee at the Primitif cafe in the city.

But what of places that belong to everybody?

What of places where people gather from all directions, where everybody's feet have left their

imprint, where generations have splashed in its fountain on the last day of school, or stood beneath its Christmas tree as the lights were turned on?

Last week I stood in King George Square wondering where on earth it had gone, its redevelopment rendering it unrecognisable.

They say the grass had to go because it's too expensive, there's not many trees because they needed more room, the fountain was dangerous because those damn kids kept jumping in it.

Maybe so, but why does our city in particular seem hell-bent on not just revamping or re-energising its past, but obliterating it?

The past is important because it anchors our stories, it tells us where we have been and why.

It is doubly important when we walk on our own city's streets, look at what once was, what has replaced it – and realise we have no idea where we are going.