

# AFTER *the clean-up*

Can city planners make the brave decisions necessary to avoid another flood disaster? **Graham Readfearn** asks the experts

The spectre of floodwaters and the sodden devastation and heartache they bring has hung over Brisbane since the last serious inundation of January 1974. Back then, most of the city had already forgotten the floods of 1893, when the Brisbane River broke its banks three times in the space of a few weeks. Now, historians will add January 2011 to the city's major flood history.

Research from climate scientists suggests the effects of climate change could heap more misery on Queenslanders and the banks of the Brisbane River in decades to come. Late last year, the Queensland Government and the Local Government Association of Queensland released a joint-report which said "with our changing climate, extreme flooding events are likely to become more intense". That report came after a Queensland Government summary of the science, released in October, reported that "climate change is also likely to affect extreme rainfall in South East Queensland".

Most climate researchers say climate change cannot be fairly blamed for any single extreme weather event because these events have always happened. In December and January, warmer than average ocean temperatures off the east coast, high humidity in the atmosphere and a strong weather pattern known as La Nina combined to deliver the floods of two weeks ago. The true impact of climate change, though, could be to make events like these worse than they were in the past.

But in the days after the Brisbane flood, some respected climate researchers said it was likely that climate change had played some role in the floods. Dr Deborah Abbs, CSIRO principal research scientist, says it would be wrong to blame the most recent floods on climate change, but she adds: "All we can do is say that, under climate change, we expect extreme rainfall events will become even more extreme. The sort of things we are seeing now are consistent with our projections. This is the sort of thing we expect to see."

She says one question which researchers are now trying to answer is what impact will climate change have on the kind of extreme weather events that caused Brisbane's flooding.

Dr Caroline Sullivan, an associate professor of Environmental Economics and Policy at Southern Cross University, says understanding the role of climate change gives "little comfort to the thousands of householders facing devastation in their homes".

"What is needed now is to think about what we can learn from this," she says. "One clear message is that these weather-related impacts are likely to be here to stay, and are likely to be more costly

than ever anticipated. The issue we must consider today is how our businesses, federal, state and local governments can adapt our homes, infrastructure, businesses and lifestyles to the changing conditions we are now facing, so that the next time this kind of 'extreme event' happens – and it will – we will be in a more secure position to deal with it."

Dr Rob Roggema, an expert in climate adaptation at RMIT University's Global Cities Research Institute, says: "After the clean-up, the natural tendency is to rebuild houses in exactly the same places and in the same way. That just prepares people for the next disaster."

He believes city planners will need to make it more attractive for people to build in less vulnerable areas. A practical response to protect those already in flood-risk areas is to reduce the amount of hard surfaces, such as concrete, in those suburbs.

"Having a lot of green spaces allows more water to go and subside into the soil with a slower run-off," he says. "We have seen with flash floods how the water has nowhere to go and that increases the magnitude of the disaster. You could simply ask people not to pave their front garden, but make it green and permeable."

He says that in parts of Europe, including his native Netherlands, planners tend to protect communities against one-in-10,000 year events rather than one-in-100 year events, which is the tendency in Australia. One approach to living close to flood-prone rivers has been employed in Hamburg, Germany, where two-storey homes are designed to allow for regular flooding of the lower floor.

"In Brisbane, people used to build homes on poles and, while some still do, many have not," he says.

Donovan Burton, of Climate Planning, is a Brisbane-based expert in helping state governments, councils and businesses to adapt to the impacts of climate change. He says there are three options which planners will now need to think about to reduce the impacts of future extreme weather events on the city.

"You can mitigate your risk by building walls and barriers – which is an engineering response," he says. "You can try and wear the risk and hope that you can insure yourself. Or you can leave. There are some hard decisions to be made."

"The problem is that we have no brave planners or decision-makers out there. Hopefully, this flood event can be a catalyst for change. Councils are aware of flood risks but they are frightened that if they put too stringent regulations on developers then those developers might go somewhere else. Without brave decisions, events like this will continue to happen."

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