

NOBODY KNOWS THE RUBBLE I'VE SEEN

By Trent Dalton

Demolition man George Deen relives the memories





demolition

Thirty years after the toppling of an iconic Brisbane landmark, the inside story from one of the wrecking crew.

man

All he left behind were the memories. The excavator's claw tearing into the rear wall of the Belle Vue Hotel. The bomb threats to his house. The sound of Joh Bjelke-Petersen's voice.

The iconic arched entrance of the Cloudland ballroom collapsing in clouds of dust. His 35-year-old mother dying in childbirth when he was 13. Leaving school, abandoning his dreams to be a doctor, to sell newspapers to help his widowed father who was supporting nine kids. And the front page of the *Brisbane Telegraph*, Wednesday, July 8, 1964: "10 Fled From Darra Blaze".

"A widower with nine children helplessly watched at Darra last night as fire raged through a house he bought only eight days ago. Mr Nasib Mohammed Deen, 42, wept today as he picked through the ruins, trying to salvage something. 'We are insured, but the children have only what they were wearing,' he said."

The home was destroyed. Demolished. All

Story Trent Dalton
Photography David Kelly

that the inferno left behind were the memories.

There he is, the eldest boy, Sultan Mohammed, aged 15, second from the left in the newspaper story's accompanying photograph. Thin limbs, hands in the pockets of high pants. And there's Abdul Rahman, aged 13, and Habib Allah, 12, and Mohammed Abdul Gaffar, 9, and Haneef Mohammed, 5. The Deen brothers.

Sultan Mohammed is 63 now. For the past four decades he's been as well known by his nickname, George. The name just evolved, he says, like the nicknames of his brothers: Ray, Happy, Louie and Funny. They became the Deen Bros demolition firm, Joh Bjelke-Petersen's ruthless go-to band of all-swinging, all-wrecking

Pakistani Muslim destroyers, famously on call in the 1980s whenever an iconic Brisbane building absolutely, positively had to disappear overnight.

He stands in the centre of a dusty work site, wearing high-visibility yellow-and-blue workwear and a yellow cap with the words "Deen Bros" over a motif of a wrecking ball and bulldozer destroying Brisbane's Cloudland ballroom above the firm's endearing slogan, conceived in a Deen Bros brainstorming session to create an ad for Yellow Pages in the mid-'80s: "All we leave behind are memories".

His team is ripping up a block of land beside the Islamic College of Brisbane on the outskirts of Karawatha Forest, 23km south of the city. He's destroying in order to create, clearing land for a carpark that will accommodate the ever-growing numbers enrolling in the school. George and his brothers built in 1995 for south-east Queensland Muslim children. He smiles widely, his big, round face moving with a bushy

black beard. Breathe it in. That's the soul-enriching smell of destruction. "That bloke in the excavator," he says, pointing to a hulking yellow machine clawing into the ground. "His brother worked on Cloudland."

We are days away from the 30th anniversary of the pre-dawn destruction of Cloudland, the hilltop ballroom in inner-north Brisbane's Bowen Hills that once hosted the likes of Buddy Holly and Johnny O'Keefe and launched a thousand enduring south-east Queensland love stories. It stood for more than 40 years, its enormous pink arch and World War II-era columns becoming a beacon for a booming city, featuring in so many starry-eyed kitchen table reflections that it fell into folklore, fell into our hearts. It took George and his brothers 60 minutes to make Cloudland fall to the ground.

"What?" he says, shrugging his shoulders, innocently. "We were asked to do a job. We did it." George isn't big on the word "demolition". He strokes his beard: "It's really ... *reverse construction*." In a world potentially 4.5 billion years old, George would contend, emotionally attaching oneself to a 40-year-old building seems preposterous. There was only one thing keeping Cloudland ballroom standing in the early hours of November 7, 1982, and that thing wasn't strong enough to withstand the might of George Deen's bulldozers: "Nostalgia," he shrugs.

NINE PM, APRIL 17, 1979, AND SMALL BUSINESS demolition man George Deen is watching television in the Oxley home in Brisbane's west he shares with his brothers and his wife, Kamrun, and their four children, Aysha, Zareena, Yasmeen and Hafeez. Their fifth child, Aziz, will be born two years later. George catches a newsbreak announcing premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen's plans to demolish one of Brisbane's most loved watering holes, the grand old Belle Vue Hotel.

The National Trust has been campaigning to preserve the three-storey hotel standing proudly on the corner of George and Alice streets in the city. State government cabinet members have approved the demolition of the Belle Vue, subject to further discussion. Documents will emerge 30 years later suggesting Bjelke-Petersen has received a secret report saying the restoration of the Belle Vue will cost up to \$2 million, while its demolition will cost \$40,000.

George Deen is a fifth-generation Australian whose ancestors were Pakistani camel traders buying and selling goods to farmers and miners across the country. His father, Nasib Mohammed Deen, was a salesman. He sold TVs and electrical goods until, in 1961, the unsubtle whiff of the family outhouse drew him to the demolition business. Then-Brisbane lord mayor Clem Jones was unrolling his plans to sewer his city, once



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known as "Sentry-Box City". Jones needed some brave souls to demolish the thousands of outhouses across the capital. Nasib Mohammed saw his family's calling.

Spotting an opportunity is an instinct gifted to George by blood. He immediately phones the reception desk at Parliament House. He doesn't know Joh Bjelke-Petersen and the premier doesn't know him. George leaves a message with the Parliament House security guard who answers the phone: "He wants to knock it down?" he says. "Yeah, we'll bloody do it."

That same night, George's phone rings. It's Bjelke-Petersen. He wants to talk. The building will come down and it will come down in secret.

Midnight, Friday April 20, and, protected by police from a growing group of protesters who have got wind of the demolition, Deen Bros commence their not-so-secret assault on the Belle Vue. The team is enclosed by a barbed-wire fence that reminds Liberal MP Terry Gygar, watching the remarkable series of events unfold, of a battleground in Stalingrad. There's a suggestion of pulling the Belle Vue's rear wall out with a delicate winch and cable set-up. But the wall is too tough, too solid. George drives his excavator to the front of the building. There will be nothing delicate about this demolition. He raises the excavator's claw and digs it into a wall of brick, taking a firm hold of the century-old icon. Then he pulls back, tearing chunks off the building as if he were tearing chicken meat from a carcass. But he hits an obstacle.

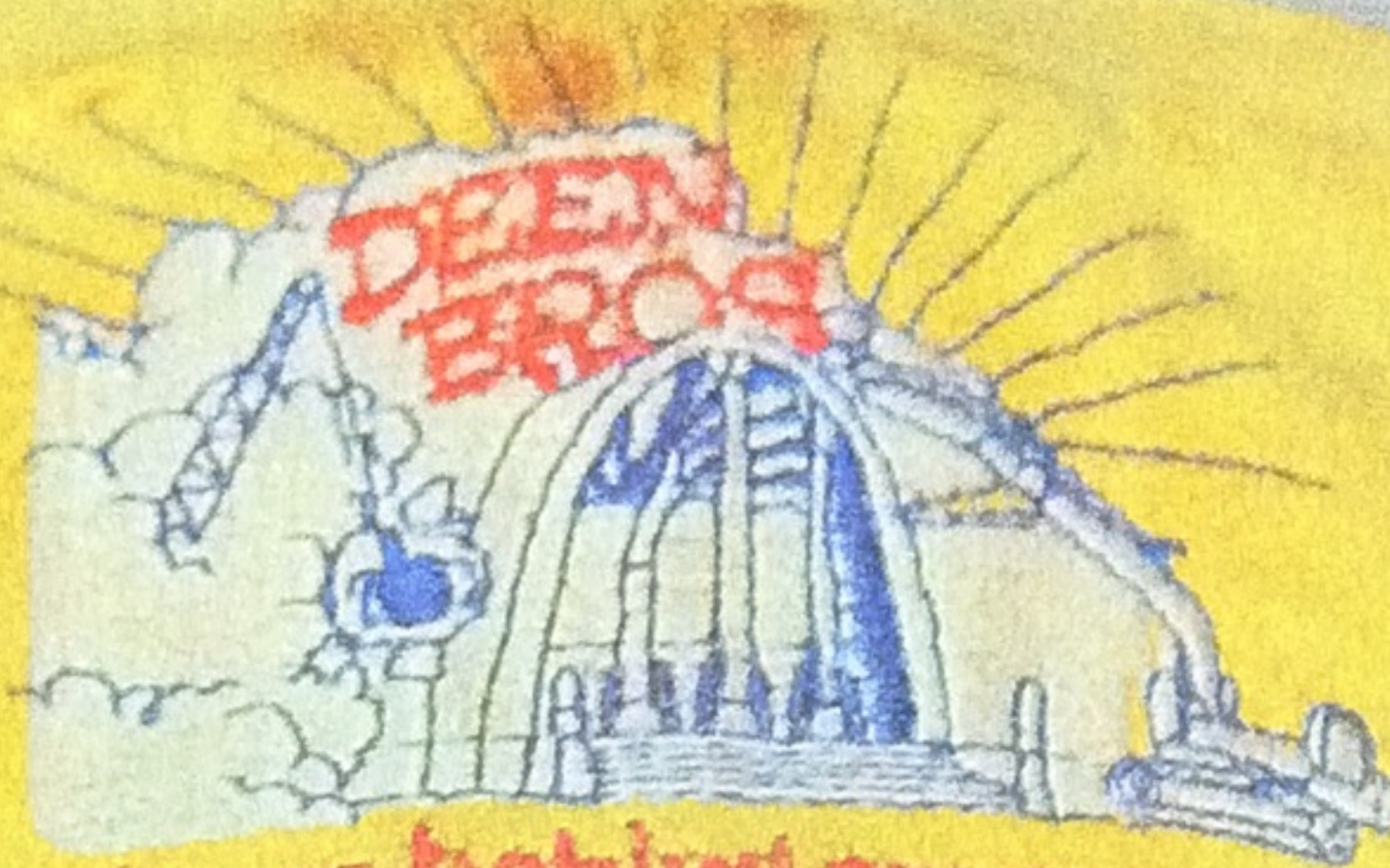
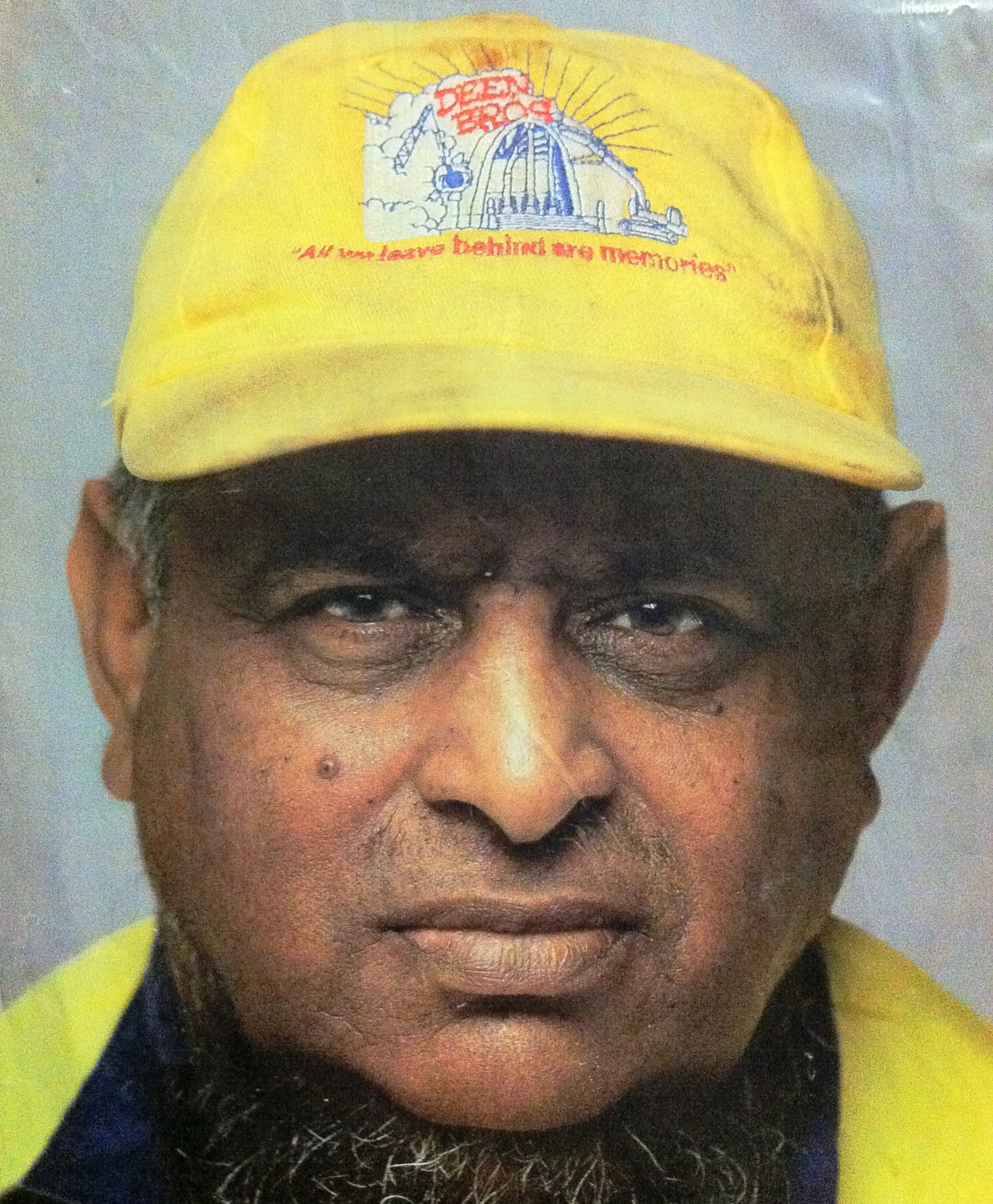
"Right in the middle of the hotel was an electrical substation," says George today. "Because of the secrecy and everything else, it was still live. We couldn't get it disconnected. So

Wrecking ball ... The Belle Vue bites the dust, 1979; Cloudland, before (right) and after (below), 1982; (above, previous page) George Deen today.



we worked all the way around it. Luckily it was beneath a stairwell, so when we finished the job and cleaned it all up, the stairwell was left standing. We knocked it all down around it."

At the Karawatha site, under a glaring sun, George holds up a black-and-white photograph of himself and his brother, Funny, proudly standing at the site of the demolished Belle Vue.



"All you leave behind are memories"



"It was the longest I've ever worked on a job," he says. "Non-stop without rest. We started midnight Friday, worked through Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday we knocked off. We'd go and shower. Home for an hour, two hours, come back. Eating on the run. Non-stop."

Direct conversation with Bjelke-Petersen was minimal. "As soon as I'd spoken to him, he'd put us on to the Works Department. Everything was organised through them." Joh was a background presence for the Deens. He would occasionally visit the brothers on jobs, drinking tea with them, George says, sharing their devotion to God. "He was very religious," Deen says. "We were Muslim. He knew we were strong in our faith. And he thought anybody like that would be good to anybody else."

With every truck of debris that rattled out of the job site, there was an armed policeman riding shotgun with the Deens. "People were angry," George says. "We had bomb threats on our house. We had police living in our house. Police there 24 hours. Checking around our house. Checking our mail."

To this day he speaks to Queenslanders still mortified by the destruction of the Belle Vue, angered as much by the removal of an icon as they are by the nefarious ways the state's

leader went about it. "The building was brick with timber," he says. "It was riddled with West Indian termite." He shrugs. "But Joh just wanted it gone. Of course there was opposition from the Liberal Party and everybody else."

Indeed, a censure motion put forth by the Labor opposition attracted the backing of 13 Liberal backbenchers. "But Joh just wanted to trample everybody and he did it," George says.

THE FIRST WEEK OF NOVEMBER, 1982. GEORGE Deen enters the Adelaide St office of Peter Kurts, a successful property investor with a thorn in his portfolio: historic Cloudland ballroom. "Peter Kurts explained the job," says George. "He said, 'We need you to be sworn to secrecy. You're not allowed to tell anybody about it. But this is what we want to do. We actually want to come in one day – and we don't know when yet – and knock the building down. And the main thing we want to do is that big arch, it has to be knocked down, that's the icon of the building'."

Kurts goes on to explain his predicament to George. "The building wasn't heritage-listed, but it had a cloud over it that it would be," George says. "Everybody was scared that if they bought it they would be stuck with a bloody lemon."

Kurts officially cited "safety concerns" as the reason for razing the building, but later he admitted that his purchase of Cloudland was just "badly timed". "[Kurts] tried to use it for rock concerts and people complained about the noise," George says. "He tried it as a ballroom and that didn't work. He tried markets there and they didn't work. Everything he tried flopped. What he told me was the only way he could do anything with it was to get rid of the building, and the land would look after itself."

Kurts needed a demolition team that was quick and discreet. The second anyone caught wind of the destruction of Cloudland, Kurts told George, "somebody was going to come with an injunction or something to try to stop them".

"He said, 'What we really need to do is make sure your first blow on that arch does enough damage to the building that it can't be recognised and so it can't be rebuilt. It's got to be defaced enough so nobody can say we have to rebuild it all'," George recalls.

George Deen considers the job for a moment. He knows Cloudland well. He recalls dancing there as a boy, sharing dreamy nights arm-in-arm with his fellow students at Coorparoo State High School and East Brisbane State School. Nostalgia. "We can do that," he says.

Three hours later, George takes a quiet drive around the Cloudland site. He circles the ballroom. His notoriety has become a problem. Since the Belle Vue controversy, the faces of the Deen brothers have been splashed across

the pages of *The Courier-Mail*, popping champagne bottles after arduous demolitions or snapped, smiling and devil-eyed, in the seats of menacing bulldozers. If a Deen brother was seen circling a building in 1982, one could safely assume that building's time on Earth was nearly up.

After three laps of the building, he has a rough destruction plan. "The arch was held up by about six or eight timber posts like electricity poles," George says. "The best way to get the arch down was to put some cables on and, if we pulled those posts over with the cables, the arch would come down. That's your big icon gone. Straight up, like that. First blow."

Saturday, November 6, 1982. Kurts has been running Cloudland as a restaurant, doing a moderate trade on weekends through loyal customers and baby boomers on first-kiss anniversaries. He tells George, to maintain the veil of secrecy, he will cease trading at midnight, leaving the tables set – knives, forks, crisp and clean tablecloths – for Sunday night trading.

While diners sip their wines and discuss the good old days, above them in the ballroom's ceiling is a series of coiled cables, smuggled in during the week by Deen Bros. There's no reason for diners to notice the squares of tin sheeting on the poles holding up the arched entry. The sheeting covers chainsaw cuts, strategically made so the poles will break instantly with one heavy pull from a bulldozer.

George Deen phones his local Oxley Police Station. He requests the assistance of 24 police officers. Straightaway, it is granted – it may seem incredible, but in the days since the Belle Vue job, such requests from Deen Bros are familiar. "Where's the job?" asks a senior officer. "Well, I can't tell you," George says. He simply gives instructions for a rendezvous point. "They were happy with that," George says today. "They knew that whatever it was, it was legal. But it was no holds barred back then."

About 3am on Sunday, November 7, the Deen Bros demolition team – hauling two hulking excavators and a Caterpillar D8 bulldozer – and 24 police officers meet at the secret rendezvous point. "I got everybody to meet coming over the South East Freeway, just before you get to Captain Cook Bridge. There was a wide area there on the left, on Stanley St. That was the rendezvous point. And nobody – nobody but me and the brothers – knew where we were going. None of our operators, none of our men, none of the coppers."

George has only two words of instruction for the nervous members of the clandestine gathering. "Follow me," he says. It's Happy Deen who climbs into the Cloudland ceiling to fetch the planted coiled cables, while George leads the unloading of two bulldozers – the D8 has been joined by another, transferred from ►

a nearby site – from their floats. Happy connects the cables to the arch's poles and one of the dozers. "While that was getting hooked up we were taking the other machines to strategic places around the building," George recalls. "Happy hooked up the ropes and he said, 'Right, go'."

The bulldozer reverses hard and Cloudland's 40-year-old dome-shaped arch entry tumbles down in what George sees as one beautiful, sublime heave. Amid the ecstatic commotion, Happy Deen has gone missing. The attending men hold their breath, imagining the jolliest Deen buried beneath a pile of rubble. Then, like a scene from a comical silent film, George sees Happy emerge from a suffocating cloud of dust, smiling, brushing off his shoulders.

No time to waste, George rumbles inside the ballroom with his excavator. "It was tough, that building," George says. "It had brick walls down each side and huge steel trusses in the roof spanning the ballroom. And, of course, the floor sat above the ground. If you crossed the floor with a machine it would fall through."

George's excavator claw makes a desperate reach for the first roof truss, only making the hold within centimetres. He pulls down on the truss but it won't give. Cloudland has been built to last. She's a worthy adversary. "Then I got two dozers on either side of the building and I said, 'While I pull down, you guys push the walls in'. So by pushing the walls in we'd weaken the roof."

The Deen brothers don't have the luxury of modern radio communication. They use instinct. A shorthand of gestures. A blood harmony of destruction. With weakened side walls, the roof trusses begin to fall in a perfect symphony of annihilation. The trusses land neatly across the raised ballroom floor, providing a stable footing for George to proceed on an improvised bridge of fallen steel. He smiles at his good fortune. It's providence. It's divinity. It's down.

"In about ten minutes, we'd gone through 20 trusses," George says. "It was like clockwork. You can't plan that. It was beautiful. It was an engineering feat. In one hour we had that whole building down on the ground. All the pictures you saw on TV were re-enactments for the cameras. There was only one cameraman there, who'd come from the Journalists' Club [the fondly recalled boozer, tucked beneath the Twelfth Night Theatre in Bowen Hills], and he was pissed out of his brain. He got a few pictures of it live, but he didn't know what he was doing."

It's a one-hour demolition but the Deen brothers feel, with the sheer intensity and pressure of the job, like they've worked 24 hours. They are hungry and thirsty. And as the state of Queensland wakes to find Cloudland destroyed, the Deens are inside the Pancake Manor on Charlotte St, sipping milkshakes.

LIKE HE SAID, NOSTALGIA. AT THE WORK SITE on the outskirts of Karawatha Forest, George shakes his head at a photo of himself, 30 years younger, sitting outside the Treasury Building on George St. "I am the only one left in the business now," he says. "All the others are doing their own things. Ray does buying and selling of trailers and trucks and stuff, Happy buys and sells trucks, Louie has a heavy haulage business, and Funny has trucks."

There's nothing simple about the destruction business. The great destroyer has been felled three times himself. "We have had a few tough spots," he says. "In a lot of ways, it had been too easy in the '80s. We started the MacArthur Centre redevelopment [in Brisbane's CBD in 1990] with Kern Corporation [the development company that collapsed in 1991] and of course they went down and left us with a big bloody debt and that really hurt us. That was when the family started falling apart, because things were really, really difficult then as a business."

"You work as hard as you can and suddenly you're down \$6 million. We have probably three times lost that amount of money. It is very volatile and you are very vulnerable."

In the shady days of the Bjelke-Petersen era, he swears he never took a kickback and never offered one. "Shady in what way?" he asks.

In the brown paper bag way.

"No, we didn't do that, I can honestly say.

**NOBODY GOT
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And it was rife in the construction industry. Never. I've lost a lot of jobs because I've refused to kickback anybody. Nobody got anything from me in a brown paper bag. Nobody."

Kickbacks still go on, though, he says. "When you go to negotiate a job and your price might be a bit higher or lower and they come out openly and say, 'Well, this much and the job is yours'. And I say, 'Well, no, I can't do that'."

This is a man who has made five *hajj*s, Islamic pilgrimages, to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. His brothers are equally devoted to Islam. Yet, for every fun colour piece written on the Deens over the past three decades there's been a news piece detailing their battles with legal entities and big-money companies baying for blood ... August 1992: "Noted demolishers the Deen Bros were named in a writ seeking more than \$2.5m yesterday." August 1993: "Oil giant BP Australia is suing the controversial Deen Bros for almost \$200,000 for allegedly unpaid oil and petroleum products."

November 2005: "The Deen Bros, famous for demolishing Brisbane icons, are in trouble with the council for allegedly building without a permit."

"Generally," George says, "I have been too trusting. Just bad business, I suppose."

In 2008, news reports detailed a legal feud between George and his brother Ray over a block of land. But nothing, George says today, could break the bonds between the brothers.

"We all still get along together," he says.

"Business is one thing and family is another. Family is more important than anything."

The 3pm bell rings at the Islamic College of Brisbane. George looks across the excavated work site to 900 Muslim students filing out of class. This is what he wants to be remembered for. Few have devoted more to Muslim culture in Queensland than the Deen brothers.

At 16, George was assistant secretary of the Holland Park Mosque Association, a committee he served on for 41 years. For 40 years, the Deen brothers have laid the foundations of every new mosque in Brisbane free of charge. He's long been a driving force of the Islamic Council of Queensland, establishing Muslim schools across the state. This Islamic College of Brisbane is, he says, his finest job. The brothers transformed it from a series of demountables on a cow paddock into a school so popular it now requires a new carpark. That's what destruction can bring. Something follows nothing. That's the cycle.

He lost his beloved mother at 13. He now has 14 grandchildren at 63. A building falls, another rises in its place. "Destruction is about moving on," he says. "Something has to go for something else to replace it. See, I don't even call it destruction."

He strokes his beard, considers his thoughts. "It's really ... evolution." ■