

City without a Plan: How the Gold Coast was Shaped

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Abstract: In the Australian landscape the Gold Coast is famous for its development without a plan. The rapid growth of the city was undoubtedly developmentally driven and the white shoe brigade's coalition with the pro-development state government in shaping the city is well known. The Gold Coast is also unusual for not having a traditional central business district but the concentration of high-rises presents a contrasting vision. This paper examines the causes and the consequences of this unplanned urbanisation process and seeks to answer the following questions: How different is the nature of urbanisation on the Gold Coast? What are the factors that make it unique? Physically how does the city compare with similar places in Australia and around the world? How did the lack of planning influence the form of the city and its internal arrangements? How did the shift from ad hoc decision making to more systematic planning efforts affect the city's urbanisation? And finally, what are the factors that shaped the Gold Coast as we now know it? These questions are answered through the examination of the city's past and its effects on its present and the future. In this sense, the morphology of the Gold Coast is viewed as a physical embodiment of past decision making.

Introduction

In the Australian landscape the Gold Coast is famous for its development without a plan. The rapid growth of the city was undoubtedly developmentally driven and the white shoe brigade's coalition with the pro-development state government in shaping the city is well known. The Gold Coast is also unusual for not having a traditional central business district but the concentration of high-rises along the coastline presents a contrasting vision. The type of urbanisation on the Gold Coast has been described as tourism urbanisation (Mullins 1991), postmodern city (Griffin 1998), post industrial urbanisation (Holmes 2001), and adolescent urbanism (Burton 2009).

Much has been written on the Gold Coast in the popular literature but scholarly examinations of the city's urban development have been few and far in between, especially in planning and urban studies. This paper examines the causes and the consequences of this unplanned urbanisation process and seeks to answer the following questions: How different is the nature of urbanisation on the Gold Coast? What are the factors that make it unique? Physically how does the city compare with similar places in Australia and around the world? How did the lack of planning influence the form of the city and its internal arrangements? How did the shift from ad hoc decision making to more systematic planning efforts affect the city's urbanisation? And finally, what are the factors that shaped the Gold Coast as we now know it? These questions are answered through the examination of the city's past through a review of literature and its effects on its present and the future. In this sense the morphology of the Gold Coast is viewed as a physical embodiment of past decision making.

The paper is presented in three main sections. The first section summarises the history of urban development on the Gold Coast through its distinct phases. The second section focuses on the structure of development and urban form highlighting its lack of a traditional central business district (CBD), linear form, canal estates, high-rise coastal strip, and developments symbolic of resort tourism. Finally the third section examines the forces shaping the city's landscape such as physical factors, tourism, transportation infrastructure, pro-growth coalitions and the political climate.

History of Urban Development on the Gold Coast

Urban development on the Gold Coast is inextricably linked to tourism development and since most of the research on the Gold Coast so far focused on tourism this literature provides some useful models for studying the development history of the city. Prideaux's (2004) Resort Development Spectrum model aims at providing a planning tool in the forecasting of the likely pattern of resort development into the future and identifies five distinct phases of local, regional, national, international tourism and decline/stagnation/rejuvenation. Adapting this to urban development history, Gold Coast can be examined in five distinct phases: pre-tourism development (1842-1889), regional tourism (1889-1957), national tourism (1957-1979), international tourism (1979-1995) and maturing from a resort into a city (since 1995).

Pre-tourism development (1842-1889)

The area of the present day city of Gold Coast was opened to free settlers in 1842. Until then, the convict settlements in Brisbane and Ipswich exploited the abundant resources of the region. The early agricultural settlements which engaged with timbergetting, dairy, sugar cane and cotton farming were inland along the rivers (Keane 1958). Settlements in the coastal area to serve this agricultural hinterland did not start until decades later with Southport in 1874 and Coolangatta in 1883. In 1876 a ferry was established across the Nerang River to Elston (present day Surfers Paradise) (Fitzgerald 1984). Visitors relied on coastal steamers and stagecoach services to access the area (Smith 1991). At that time the region was named South Coast relative to its position to Brisbane and served the local area as a recreational destination.

A modest destination serving the regional hinterland (1889-1957)

With the opening of the railway connection from Brisbane to Southport in 1889 the area became more accessible and tourism oriented development began. McRobbie (1982: 22) reports that "the opening of the railway caused a boom in holiday visitors to Southport with some spill-over to the Main Beach area across the Nerang via Meyer's ferry." Southport was the dominant beach resort in the area until the 1920s after which a number of factors contributed to its decline. Increasing road access from Brisbane freed visitors from the immediate confines of the railway station while at the same time changing geomorphological conditions influencing Southport's sheltered beach turned the once fine sandy beaches into mud (Smith 1991). The first hotel in Surfers Paradise just south of Main Beach was opened by James Cavill in 1923 for anglers but the beach and the surf brought holidaymakers seeking recreation rather than sport. For thirty years this was the only hotel at Surfers Paradise (Keane 1958). With the opening of the hotel, Surfers Paradise became the new focus of tourism development.

The opening of the vehicular Jubilee Bridge over the Nerang River in 1925 reduced the reliance on ferries to cross the river to Main Beach. The opening of the interstate railway in 1930 enabled direct rail access to southern states. At the same time, during the Great Depression many wealthy residents of the southern states trying to conserve money visited the Gold Coast instead of more lengthy and expensive overseas trips resulting in a building boom with the rates of approval per capita 800 percent higher than the state average (McRobbie 1982). The first regular air services to Coolangatta commenced in 1947" (Prideaux 2004).

The Gold Coast was discovered internationally as a vacation destination during the Second World War when American troops stationed in the South Pacific were sent here for recreation (Keane 1958). However, depression and building restrictions related to the war limited Surfers Paradise's growth and well-established Southport still overshadowed Surfers (Smith 1991). 1950s also witnessed considerable government investment into transportation, drainage, water and sewerage. Most of the transport activity was concentrated on roads but with the increased importance of air transport Coolangatta airport was also upgraded (Mullins 1984) and direct flights from Sydney to Coolangatta commenced in 1956 (Prideaux 2004).

Interstate capital and evolution of the Gold Coast into Australia's Playground (1957-1979)

A number of changes after the war were influential in the development of the Gold Coast into a national resort centre. Level of affluence and car ownership increased, working hours decreased, paid annual leave was introduced, and road improvements and introduction of passenger air services reduced travel times enabling increased holiday travel (Prideaux 2004). After the lifting of the building restrictions in 1952 the area experienced its first development boom (Smith 1991). Early tourist accommodations on the coast were mostly self-catered and quite distinctive. Houses, flats and units were offered to tourists largely by small operators (Mullins 1984) however to attract tourists from longer distances different types of facilities and services were necessary and this was provided through the capital and marketing skills from Melbourne and Sydney. In 1957 a Gold Coast real estate agent persuaded Stanley Korman, a Melbourne entrepreneur, to invest in the development of a large touristic complex in Surfers Paradise including a hotel, resort and entertainment (Hajdu, 1993) and resort tourism development began. Beach shacks, other buildings considered 'inferior' and beach-front camping grounds were removed by the city council and rapidly replaced with motels, condominiums, flats and houses. Started in Surfers Paradise, this built form quickly spread to main Beach and Broadbeach and then to the rest of the coast. What was striking was that in contrast to the development of Brisbane and other Queensland cities, development on the Gold Coast was mostly privately funded (Mullins 1984).

By late 1950s the entire length of the Gold Coast was developed as a tourist strip of ribbon development through connected settlements of Labrador, Southport, Surfers Paradise, Northcliffe, Broadbeach, Mermaid Beach, Nobby's, Miami, Burleigh Heads, Tallebudgera, Palm Beach, Currumbin, Tugun-Bilinga, Kirra and Coolangatta (Keane 1958). After the narrow strip of available land was built on developers' attention turned to wetlands and estuaries and the end of the 1950s saw the beginnings of commercial canal development (Fitzgerald 1984). With the severance of the rail link to Brisbane in 1962 road development gained pace. The land freed up from the rail line was sold or allocated to other purposes and the area was rapidly redeveloped with small retail enterprises catering mainly for the tourist trade. The concentration of investment activity in areas accessible to ocean beaches hastened the decline of Southport's resort function and Surfers Paradise has emerged as the centre of the Gold Coast tourist industry (Pigram 1977). "The replacement of the narrow Jubilee Bridge with a four lane highway in 1966 completed the transformation of Southport" (Pigram 1977, 538).

Throughout the 1970s the Gold Coast continued attracting investors and developers making it Australia's most intensely urban environment by the end of the decade. McQueen (1982, 121-122) found that "land changed hands faster than contracts could be written and the money paid into accounts" and by early 1980s "more cranes work[ed] on the Gold Coast than in Sydney and Melbourne combined." As in other places with similar rates of high growth, the history of the Gold Coast occurs through cycles of booms and busts. The first development booms occurred in 1958-60, 1968-70 and this was followed by steady growth up to 1974 at which time a national economic recession slowed development again (Smith 1991). Queensland's abolition of death duties in 1976 revived the stagnating land prices (McQueen 1982).

Foreign capital and internationalization of the Coast (1979-1995)

The next boom which occurred from 1979 to 1982 led to overbuilding and market collapse due to over-supply. By 1987 another boom period that would last till 1989 had started (Smith 1991). In this period high-rise apartments replaced many coastal houses, basic shops were replaced by specialty stores and the towns dotting the coast connected to form a continuous urban area. American capital had entered the Gold Coast during the early boom years, but in 1980 and 1981 large-scale foreign capital came with investors from Hong Kong, Arab countries and Singapore (Fitzgerald 1984). In the 1980s foreign property purchases on the Gold Coast increased dramatically with New Zealanders leading the way and nationals of Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and other Asian/Pacific nationals following suit (Hajdu, 1993). Some just bought residential property, others bought commercial property and land and some even went into development.

Ability to attract new investment and the composition of that investment are among Prideaux's (2004) key resort development criteria in the international tourism phase. In the same way development of the Gold Coast into a national resort centre was connected to developments in transportation and attraction of national capital, development into an international destination also occurred with the aid of transportation and international capital. Upgrading of the Coolangatta airport in 1984 and completion of Brisbane's new international terminal with a direct road link to Gold Coast in 1988 made the city accessible. "Between 1988 and 1991 ten large international hotels were opened on the Gold Coast. The first duty free shop was opened in 1981, by 1988 there were 12" (Hajdu 1993, 42). In 1990 first international charter flights and in 1999 regular international flights began.

Maturing from a resort into a city (since 1995)

The city's origins in resort settlements and the density of tourism related activities on the Gold Coast often results with it being viewed solely as an overgrown resort town. While there are some bases to this argument, there is also evidence indicating that the Gold Coast of today is more than this as one of the fastest growing cities in the country. It is already far larger than some of the state capitals with half a million people, the largest non-metro city, the largest urban area outside the major state capital cities and home to the second most populous Local Government Area (LGA) in Australia. While Griffin (1998: 286) notes that "Gold Coast isn't an easily definable place with a singular identity" Holmes (2006) argues that the Gold Coast has a dual identity of a city and a destination. Stimson and Minnery (1998: 196) suggest that Gold Coast presents at least four different images to the world: "a city of leisure; a city of enterprise; a city of tourism; and a city in its own right within the South East Queensland 'sun-belt' growth metropolis" and Edwards et al. (2007) describe it as a resort centre that is currently evolving into a city. From behind the facade of the overgrown tourism resort a real city with two universities, an international airport, national sports teams, regional hospitals and many other amenities that is preparing to host the 2018 Commonwealth Games is emerging (Dedekorkut-Howes and Bosman 2011).

Structure of Development and Urban Form

The Gold Coast has some unique features that make it different than other Australian cities. It does not have a traditional central business district but rather a number of smaller centres spread around the city. It is a strongly linear city, has a very large number of high-rise buildings compared to its population and the omnipresent canal estates add to its distinctiveness. It also contains many of the features which make tourism urbanisation symbolically distinct (Mullins 1984).

A city with no centre or a city of many centres?

The absence of a CBD in the most central and valuable part of the city is not uncommon in resort towns. In fact, Mullins (1991) argues that tourist cities are spatially distinctive without traditional CBD. Stansfield and Rickert (1970) define a Recreational Business District (RBD) which exists in resort towns that is spatially and functionally distinct from the CBD. This district is based on a recreational attraction rather than upon the proximity to residential areas or transportation routes, serves an area far beyond the hinterland of the town and is characterised by a distinctive array of pedestrian, tourist-oriented retail facilities. Studying Surfers Paradise Pigram (1977, 538) found that “the commercial core is dominated by recreational facilities, fast food and liquor outlets, and high-class restaurants. The visual effect is reinforced by a maze of neon signs and advertising displays so that the impression is unmistakably leisure-oriented.” Gold Coast Highway parallel to the beach marks one axis of the RBD while Cavill Avenue running between the beach and the river and intersecting the highway is another. Since becoming a pedestrian mall its importance has been further enhanced. With continued growth of the tourist trade, the RBD expanded and recreational business has spilled over into adjacent streets.

Lack of a CBD worked in the cases of the resort centres of Surfers Paradise and Coolangatta because of the “twinning” that has occurred with Southport and Tweed Heads where the twin cities in each set played a supporting and complementary role for the other in which Southport and Tweed Heads assumed an administrative and service role with a considerable CBD function as well while Surfers Paradise and Coolangatta remained the focus for recreational business (Pigram 1977). This spatial and functional separation of the RBD and CBD is at the root of the limited perception by tourists of the city’s overall urban structure.

In his study of beach resort development Smith (1991) found that long beaches encourage dispersal while short beaches promote concentration of recreational business function along the beach. Urban development on the coastal strip started as a chain of resort centres on the Gold Coast with the built-up area added to by an inland extension of canal estates in the estuary and backswamps of the Nerang River. Fusing of these settlements has subsequently occurred, resulting with a multicentric city with the older settlements now forming beads in an elongated pattern.

Linear development

In addition to the overall linearity of the urban form of the Gold Coast the linearity of the functional land-use zones parallel to the coast Pigram (1977) identified in Surfers Paradise and Coolangatta can still be seen in most of the length of the city today. Adjacent to several beaches is a linear park with facilities and parking with the high-rise tourist accommodation facing the beaches immediately behind. A linear aggregation of speciality stores, food and drink stands, amusement parlours and an array of novelty and souvenir shops behind marks the Recreational Business District.

Canal estates and high-rise coastal strip

Granted, the skyline of the Gold Coast and the canal estates are a unique combination in Australia, they are quite common in some other touristic coastal cities in the world, especially in Florida. Dredging and development of swampy land and densification are common responses to high development pressure in places with limited land and rapid population growth. On the Gold Coast when the narrow strip of land between the beach and the Nerang River was developed but demand continued unabated, few choices remained for continued development. Expansion into the hinterland continues, however this serves only to the permanent residents, not tourists or investors who prefer to be in the thick of things and canal estates and intensification serves them. The Gold Coast has a greater proportion of its population living in high rises than any other Australian city (Wise 2006). McQueen (1982, 116) once called Surfers Paradise “a vertical retirement village”. Pigram (1977, 538) explains how once the coastal strip was built up “a second zone of high-rise development began to emerge further inland overlooking the Nerang River estuary reflecting both the attraction of waterbased site and the growing shortage of beachfront land.” By 2006 Gold Coast had 212 apartment blocks over twelve storeys high compared to fewer than thirty in Brisbane (Spearritt, 2006) and even boasted shortly with the tallest residential tower in the world (Sunland Group, 2006).

Symbolic distinctiveness

Mullins (1984) argues that hedonism, which is the locus of resort tourism, fuelled the growth of the Gold Coast and created a unique built environment that does not resemble other Australian cities. He claims that mass tourism resulted in a spatial organisation that encourages and promotes consumption and the resulting condominiums, canal estates, shops, restaurants, amusement centres and related infrastructure of the Gold Coast provide a sharp contrast to other Australian cities. Tourist cities are also symbolically distinctive with most urban symbols (marinas, shopping plazas, casinos and other attractions) aimed at tourists evoking images of pleasure consumption (Mullins 1991).

Forces Shaping the Gold Coast Landscape

An examination of the development history of the Gold Coast revealed a number of factors affecting the shape and pace of growth. Physical characteristics and attributes have always been influential on the urban form. Economic base of the city also has an effect as Mullins (1991) argues the unique shape tourism urbanisation takes. There are a number of reasons for the similarities observed in these resort towns. Structure-wise, the Gold Coast has been shaped in part by the influence of terrain and in part by historical factors such as the development of the transport infrastructure. The pace (and some of the shape) of growth is a function of pro-growth coalition of development interests and state and local governments resulting unplanned development.

Physical factors

In seaside resorts growth along one axis is precluded or restricted. Typical response to accommodate pressures on space is linear or vertical expansion both of which are clearly seen on the Gold Coast (Pigram 1977). Proximity to the public beach and promenade is the dominant factor in siting of hotels, motels, amusement centres, recreation-oriented retail establishments and better class housing. This creates a functionally and socioeconomically distinct front from the rest of the town.

Tourism urbanisation

In his study of the morphology of two twin settlements at the north and south end of the Gold Coast (Surfers Paradise/Southport and Coolangatta/Tweed Heads) Pigram (1977) found that these settlements exhibited the typical characteristics of beach resorts studied previously in Britain and North America: a linear urban form, a commercial core adjacent to the coast, a transport network that parallels the coast. Mullins (1991) further found the Gold Coast spatially and symbolically distinctive as a tourist city with no CBD but many symbols of touristic consumption. In fact, tourism urbanisation can create striking similarities despite significant differences in political structures and planning regimes as in the cases of the Gold Coast and its sister city Fort Lauderdale, Florida, aerial photos of which are in parts virtually indistinguishable (Mayere et al. 2010).

Transportation infrastructure

Prideaux's (2004) Resort Development Spectrum model identifies transport access as a major factor in resort growth. The brief overview of the development history of the Gold Coast at the beginning of the paper already illustrated that the transportation system was one of the most important factors in both the location and shape of growth of the area. First the railway system, then the highways and private car usage, and finally the development of the airports shaped the fate of the city as a touristic destination.

Opening of the railway lines to Southport and Nerang in 1889 and Coolangatta/Tweed Heads in 1903 (Keane 1958) stimulated resort development. The block facing the beaches was first developed historically in close proximity to the railway station (Pigram 1977). In the early years specially low excursion fares were granted for any distance over twelve miles on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays to seaside resorts such as Coolangatta to increase ridership (Fox 1919). During the early part of the twentieth century Southport became an important seaside resort catering for day and weekend visitors from Brisbane. The Nerang River was a formidable barrier to extension of tourist activity to the other bank and a ferry service across the Broadwater was required to reach the surf and ocean at Main Beach. The construction of Jubilee Bridge provided the first real stimulus for growth on Surfers Paradise and the closing of the railway nailed the coffin Southport's decline as a resort (Pigram 1977). "By 1932 the last two vehicular ferries on the Brisbane to South Coast road were replaced by bridges over the Coomera and Logan rivers, and suddenly this coastline became just a few hours drive from the state capital" (Davidson and Spearritt 2000, 5). From the mid-1930s, automobiles became a popular mode of travel to the Gold Coast and in the following decades the highway to Brisbane was reconstructed to an all-weather standard. During the 1950s the Pacific Highway was subject to frequent traffic jams on weekends as Brisbane daytrippers headed to the Coast (Longhurst 1994: 67).

The closure of the rail line met with little opposition due to most people's obsession with the car (Davidson and Spearitt 2000).

Pigram (1977, 540) declares that in Surfers Paradise "the role of public transport, and especially the siting of railway stations relative to the beachfront, played a significant part in the arrangement and evolution of zones of land-use... In particular, a growing reliance on the automobile has led to the highway orientation of a large segment of recreational business and auto-based accommodation establishments on major access routes to the resorts." The linear form of the settlements parallel to the coastline and associated dune system has been strengthened first by rail access routes also aligned parallel to the beach, then the north - south alignment of major highways through the built-up area. Furthermore, initially the railway, then the major north-south highway presented an effective barrier to expansion inland (Pigram 1977).

Pro-growth coalitions

Among key resort development criteria Prideaux (2004:37) includes the support given by local authorities and local residents for tourism development as well as the level of support given by regional, state and national governments. The Gold Coast is one of the cities which exemplify Molotch's (1976) growth machine theory. Among the reasons for its rapid growth are the pro-development attitude of Queensland government (Morris, 2004) and populist local politics based upon a pro-growth coalition of classes in the city (Mullins, 1979; 1984). Mullins (1991) describes Gold Coast local government as "boosterist" and notes (1979) that distinctive pro-growth coalitions which included development companies, real estate interests and building societies emerged on the Gold Coast during the 1960s under the coordinating power of local governments headed by progrowth mayors such as Bruce Small who were personally linked to development companies and real estate interests. In the late 1970s Gold Coast entrepreneur Keith Williams' fondness for white shoes resulted in the nicknaming of a group of "can do" Queensland property developers as the "white shoes brigade" (Davidson and Spearitt 2000). Guhathakurta and Stimson (2007: 137) view the development of the South East Queensland region in Australia "as archetypical sunbelt growth urban centres that are representative of entrepreneurial urban regimes" whose "growth and development has been largely 'developer led' in response to, and in encouragement of, in-migration and the creation of urban consumption landscapes attracting retirees, tourists, as well as others seeking a 'lifestyle'".

Smith (1991, 204) indicates that "for Surfers Paradise, the focus of political power that drove the development of the resort moved from non-government organizations and alliances to the local government for the resort, which eventually failed, and onto the higher level of state government." In March 1978 when the local government failed to reconcile the conflicting demands in development the state government sacked the Gold Coast City Council and handed control to a state public servant to ensure rapid and coordinated growth of a consumption centre - due to problems arising from development (Mullins 1979). Former Gold Coast mayor Jack Egerton (1986: 66) claims that "the relationship in Queensland between developers and financiers with state and local authorities is closer than in most other cities. Developers freely acknowledge that to prosper in Queensland you must join the club; that is, subscribe to the National Party... Appointments of developers to boards and quangos is akin to placing Dracula in charge of a blood bank. The results of their influence can be seen in building short cuts and town planning defects. Where else could buildings be constructed under a 1973 plan in conflict with the 1983 plan?"

Role of state and local governments and planning

In his study to develop a holistic beach resort development model which shows the process of their process of urbanization Smith (1991, 208) found that it is typical for resorts that have evolved predominantly since World War II to have "a process of evolution that is largely unplanned in that there is no comprehensive master plan for the resort which is generally followed... In essence, the planning process is ad hoc." Many have commented on the lack of planning on the Gold Coast. Fitzgerald (1984: 469) states that "Gold Coast 'was borne to preeminence in an era devoid of design or planning. Consequently it was destined to be ravaged by inexperienced, selfish and vested interest in their reckless rush to seize their choice of its delightful foreshores'". Mullins (1984, 44) notes that "although Gold Coast local governments have played a central role in promoting growth, this has not been undertaken by means of a detailed plan. There have been basic town plans but the Coast, in priding itself as a 'free enterprise city', sees government's role as simply aiding private enterprise. As a consequence, detailed planning is not a part of the process. Even the Queensland government, which has played a major interventionist role in the state over the last 20 years, has played a relatively small role on the Coast." Pigram (1977, 538-539) agrees on the "notable absence of planning" and lists environmental degradation, an unfortunate mix of old and new structures, innovative yet shoddy

architecture, a lack of provision for open space, inadequate roads and parking facilities servicing the high-density populations among the consequences of the unplanned development. Guhathakurta and Stimson (2007: 139) agree and note that the domination of private sector interests over the planning and development process in local councils up until the 1990s was responsible for this outcome and it was not uncommon for “the state under the notorious National Party governments from the 1960s to 1989” to intervene to remove local council control over major tourist and residential developments or for corruption to occur, resulting in the prosecution and jailing of several ex-government ministers and developers during the late 1980s–early 1990s.

A brief planning history of Gold Coast shows how much it was tied to local politics. During the 1950s and 1960s state governments did not restrict coastal subdivision (Fitzgerald 1984). There were a few ineffective attempts in controlling the negative consequences of unplanned development. At the height of canal development and in the wake of 1954 floods the South Coast Council moved to fix safe flood levels, but not before some estates had already been sold. Until the Canals Act of 1958 neither state nor local governments had power over canal estate developers along the Nerang River. The state government continued to encourage the reclamation of coastal wetlands for urban development with the Crown Lands Development Act of 1959 (Fitzgerald 1984). Melbourne entrepreneur Bruce Small entered not only urban development on the Gold Coast but also municipal politics. With his election as lord mayor in 1967 “local government and land development became inseparable on the Gold Coast (Fitzgerald 1984, 462). “In erosion, as in other areas of development, the Small administration was faced with a heavy backlog of improvident development.” The in-coming mayor later acknowledged that “the Gold Coast in 1960 was growing like Topsy, rapidly but with no plan or control of its design” (Fitzgerald 1984: 465). Fitzgerald (1984: 465) suggests that the introduction of a town plan which he describes as “among the first comprehensive attempts of its kind in Queensland” is one of Bruce Small’s lasting achievements. The plan was published in 1969 and covered the period 1970-1990. Among its findings were a failure to provide an acceptable open-space network and careless subdivision of state forests. Fitzgerald (1984) notes that despite overwhelming public disapproval the council could not keep its promises to limit high-rise development due to soaring prices and scarcity of land in its 1973 town plan. Furthermore, he maintains that “there was constant pressure on council to rezone land for commercial and shopping purposes, and intrusion of multi-storey units into low density residential areas” (Fitzgerald 1984: 467).

Smith (1985, 27) notes that it is a “well-documented contention that Queensland politics are principally about ‘bread and butter’ issues of development, involving reconciliation of competing demands for resources”. The Bjelke-Petersen government that ruled from 1968 to 1983 during which major growth occurred on the Gold Coast, was criticised by some for being a “development-at-any-price government” (Stuart 1985, 53). Among the reasons Russell and Faulkner (1999) give for making the Gold Coast the perfect place for entrepreneurial activity are an optimistic pro-development climate supported by the Premier Joh Bjelke-Peterson and Lands Minister Russ Hinze who were particularly accommodating to free enterprise and favourably disposed towards Gold Coast’s development. Fitzgerald (1984) also discusses how politicians usurped the role of town planners in Brisbane and the rest of the state. Russ Hinze, the local government minister of Bjelke-Petersen government was a partner in several Gold Coast property companies. After the 1974 Australia day floods that affected both Brisbane and the Coast initiation for development came directly from minister Hinze under whom the planning advisory committee was no longer convened. The minister was of the opinion that “most people are not interested in town planning” (Fitzgerald 1984: 453).

The close relationship between the government and the entrepreneurs, rapid legislative changes that allowed for private development, even in flood-prone land, ability of developers to become members of government and council resulted in a pro-growth coalition where typical opposition of developers and regulators was diluted in the Gold Coast and the role of the regulators had been compromised. The city’s reputation of unplanned growth is rooted here, as well as the actual unplanned development of the early days.

Conclusions

This paper examined how unique the nature of urbanisation on the Gold Coast is in the Australian landscape and explored the factors that make it unique. In terms of physical structure of development and urban form the city is strictly linear, features a high-rise coastal strip and canal estates behind. Rather than a single tradition centre it is a multiple nuclei city where the nuclei are specialised in the functions that are contained in a single CBD in most cities. While quite unique in Australia, this type of development has other examples elsewhere in the world.

As the factors that shaped the Gold Coast as we now know it, this paper identified geographical as well as historical factors such as the development of the transport infrastructure. The pace and shape of growth is also a function of pro-growth coalition of development interests and state and local governments and resulting unplanned development.

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