

RESEMBLING FLORIDA: TRANSPACIFIC TRANSFER OF IDEAS FROM ONE GOLD COAST TO ANOTHER

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ABSTRACT

Despite different political structures and planning systems, striking physical similarities exist between the tourist destinations of the Gold Coasts of Queensland and Florida. Both have been fast developing sub-tropical coastal areas, subject to massive land booms, speculation, and entrepreneurs' grand visions throughout their history. As a result, both have become tourist destinations of international renown. Drawing on historical sources, the present research seeks to investigate the extent to which these similarities result from taking American cities as a model for newer development in Australia; in this case from transferring planning and marketing ideas from one Gold Coast to another, with the development of the Florida Gold Coast setting precedent for the development of the Queensland Gold Coast.

INTRODUCTION

Gold Coast City, Queensland, is one of Australia's most famous tourist destinations. Its sub-tropical climate and coastal location attract over eleven million visitors each year. Its reputation as a major holiday destination has contributed to its growing economy and its attractiveness for tourism and retirement. Over time, Gold Coast City transformed from a series of small towns and villages in the early part of the 20th century into one of the fastest growing local government areas in Australia, with a current population of 500,000 that is expected to rise to one million by 2030. It is the largest non-capital city in the country, and in some cases larger than several state capitals.

The fast pace development of Gold Coast City and the Gold Coast region began in the 1930s, at a time during which Australian planning practices started to turn away from the traditional British approaches and were looking at "new world" planning ideas inspired by the United States. Despite major differences between Australia and the United States in terms of population size and distribution, the United States was considered as a model because of its technical know-how and planning visions.

During the early phases of Gold Coast City development, the limited amount of readily-available buildable land along beaches led developers to turn towards the reclamation of floodplains and the development of canal estates on these reclaimed land. Similar practices had been employed in some parts of south Florida in the 1920s. The property boom was fuelled by marketing campaigns advertising Gold Coast City as a man-made miracle and selling Australia's first, truly "Florida Keys' style", waterway developments ("Surfers' Paradise", 1957: 5). The parallels drawn with the American Sunshine state clearly show that Gold Coast City shares strong similarities with Florida's Gold Coast cities such as Fort Lauderdale and Hollywood. In fact, aerial photos of these cities are virtually indistinguishable in parts, despite the differences in political structures and planning regimes.

These similarities raise the following question: to which degree are these analogous outcomes coincidental or intentional, resulting from using American cities as a model for newer developments in Australia? To understand the pace and shape of development that occurred in Gold Coast City, one needs to look at the transfer and diffusion of specific ideas regarding the development of coastal resort towns, as well as the factors that contributed to these processes. To this effect, this paper explores the historical links between Gold Coast City in South East Queensland,

Australia, and the Gold Coast of South Florida, U.S., using archival data and historical documents.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Information about the Gold Coast City development history were drawn from a variety of sources: historical accounts of Gold Coast City since the 1920s, local newspapers such as the Courier Mail, the Gold Coast Adviser, the Gold Coast Bulletin, and the South Coast Express, inter-state newspapers such as Melbourne-based The Age and the Sydney-based Morning Herald, as well as international accounts of Gold Coast City. The newspapers were reviewed for articles related to the development of Gold Coast City, for advertisements and promotion campaigns relating to the tourist resort, and for reference to American examples. The paper also used exhibition catalogues of the Gold Coast Art Centre as supporting material.

The use of historical accounts and newspapers as data source enables to develop a chronology of development and provides invaluable information on the potential links between the Floridian and Queensland Gold Coasts. To understand the context of the planning ideas transferred from South Florida to Gold Coast City, one needs to look at the links between planning in Australia and the United States.

THE DIFFUSION OF PLANNING IDEAS FROM THE UNITED STATES TO AUSTRALIA

Urbanization and planning in Australia have been influenced by foreign ideas and models for a long time. As a natural outcome of Australia's colonial history, planning ideas came from Britain in the early days. But by the 1920s, Australian planning practices started to turn away from the traditional British approaches and were amenable to planning ideas inspired by the United States and their comparable "new world" environment. America was considered a model for its technical know-how and planning visions.

Among the early themes imported from the United States were the City Beautiful movement, as well as the ideas of master planned communities and Radburn estate layout. American influence on Australian planning increased in time. In the 1970s, among imported American influences Freestone (2004: 204) included "environmental management, landscape planning, public participation, transference of development rights, and human-scaled place-sensitive planning." This would be followed by "metropolitan area planning through urban redevelopment, systems planning and corporate planning techniques, the new urbanism, land use-transport integration, and growth management" (Freestone 2004: 205). Ward (2002: 384-385) claims that "given so much common ground between Australian and American suburbs, it was inevitable that the new urbanist philosophy would provide the design underpinning for urban consolidation."

This does not mean that Australia borrowed everything "as is" from the United States. Even by 1920s some planners such as Saxil Tuxen warned that "Australia could learn from America's good examples 'without falling prey to . . . its many faults,' such as its laissez faire organization of utilities and the 'ugly face of commercialism'" (Nichols, 1998: 66). Freestone (2004: 190) agrees that "American ideas have been demonstrably assimilated into Australian planning theory, ideology, and practice over an extended period" however "Australian responses were not uncritical, deferential, indiscretionary forms of 'undiluted borrowing'" (209) as Ward (2002) suggests. Thus he concludes by arguing that what really took place was "arguably less the Americanization of Australian planning and more the Australianization of American planning" (2004: 210).

Whether coincidental or intentional, uncritically borrowed or adapted, the similarities are gaining attention from researchers. Freestone and Murphy (1998: 295) note that an emerging theme in Australian urban studies in the 1990s has been the relative convergence and divergence of the urban development paths of Australian cities compared to those overseas, notably North American.

Similarities have been observed with the development of master planned communities and resort towns. Minnery and Bajracharya (1999: 36) note that "the initial visions for master-planned communities (MPCs) in the South East Queensland have been influenced by those in the United States particularly from Florida and California". Minnery and Bajracharya add that many developers and designers made

trips to the United States to gain ideas. In addition, like the growth of MPCs in sunbelt areas of the US, interstate migration to South East Queensland contributed to the planning and development of MPCs. Freestone (2004: 207) points to “the resort town ‘with old-fashioned neighbourhood values’ of Seaside near Coolom on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast, with the architecture a fusion of the American Seaside and traditional Queenslander homes” as “a direct American inspiration”.

The rest of the paper explores the similarities of development patterns between the Queensland and Floridian Gold Coasts by looking at three main themes: the development of residential canal estates in Gold Coast City, the role of political entrepreneurs in the diffusion of planning ideas, and the power of advertisement in promoting Gold Coast City and its region. The following section considers the early phases of the Gold Coast City development, where the limited amount of readily-available buildable land along beaches led developers to turn towards practices successfully employed in some parts of Florida such as the reclamation of floodplains and the development of canal estates built on reclaimed land.

GOLD COAST CITY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF FLORIDA-LIKE WATERFRONT LIVING

Gold Coast City, one of Australia’s most popular tourist destinations, is located in the South East corner of Queensland. It forms a 56 km coastal strip from Southport and Surfers’ Paradise in the north to Coolangatta to the south (Figure 1). Over time, the area has become recognised and marketed as a single destination, but it started out as a collection of distinct areas and nodes with physical boundaries that blurred over time (Russell and Faulkner, 2004: 565). Until the late 1940s it was comprised of three major towns, Coolangatta, Tweed Heads and Southport, and a series of hamlets and holidays shacks. The towns developed as holiday destinations following the construction of the railway from Brisbane to Coolangatta in 1903 (Holthouse, 1982: 36; Mullins, 1984: 34). The railway line proved popular and triggered a massive influx of one-day and weekend visitors from Brisbane, (Spearitt, 2009: 97). It was a trigger that caused a wave of development in the area and provided the impetus for the emergence of mass residential development and tourism during the 1950s and 1960s, which would later be reinforced by the growth of car ownership.

In the late 1940s, Coolangatta, Southport and part of the Moreton Shire in between were amalgamated into the town of South Coast, renamed in 1958 Gold Coast City (Mullins, 1984: 35). The name change was thought to offer better marketing prospects for attracting tourists and potential investors. Despite resemblance of development patterns, one can still observe a certain polarisation in terms of development between the north and the south of Gold Coast City, epitomized by the differences between Surfers’ Paradise, the international resort which development was influenced by creative entrepreneurs, and Coolangatta, whose approach to growth was more dispersed (Russell and Faulkner, 2004).



Figure 1: Map of the Gold Coast (source: www.gold-coast.info)

Surfers' Paradise, formerly called Elston, grew from a hotel, opened in 1925 by James Cavill, one of Gold Coast's most famous developers, to a successful sea resort in just few years (Holthouse, 1982; Spearitt, 2004). Cavill is credited with being the first individual to make a significant impact on the area. His initiative triggered a cycle of change and development that would take place on a greater scale years later (Russell and Faulkner, 2004: 568). During the 1950s, other real estate developers such as Laurie Wall, saw the potential of Surfers Paradise. According to Elliot (1980: 98), many holiday shacks at the time were owned by Western graziers who started to sell their land after a series of cyclones led to a decline in wool prices. Speculation took place as investors from Sydney and Melbourne purchased and sold land in frenzy. According to Elliot (1980: 98), "the new visionaries were planning on similar lines to Miami, Florida, USA".

Ironically, the Gold Coast City area was considered by architects and other professions as intrinsically unsuitable for development as a major scale holiday resort for several reasons: the narrow strip of land (one mile wide and twenty miles long) offering only ribbon type development, and with a swampy hinterland subjected to flooding, and the desirable quality of the coastline beaches, as compared with the Sunshine coast, north of Brisbane, or even the north of New South Wales (Kollar, 1959; Jones, 1986).

As rapid development was taking place along the narrow strip of sand dune immediately behind the beaches, it became clear to Gold Coast developers that further expansion needed to take place in low-lying areas adjacent to the Nerang River, subject to periodic flooding, and on the inland side of the sand strip. These locations presented drawbacks to the promoters of subdivisions. However, a local newspaper argued, "in this business a subdivision's possibilities increase in proportion to its lack of natural endowments" ("Money's been poured into Gold Coast", 1959: 13).

Residential canal estates typical of the Florida and Queensland coasts (Hudson, 1996: 102) are particularly relevant for drawing similarities. In Florida, the development of canal estates was made possible by land reclamation as early as the 1920s, when swamp lands and mangrove areas were converted to expansive residential land. According to Moore (2003: 196), Gold Coast developers created canal estates by utilising land reclamation methods first implemented at Fort Lauderdale in Florida. The techniques consisted of pumping the sand from the water to form finger-like canal estates while raising the land above flood level (Jones, 1986: 32). Local Gold Coast City newspapers were reporting on the use of

suction dredges to convert swamps and sandbars into Florida-style waterways (“Money’s been poured into Gold Coast”, 1959: 13).

Alfred Grant, a Gold Coast developer, is credited, along with the architect Karl Langer, for pioneering the first man-made waterway estates in South-East Queensland. During the 1950s, visits to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and Hawaii convinced Grant that the Gold Coast offered excellent opportunities for canal and country club developments, and that it was possible to convert flood-prone swamps into prime building blocks by pumping water out of sand along the Nerang River. Together they created the Miami Keys and Rio Vista estates in 1957, what Jones calls “the most genuinely planned canal estates in the initial wave of waterway development in the 1950s and 1960s” (Jones, 1984: 32). The subdivisions guaranteed every home builder an absolute water frontage.

However, it appears that Karl Langer was more influenced by Dutch reclaiming techniques than ideas from Florida in drawing the plans for the estates. Describing his work in a 1959 special edition of *Architecture in Australia*, Langer claimed that he used the Dutch idea of taking filling material to convert these low lying grazing lands from the site itself and using a rectangular pattern (Langer, 1959: 66). Langer also adopted the Radburn layout designed by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, and replaced the park areas and green strips located behind the houses by waterways. According to Langer, “the Dutch pattern, together with the Radburn pattern and modern aspects planning have been welded into a canal estate layout that is now typical in this area” (Langer, 1959:67). Contradicting Langer’s argument, J. H. Shaw, a senior lecturer in town planning at the University of New South Wales, commented in the same edition that the Miami Keys and Rio Vista developments, with their grid of waterways and roadways, were indeed styled on the Florida Keys estates in the United States, (1959: 83).

The idea of canal estates was also favoured by other influential figures such as Bruce Small, a Melbourne entrepreneur who later became the mayor of Gold Coast City, and Stanley Korman. Bruce Small proposed 160 km of canals, convinced that the newly created residential developments would increase property values up to 163% a year (Davidson and Spearitt, 2000). Stanley Korman pursued a similar strategy when opening the first international style hotel, the Chevron, in 1955. These projects set new standards for urban development, and promoted the Gold Coast in what Russell and Faulkner call “show business style” (2004: 571), expanding its image of glamour and leisure.

Significant in the transfer, promotion and implementation of planning visions and ideas is the fundamental role played by political entrepreneurs. Similarly to Florida and other Sunbelt states, the urbanisation of Gold Coast City can be seen as the result of the entrepreneurial activities of a small number of innovative and risk taking developers/investors (Mullins, 1984). This parallel is explored in the following section.

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL ENTREPRENEURS IN THE DIFFUSION OF PLANNING IDEAS

According to Mullins (1984: 36), it is entrepreneurship which leads to new capitalist development initiatives and distinguishes the growth of the United States sunbelt and the growth of Gold Coast City. Mullins draws parallels between the rapid development of the Gold Coast and of the Florida coast especially around Miami. Such rapid growth was fuelled by entrepreneurial visions. People like Stanley Korman and Bruce Small had a vision of large-scale, high class real estate developments in Gold Coast City (Jones, 1986: 26). It resulted in a distinctive built environment, made up of canal estates, condominiums, shops, restaurants, amusement parks and related infrastructure (Mullins, 1984: 36). Gold Coast City has been described as a “free enterprise city”, similarly to cities which expanded rapidly over the last few decades, such as Houston (Mullins, 1992: 195), as well as “a millionaire’s playground, a tourist resort modelled on those in Florida”(The Age, 1958: 8).

The explanations put forward to explain the rapid development of Gold Coast City clearly emphasize the role of pro-growth coalitions and entrepreneurs. Mullins (1984) identifies four main factors that played a crucial role in this process: the role of major investors, often from Southern states such as Victoria, the presence of a pro-growth working class, the presence of “sympathetic” governments (local

councils and the Queensland government), and the existence of what he qualifies as a petty bourgeoisie (self employed and small employers) who was involved in all phases of development (Mullins, 1984: 35). This is consistent with the idea that entrepreneurship prospers in an environment where social, economic and political conditions are favourable. In this sense, the relationships between local governments and entrepreneurs are essential to understand. If local planners and other regulators are relatively supportive, and if there is little tension between them and the entrepreneurs, the latter will be relatively free, and the area is likely to experience growth (Russell and Faulkner, 2004: 572).

Mullins (2003: 133) argues that the two main local governments, Gold Coast City Council and Albert Shire Council (representing an area stretching from the Brisbane City Council boundary through the rural hinterland districts to the Queensland New South Wales border) were conducting populist politics and therefore provided the conditions for easy and speedy development in the region. In effect, the area was dominated by a land-oriented regime (Mullin, 2003: 133). In 1957, the Albert Shire Council, which controlled the South Coast, allowed the developers of the "Florida Gardens" estate to build a 100 foot-wide canal, based on "proven US methods" (Spearitt, 2004: 2). In May 1958, State Parliament passed the *Queensland Canals Act*, which allowed these newly created water-frontages to be sold as freehold title, without the Brisbane Harbour Authority being able to claim land abutting the canal. It also allowed for the creation of artificial waterfront blocks on the Florida Keys style (Spearitt, 2009). The lift on building restrictions that followed WWII (Russell and Faulkner, 2004: 570) also contributed to boost development on the Gold Coast.

This land-oriented regime also focussed on promoting tourism interests and attracting tourists. The Gold Coast City Council played an important role in relation to tourism and development e.g. provision of basic infrastructure, speeding building approvals, general aid in construction and land development, promotion of tourism (Mullins, 1992: 195). During the 1960s and 1970s, entrepreneurs in the Gold Coast region co-opted local planners by infiltrating the political structures (state and local) to which they were accountable. State politicians and the councillors were, at the same time, land owners and developers. The boundaries between the roles became blurry and conflicts of interest were not questioned. Similarly, many local governments in South Florida cities were co-opted by private sector coalitions of developers and entrepreneurs favouring unrestrained growth (Turner, 1992).

Gold Coast entrepreneurs and investors were influenced by planning visions and ideas that emerged in similar contexts in the United States. They in turn influenced the development of the Gold Coast by attempting to implement their own visions. According to Spearitt (2009: 92), Gold Coast entrepreneurs owe much to Florida canal estates and theme parks as models and sources of inspiration. The Montreal Gazette's description of the Gold Coast's most famous flagship development captures this phenomenon quite clearly: "in many ways, Surfer's Paradise, its modern hotels and motels, is patterned on the Florida style." (Bantey, 1961:18). Jay Clarke, from the Miami Herald (1996), also remarks on the resemblance: "coincidence? Hardly. Though no one here admits it, it's obvious where the developers of this booming resort region go their ideas... [as] a Gold Coast tourism official observed, imitation is a form of flattery".

The use of American names was a deliberate appeal to the imagination and attraction of capital and customers. Gold Coast was considered a paradise of financial opportunities. An extract from a 1959 edition of the Gold Coast Adviser makes the claim that "there's been no development of an area to match the Coast since the days of the American development of the multi-million dollar Florida USA coastline" ("*£2 Million Estates*", 1959: 3). Later, this emphasis on names and lifestyle would draw criticisms by being too American. In an article published in the September 15, 1965 edition of *The Age*, Pamela Fox reports some of the negative comments attached to the Gold Coast, loathed for being a cheap, imitatively American Coney Island, as opposed to a second Miami (Fox, 1965: 13).

Part of the success of this financial paradise rested upon the use of innovative and powerful marketing strategies. The "biggest coastal land boom" of the 1950s and 1960s (Spearitt, 2004: 2) was fuelled by marketing campaigns orchestrated by powerful and innovative entrepreneurs advertising Gold Coast City as a man-made miracle and selling Australia's first, truly Florida Keys' style, waterway developments. The coastal blocks were the target of aggressive marketing campaigns originally directed towards investors from Queensland and from

Southern states. Interestingly, these campaigns were using marketing techniques borrowed from the United States.

THE POWER OF ADVERTISEMENT IN PROMOTING GOLD COAST CITY

The “successful” decades of Gold Coast City were characterised by grand-scale development and its consolidation, with migration to the coast, capital investment and entrepreneurial visions and government cooperation. In tourism and land development, one of the main factors of change is the presence of entrepreneurs who use creativity, perceptiveness and fortuitous timing to identify and exploit new opportunities (Russell and Faulkner, 2004: 557). The Gold Coast, especially with destinations such as Surfers ‘Paradise, was successful in attracting and retaining entrepreneurial investment, while maintaining itself in a constant state of alertness to development opportunities, despite financial setbacks in the 1960s.

Local newspapers were celebrating the fact that “money’s been poured into Gold Coast” and that people had been known “to get subdivision fever just by lying on the beach” (“Money’s been poured into Gold Coast”, 1959: 13). The narrow strip of land became a property exchange, with at least 88 real estate offices between Coolangatta and Southport. The frenzy of swapping land, up to seven or eight times, is revealing of this land booming “intoxication” (Howard, 1959: 15) and speculative race.

The property boom was fuelled by marketing campaigns making use of the best of American land booming promotion strategies (Longhurst, 2006), advertising Gold Coast as a man-made miracle and selling Australia’s first, truly “Florida Keys’ style”, waterway developments (Figure 2). The names Gold Coast and Surfers’ Paradise, with their connotation of leisure and fun and the images they evoked, were an open invitation to tourists and prospective buyers that was fully exploited by entrepreneurs. As McRobbie pointed out, “Surfers’ Paradise is the story of free enterprise... bold and innovative risk taking, which involved true entrepreneurial flair” (McRobbie, 1988: 19).

The attention brought to the South coast was instrumental in developing the publicity and branding of the coastal landscape. Some real estate firms were buying entire pages in inter-state newspapers such as The Age, and the Sydney Morning Herald, and displayed attractive real estate advertisements to promote/praise the unequalled and golden opportunities that await potential Gold Coast investors. Large full print newspaper ads and coloured notice estates with attractive features were used to attract prospective buyers, promising them glorious positions on the waterfront and more. These marketing strategies were very similar to the ones employed by South Florida developers such as Carl Fischer, who in 1920 bought a giant billboard advertisement in New York Times Square promoting the virtues of Miami’s weather and beaches.



Figure 2: The development of Gold Coast “Florida style” (source: The Courier Mail, 23 December 1957)

Free return trips and transport to the particular subdivisions, as well as complimentary champagne for potential buyers, were powerful examples of these very intensive promotion campaigns. The *Age* reports in its January 8, 1958, edition that “Victoria residents are flying free to Coolangatta to purchase residential sites at Australia’s first Florida Keys style, man-made waterway developments at Surfers’ Paradise and Broadbeach” (“Free Air Travel”, 1958: 4). The article emphasises the novelty of this type of development in Australia, where every house have a road and water front, and is styled along the Florida Keys and Fort Lauderdale.

Advertisement campaigns would use images and models that would appeal to prospective buyers. In the 1920s, with the development of surfing as a recreational pastime, estate developers would use images such as shapely surf girls in bathing suits and estate names such as Surfers Paradise and Pacific Ocean estate. The lands on offer would be described as offering great potential for swimming, surfing, fishing, and so on. Later on, Sunshine states like California and Florida became the new models (Longhursts, 2006: 7). Images of streetscapes lined with palm trees and bungalows were used in advertisement campaigns. Gold Coast estates were given names with direct reference to the American culture: Miami Shores, Palm Beach, Florida Gardens, Miami Keys, Miami Gardens, etc. The use of American names was a way to inflame the imagination of the Australian public. It also reflected the fact that developers such as Korman and Small were, according to Spearitt (2009: 98), “besotted by developments in Florida”.

These strategies of land promotion coincide with the existence of what Mullins calls a land-oriented regime that dominated the Gold Coast politics from 1945 until 1980 (Mullins, 2003: 133). This land oriented regime, dominated by land development interests, was focussing on attracting buyers. It was also focussing on attracting tourists, in cooperation with local tourism interests.

CONCLUSION

For the non-discriminating eye, cities such as Gold Coast and Fort Lauderdale look virtually indistinguishable in parts. Is this resemblance intentional? Based on the early evidence gathered in this paper, similarities of climate and geography made Florida a source of inspiration for Gold Coast developers and entrepreneurs in the early phases of the city’s urban development. These entrepreneurs searched for and found models of development that had been successful in South Florida. The implementation of land reclamation techniques and the creation of canal estates provide a compelling argument for the transfer of ideas from one Gold Coast to another. The role of these entrepreneurs in fuelling land speculation and in infiltrating local and state politics to influence development decisions is another characteristic shared by both places. Furthermore, the use of Florida-inspired place names and marketing strategies clearly demonstrate that the example of Florida was not used only in building the image of Gold Coast City but in selling it as well. This does not mean that Gold Coast City is a copy of a particular place in Florida. Similarly to Freestone (2004), one can argue that these ideas have been assimilated, transformed and adapted to suit local conditions.

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