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Changing Landscapes, Memory and Ideals of Homeownership

INTRODUCTION

Histories of the Gold Coast City depict rapidly changing social, economic and environmental landscapes. These changes are contextual and complex, repetitive and contradictory. The Gold Coast population continues to grow with the majority of people continuing to migrate from within the eastern states of Australia; many of whom may have holidayed on the Gold Coast previously. The difference between the migration cohorts of the 50s through to the 80s and the current cohorts is significant. The early years saw entrepreneurial, professional and business cohort swell; currently it is Baby Boomers moving to the Gold Coast to retire (the 'Sandrush' as Brendan Gleeson (2007) calls it) and the 20-25 cohorts seeking part-time work, mainly in the tourist and hospitality industries. It is these 2 population groupings that constitute the largest sectors of the Gold Coast City population growth pie.

This paper will map a history of Gold Coast landscapes between 1950 and 1980 as they relate to ideals of homeownership; drawing on interviews, archival images and an autobiography as primary research data. My original intent was to begin a genealogy of ideas of homeownership to illustrate how memory is reinvented and reproduced as 'constant' and 'true' to promote 'new' themed residential landscapes that are 'legitimate' and engender feelings of 'belonging'. My thinking was that the Gold Coast development and real estate industries were attempting to produce a 'lifestyle narrative that resonated with 'middle-Australian' values' (Carter, Dyer and Sharma 2007 p.767) and happy memories of holidaying on the Gold Coast. My primary data being real estate discourse, images and interviews. The supposition underpinning my research intent was that some people chose to purchase a home and reside on the Gold Coast partly because of positive holiday memories of the place. This proposition however has, so far, not proved to be that fruitful. Instead, as this early research suggests, memories of holidaying and growing up on the Gold Coast in the 1950s-1980s holds personal significance outside of place meaning, identity and value.

CURRENT GOLD COAST HOUSING SITUATION

Perhaps to begin, a current picture of the Gold Coast housing situation will be useful. The Gold Coast City is situated in the southeast corner of the State of Queensland, Australia. The city is reported (Gold Coast City Council 2005 a) to be Queensland's fastest growing area with an expected population growth rate of 2.4%. The Gold

Coast City Council (2005 a) give the June 2006 population projection as being 496,543 and they indicate that this figure will increase to 683,568 in 2021 (an additional 187,025 people over 15 years) (Gold Coast City Council 2007 p.18). The council predict (Coast City Council 2005 a) that by 2016 the over 65 cohort will be the city's largest single population grouping. The aging of the population coupled with the current and predicted growth rates suggest strong real estate markets. Together these factors highlight the urgent need for understanding the housing landscapes on the Gold Coast and the social, ecological and economical risks that are attached to them.

Brendan Gleeson (2007) writes that 'the new national penchant for surf, sand and rust has been made possible, not to say compulsory, by rising prosperity, technological change (telecommunication) and the discovery that ocean views are vital to happiness.'

Homeownership on the Gold Coast is not high and many that are enmeshed in this governmental web are paying a high price for the privilege. According to the Gold Coast City Council (2005 b p.33) the 'affordable housing' statistics suggest that 35% of all households—renting or paying off a mortgage—are suffering housing stress. This number is higher than the Queensland average and also the National average. Statistics from the 2001 ABS suggest that the Gold Coast City has a higher number of units and town houses than either the Australian and Queensland average (Gold Coast City Council 2003); significantly, most of these dwellings are recorded as rented properties.

The housing context on the Gold Coast is related to the somewhat vulnerable or risky economic foundations of the Gold Coast City. The city is primarily based upon just three industry sectors; all of which are co-reliant. These three economic indicators are: the construction industry, the property sector and the tourism industry. These three industries are the primary employers of the majority of the Gold Coast City workforce. What is perhaps the most significant in terms of this research, is that all three industries primarily employ low paid, part time, casual labour. This suggests that the City comprises 'higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage relative to other parts of Australia ... [and has] lower levels of tertiary qualifications ... [and]

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higher levels of unemployment' than elsewhere in Australia (Gold Coast City Council 2003). This suggests that homeownership on the Gold Coast is a privilege that is available to limited minority of the local population.

The financial gap between Gold Coast residents who can afford to purchase a house and those who can not is expanding; as it is elsewhere in Australia. Many would be homeowners in the young middle income cohorts are not able to afford the accommodation of their choice; whether it be because of lifestyle choice or actual house prices (ABC 2007; Nichols 2006). Stewart (2006 p.17), indicates that in Brisbane in 2004 land and house packages cost on average \$390,000. Based on a 20% deposit of \$78,000 and a 80% loan of \$312,000 the monthly mortgage repayments (over 25 years at 6.5% interest) will be around \$2,107. If the purchasers' repayments are not to exceed 30% of their income, Stewart calculates that the household income will need to be in excess of \$84,280 per annum. This figure precludes a large percentage of the Gold Coast workforce from purchasing a house, given the economic structure of the Gold Coast City.

The economic and social profiles of the Gold Coast City are rendered particularly risky when considered in relation to some of the current climate change forecasts. The areas of the city most vulnerable to sea level rise are where some of the key privately owned residential real estate, construction and tourism landscapes are located. The extensive residential canal developments are potentially under threat and extensive floodplains have been and continue to be developed for residential housing; mostly in the form of gated communities. The Gold Coast first began to experience residential land shortages in the 1970s and developers began to reconstruct the floodplains and hinterland. Development growth on the Gold Coast is restricted by the ocean in the east, the hills in the west, NSW boarder in the south and the cane fields in the north. The consequences of climate change further limits the land suitable for development and for housing in particular. A land shortage coupled with high population growth has significant impacts for the Gold Coast City Council, the city and the state.

BEGINNING A GENEALOGY OF HOMEOWNERSHIP

In one sense the history of homeownership on the Gold Coast is relatively new. There is no specific time or place that this history suddenly begins; Aboriginal communities

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lived here long before Colonial settlement, which began in the 1800s. The narrative that I am interested in here, emerges out of the 1950s building and population booms. A narrative that relates the change from holiday shack to serviced apartment to family home; from a Queenslander to walk up apartments to the Q1; from a series of identifiable walkable villages (where no one locked any doors) to monotonous car reliant suburbia to a linear sprawling urban form dotted with exclusive and gated communities.

Up until the 1950s it seems that the Gold Coast was 'Brisbane's traditional seaside resort' (Mc Robbie 1984 p. 81). There is nothing fancy or flash about the place, it was an affordable place for people of Brisbane to escape to. The beaches offered satisfactory camping grounds for many and the holidaymakers participated in communal games and festivities.

It was in the late 1950s that the holiday experience began to evolve rapidly into a tourist experience. There were a number of hypotheses for this change; perhaps one of the most controversial, in terms of current discourses on gender was proposed by Arthur Richards; a journalist for the Courier Mail. On the 04 Oct 1954 he wrote (quoted in Mc Robbie 1984 p.81):

In the last year or so Surfers Paradise has dedicated itself to the proposition that Australian women don't like bending over a hot stove. It is this proposition, mostly, that has changed the tone and atmosphere of the resort's central Golden Mile. The large, rambling, essentially Queensland holiday home is dying out as a commercial proposition, and the sophisticated apartment and service-flat are coming in. They are the sort of thing you see on a larger scale in Honolulu. ... What is the price of all this? Is the new Surfers paradise being priced out of the reach of the old Queensland customers.

The change from a quintessential Queensland/Brisbane affordable family holiday experience to an internationally inspired, modern expensive, exclusive tourist experience was taking place.

Anne Green (1982 p.3) wrote:

It wasn't until the American inspired Motel craze hit the coast in the late 1950's... peppering our already littered highways with neon-lighted promises of tea-bag accommodation that the Coast's

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wonderful old guest houses went into gradual decline, and with them the last traces of Australian individuality.

The new modern “American” serviced apartment proved so popular that many other holiday accommodation types were left vacant for much of the year. Consequently, these units, houses and apartments were rented or sold as permanent (as opposed to holiday) accommodation (Burchill 2005 p.73). This change of use proved significant in years to come. As land on the coastal strip became scarce and property prices soared, these now humble homes, home mostly to elderly pensioners, became the focus of the economic growth machine; entrepreneurs and developers.

From the 1950s economic growth has been the principle guiding factor in life of the Gold Coast City; ‘Accepting these developments in the best interests of the region’s economic growth was the ruling factor.... . Adverse outcomes, if any, ... were something that could be tackled later’ (Burchill 2005 p.59). Some of these adverse outcomes, if they be that, would prove to be ones that no amount of ‘tackling’ would solve: homelessness, loss of income, flooding, loss of indigenous habitat, flora and fauna and of course climate change.

Regardless of the social, economic and physical changes taking place on the Gold Coast it remains a annual holiday destination for many generations of families; families who visit the same place at the same time every year. And in some cases, family members settle on the Gold Coast, purchase a home and raise their children here.

Robyn (an ex Brisbaneite now in her early 50s) holidayed on the Gold Coast with her parents, each year and in the same location, between that age of 3 and 17. She eventually moved down to live on the Gold Coast with her husband (whom she met on holiday at the Gold Coast) and their children. Robyn’s grandparents too holidayed here with their families. Robyn’s children however, have left and made the move back to Brisbane. Indeed Robyn too has by now moved out, and she explains why in a moment.

Both Mike's parents also holidayed on the Gold Coast as children, with their families. Mike's parents moved down from Brisbane in the early 1970s to live on the Gold Coast, bring up their children and participate in the lucrative development and real estate industries. Mike (now in his mid 40s) has children of his own and they too indicate their preference for owning a home on the Gold Coast when the time arrives.

The preference to purchase a house and live on the Gold Coast for both Robyn and Mike's parents stemmed from childhood memories and holiday experiences. Jennifer Carter, Pam Dyer and Bishnu Sharma (2007) suggest that it is both the physical characteristics of a place as well as human actions that help construct place identity. For Robyn memories were powerful because of the frequency and the consistency of the holiday experience, an experience that she loved. Robyn says 'we always loved Burleigh—we never wanted to go anywhere else on holiday. We were quite happy to just come to Burleigh every year.'

Describing the houses along Hedges Avenue in the 1960s Robyn says that all there was, was 'those little old fibro shacks, no big building, no big houses, just little beach shacks all the way along.' This form of residential accommodation characterised the Gold Coast in the 1950s and 60s: 'fibro holiday shacks and small timber houses, wooden two-storey flats in small blocks, corner pubs, and small family motels' (Burchill 2005 p.61). Houses were often built of a combination of asbestos, wood, glass louvers, galvanised iron; most houses were close to the beach and as I have already said, doors were seldom locked.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s this landscape had undergone a radical transformation. The coastal strip was being developed as a tourist precinct and permanent places of residency were not part of the plot. Mike's home was a Queenslander, one of those permanent places of residency that in the 1970s was under threat of demolition. Talking about the change to his neighbourhood Mike reflected:

and Surfers went through this change and there was like—I don't know—souvenir shops, T-shirt shops um just crappy sort of real estate; sorts of time share shops and it all sort of changed as they were marketing towards the tourists more and the locals sort of didn't feel a part of that.

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Instead, the floodplains of the Nerang River, Coomera River and Currumbin Creek were being reconfigured into canal estates; and the native bushland fringe was being cleared and reinvented to accommodate large scale residential developments, targeted at homeowners. During the 60s and 70s there were no town planning schemes in place to deal effectively with the extent and pace of growth on the gold Coast. Development approval was gained, for the most part by obtaining a 'single and simple' development permit (Burchill p.126) regardless of infrastructure issues such as adequate water supply, sewage disposal or roads.

These new residential developments were not designed to evoke memories of holiday experiences on the Gold Coast. The design of the houses, the choice of building materials, the subdivision layout and the landscaping (or lack thereof) were all governed by the economic growth machine. Carter, Dyer and Sharma (2007 p.764) state that the 'failure to incorporate alternative place-meanings and identities in development and marketing ignores the way places are created and experienced by many people, and risks inappropriate meanings being assigned to place in order to attract the investment dollar.'

The value of built form on the Gold Coast has generally weighed heavily in favour of economic value rather than heritage value. The necessity to stay up-to-date and maintain growth and tourist trends has meant that icon buildings and places have been obliterated. It is most for this reason the Robyn has by now pack up and moved away from her the place that she loved so dearly. And the reasons she gives:

'Oh just so busy, so many people, so much traffic.'

'I just don't like the traffic. I don't like all the high rises and I don't like having to drive through Surfers. I just don't like any of that.'

She also commented on escalating crime on the Gold Coast and she said she would not want to raise children here now.

As others have found (Carter, Dyer and Sharma 2007, Burnley and Murphy 2004) it is not that Robyn is anti change and anti development, it is just the type and form of development that has eventually driven her out of her home. Graham Griffin (2006) writes

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Its tourism industry [on the Gold Coast] is centred on the beach, theme park entertainment, and shopping: not on its history or heritage. Its building industry depends on an ever-growing influx of tourists and settlers. It reinvents and rebuilds itself every 20 years or so. It doesn't need a heritage or a heritage industry – it doesn't have the time for one.

Perhaps if memory, history and heritage were significant factors in urban planning and design on the Gold Coast; perhaps if some effort is made to address the meaning and value of place for local residents then Robyn might well return to the Gold Coast and fulfil her parting wish: 'I don't want to be able to see a change—I would like to be able to feel it: "Ohh isn't this nice" not "jeez another building"'.

Mike, while committed to living in the Gold Coast City has moved out into the hinterland. He too fears for his children's safety and future in the tourist strip. Talking about the most significant changes Mike said:

'Well the skyline for one. The building density and the population of course ... the main thing we all say is the loss of that community identity that we had back then where everyone knew everyone. ... its lost its original sort of surf village identity.

But we maintain that within our own community, within our self, because we still go to barbies but we've all got kids and we've grown up now; so it's a lot different. But we still sort of have maintained that community even though it's not physically at Surfers; it's sort of all over the gold Coast.'

'so... I don't know, it was the sort of up marketing of Surfers that sort of drove us out in the end.'

'I think its lost the initial things that made me enjoy my childhood here and my kids will probably never see the Coast the way I saw it ...'

CONCLUSION

All is not lost however, 'even on the Gold Coast it seems there is no escaping history' (Shanahan p.54). We need to creative, however, about where to find it: heritage is kept alive in memories, memoirs, art, photographs; not only in built forms. Mike keeps a Gold Coast heritage alive in his imagination, he explains:

[I have] a deep sense of history of the area and I sometimes, I'm looking into the past so I go around and look at things but I'm not seeing what's there now, I'm still seeing what used to be there and all that sort of stuff so um... but ... I really don't go to Surfers [where he spent his child and early adulthood] that much anymore.

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