

## THE GOLD COAST: AUSTRALIA'S PLAYGROUND?

Ayşın Dedekorkut-Howes<sup>a</sup>

Email: [a.dedekorkut@griffith.edu.au](mailto:a.dedekorkut@griffith.edu.au)

Phone: +(61-7) 5552 7049

Fax: +(61-7) 5552 8244

Caryl Bosman<sup>a</sup>

Email: [c.bosman@griffith.edu.au](mailto:c.bosman@griffith.edu.au)

<sup>a</sup>Griffith School of Environment & Urban Research Program, G31, 3.02

Gold Coast Campus, Griffith University, 4222, Queensland, Australia

Corresponding Author: Ayşın Dedekorkut-Howes

**Abstract** This city profile provides an in-depth look at Australia's sixth largest city, the Gold Coast. The purpose of the profile is two-fold: to question the accuracy of some widely held beliefs about the Gold Coast which view it solely as a resort town and to attempt to determine whether the nature of urbanization on the Gold Coast is different. In order to illustrate in what ways the Gold Coast is similar to and different from other major cities in Australia, the profile examines its historical evolution, urban development, structure of development and urban form, population growth and demographic structure, and economic indicators. In doing this it compares the Gold Coast with the state and national averages, Australian capital cities, and the city of the Sunshine Coast which is the second major tourist settlement in the state of Queensland. While the city is physically different, demographically and socioeconomically it is no different to other major Australian cities. The Gold Coast is a case in point which shows that for some places tourism urbanization is a stage in the development of a city that it may simply grow out of, evolving into a diverse city in its own right.

**Keywords:** Gold Coast; tourism urbanization; mid-size cities; sunbelt growth

# THE GOLD COAST: AUSTRALIA'S PLAYGROUND?

## Introduction

The subtropical city of the Gold Coast on the eastern coast of Australia in the state of Queensland (see Figure 1) is famous for its sun and surf and is viewed mostly as an overgrown resort town. Its glittering image as a vacation destination, with long stretches of white sandy beaches, skyline of skyscrapers, gold lame bikini clad meter maids<sup>1</sup>, and tanned surfers, dominates the discussions about the city (Figure 2). Wise (2006: 185) sums up the general perception of the Gold Coast accurately when she says:

*'The city continues to be characterized in the national media as a "cultural desert". Its neighbour, the state capital Brisbane, is represented as having "matured" into a "metropolitan centre" with a "vital arts life" and definable "cultural precincts", like Sydney and Melbourne. But in the Australian cultural imaginary the Gold Coast's total identification with leisure, popular cultural excess and dispersion is taken to signify a sort of perpetual adolescence. There is no expectation that it will "grow up" into "a real city" where "culture" occurs.'*

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

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<sup>1</sup> In 1965 the local council installed parking meters in Surfers Paradise. As an initiative to maintain business in response to this, the local progress association introduced 'meter maids' who were charged with inserting coins into meters that were running out of money. These girls, clad in gold lame bikinis became a symbol of the city.

As Griffin (1998: 286) notes ‘the Gold Coast isn’t an easily definable place with a singular identity.’ The city has been variously described as being ‘a sunny place for shady people’ (Jones, 1986: 1), ‘sin city’ (by *Brisbane Sunday Mail*, Griffin, 1998: 285), an example of ‘tourism urbanization’ that is physically, demographically, socially, economically, and politically different to other Australian cities (Mullins, 1991), ‘the most heterogeneous region in Australia’ (McRobbie, 1991: vi), ‘the most postmodern of all Australian cities’ (by Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle et al., 1997: 4), ‘an urban setting that has already achieved many of the conditions towards which post-industrial urban centres are moving’ (Holmes, 2001: 179), and a city experiencing ‘adolescence’ (Burton, 2009: 1). Most of these descriptions are consistent with the notion of the Gold Coast as being simply an overgrown resort town (Mullins, 1984; 1990; 1991; Symes, 1994; Griffin, 1998).

At the same time, with half a million people the Gold Coast is one of the fastest growing cities in Australia, already far larger than some of the state capitals. It is the largest non-metro city, the largest urban area outside the major state capital cities, home to the second most populous Local Government Area in Australia<sup>2</sup> and the nation’s fourth most visited destination for international leisure visitors following Sydney, Melbourne and Tropical North Queensland (Tourism Research Australia, 2008). Economically and socially the city no longer typifies the characteristics of a resort town (or briefly a ‘resort’ as used in the tourism research literature), which refers to a specific holiday locality (Prideaux, 2004). On the contrary, a real city is emerging from behind the glittering façade, a city extending beyond a mere tourism destination, with two universities (three if you include Tweed Heads<sup>3</sup>), an international airport, national sports teams, regional hospitals and many other amenities; a city that is preparing to host the 2018 Commonwealth Games. Views of the Gold Coast challenging the notion that it is an overgrown resort are slowly emerging, as it is now

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<sup>2</sup> This is due to the local government amalgamations in Queensland, the only state in Australia that uses this governance structure.

<sup>3</sup> The contiguous urban area of the Gold Coast region extends beyond the state boundaries to the south and only a street separates the city of Tweed Heads in New South Wales from its twin city, the suburb of Coolangatta which is part of the city of the Gold Coast. If the Gold Coast is defined as a region rather than an administrative jurisdiction, Tweed Heads is viewed as part of the region. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) defines the Gold Coast-Tweed region as one of the Significant Urban Areas in the 2011 Census.

described as a resort center that is currently evolving into a city (Edwards et al., 2007) with a dual identity of a city and a destination (Holmes, 2006). Stimson and Minnery (1998: 196) go further and suggest that the 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.’

With the aim of contributing to the literature on Australia’s settlement system by focusing on large scale urbanization outside of the capital cities, this city profile provides an in-depth look at Australia’s sixth largest city which is often taken too lightly. The purpose of the profile is two-fold: to question the accuracy of some widely held beliefs about the Gold Coast which view it solely as a resort town, and to attempt to determine whether the nature of urbanization on the Gold Coast is different to that of the rest of Australia. In order to illustrate in which ways the Gold Coast is similar to and different from other major cities in the country, the profile examines its historical evolution, urban development, structure of development and urban form, population growth and demographic structure, and economic indicators. In doing this it compares the Gold Coast with the state and national trends, Australian capital cities, and the city of the Sunshine Coast which is the second major tourist settlement in the state of Queensland.

### **Historical evolution**

The first settlements on the Gold Coast region were agricultural settlements. Coolangatta, Tweed Heads and Southport (see Figure 3) were the major towns established in the nineteenth century as service towns for sugar, timber and dairy production (Mullins, 1984). The first railway line from Brisbane to Southport was completed in 1889 to support the farming industry and encouraged the development of a holiday center. With the extension of the railway to West Burleigh in 1901 and to Coolangatta-Tweed Heads in 1903, what was then called the ‘South Coast’ in reference to Brisbane

started developing as a regional tourism destination (Longhurst, 1995). The area was connected to the southern states directly by rail in 1930, but throughout the 1940s and 50s most of its visitors were from South East Queensland (Prideaux, 2004). From the mid-1930s automobiles became the popular mode of travel to the region.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

The introduction of passenger air services in 1947 and direct flights from Sydney to Coolangatta in 1956 made the city easily accessible to the national market (Prideaux, 2004). Following these developments and the lifting of the post-war construction restrictions, large-scale sale of coastal building plots began in 1952 (Hofmeister, 1988). Improvement in interstate motorways and rising car ownership changed the mode of travel and resulted in the closing of the rail lines in 1964 (Longhurst, 1995). In the following decades the attractions and services offered on the Gold Coast developed and diversified, and direct airline connections from Brisbane to Europe and Asia enabled the city to become an international tourism destination by the mid-1980s. The rail link to Brisbane was restored in 1997 (Nightingale, 2006), however, rather than following the coast as its predecessor did, the new link followed an inland line parallel to the Pacific Motorway.

Between 1934 and 1995, administratively the current Gold Coast City Council (GCCC) (rebranded in 2013 as the City of Gold Coast) developed via a series of amalgamations of a string of separate coastal resort towns such as Labrador, Southport, Surfers Paradise, Burleigh Heads and Coolangatta, as well as inland settlements such as Nerang and Mudgeeraba (see Figure 3). In 1958 the South Coast Town Council adopted the informal but more marketable name used in the local and national media: 'the Gold Coast'. The final amalgamation in March 1995 transformed the city of the Gold Coast to a 'super city' (Stimson and Minnery, 1998: 199) making the GCCC the second most populous Local Government Area in Australia after the state capital of Brisbane.

## **Urban development**

With its developmentally driven growth, the Gold Coast is one of the cities which exemplify Molotch's (1976) growth machine theory. Among the reasons for the Gold Coast's rapid growth are the pro-development attitude of the Queensland government (Morris, 2004) and populist local politics based upon a pro-growth coalition of classes in the city (Mullins, 1979; 1984). Mullins (1984) further argues that the Gold Coast's rapid development occurred through the entrepreneurial initiatives undertaken by the local petty bourgeoisie and small local capitalists.

From the time of the 1930s, domestic tourism in Australia was stimulated by the prosperity of a modernizing economy and a growing cultural attachment to the outdoors, and to the beach in particular. The Gold Coast benefited from these trends which bolstered land speculation in the area. Developers tapped into Australia's post-war prosperity, feeding a desire for every Australian to have a holiday house by the beach. This trend towards second homeownership stimulated the development of construction industries and property services and secured the Gold Coast's property boom. By the end of the 1959 financial year, the value of Gold Coast building approvals was an Australian record (*The South Coast Bulletin*, 1959) and the city has held this position almost consistently throughout the latter part of the twentieth century.

The image of the Gold Coast began to change dramatically after 1950. Up until then it had been 'Brisbane's traditional seaside resort' (McRobbie, 1984: 81). There was nothing fancy or flash about the place, it was an affordable place for the people of Brisbane to escape to (Davidson and Spearritt, 2000). The beaches offered adequate camping grounds and many of the holidaymakers participated in communal games and festivities (Condon, 2003). However, by the early 1950s Surfers Paradise was criticized as being 'tawdry, vulgar, [a] clip joint, millionaire's mile, garish,

brassy, Americanised' (McRobbie, 1982: 81). This image of the Gold Coast was fuelled in part by the extended opening hours of shops, which were restricted elsewhere in the state. In addition, cinemas on the Gold Coast were open on Sunday nights, a practice that was not permitted in other major cities in Australia (McRobbie, 1982). Bikini clad meter maids, surfing legends and 'pyjama parties' held at a local hotel helped to consolidate the Gold Coast's saucy reputation (Davidson and Spearritt, 2000; McRobbie, 1984). According to the editor of a Special Edition of *Architecture in Australia* (Editorial, 1959: 47) these practices contributed to 'a chaos of the worst type of commercialisation ... [and] ... a wild jungle of indecorum.'

In addition to the image of the Gold Coast being cast as immoral, the changes to the physical form of the city were rapid and significant. Many of the timber, iron, and fibro holiday or second homes built along the coast were being demolished and replaced with motels, which soon thereafter were demolished and replaced by the emerging high rise architectural typology (see Figure 4). Ann Green (1982: no page number), a local Gold Coast resident at the time, writes of this phenomenon: '[When] the American inspired Motel craze hit the coast in the late 1950s ... peppering our already littered highways with neon-lighted promises of tea-bag accommodation<sup>4</sup> the Coast's wonderful old guest houses went into gradual decline, and with them the last traces of Australian individuality.' The motel phase was soon overtaken by the growing popularity of apartment accommodation. The new modern 'American' serviced apartments proved so popular that many other holiday accommodation types, including the rapidly dated motel style of accommodation, were left vacant for much of the year (Burchill, 2005; McRobbie, 1984). 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 holiday units, homes mostly to elderly pensioners, became the focus of the economic growth machine; fodder for entrepreneurs and developers.

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<sup>4</sup> *Tea-bag accommodation* refers, disparagingly, to the convenience and standardization of motel rooms.

## INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

During the 1960s and 70s there were no effective town planning schemes in place to deal sufficiently with the extent and pace of growth in the area. Development approval was gained, for the most part, by obtaining a 'single and simple' development permit (Burchill, 2005: 126) regardless of infrastructure issues such as adequate water supply, sewage disposal or roads. Consequently, new residential estates flourished in the Nerang area; together with a boom in the commercial, service and light industries. During the 1970s and 80s the then Gold Coast City experienced unprecedented growth. A group of developers with shady reputations who were at the forefront of this development became known as the 'white shoe brigade' (Forbes and Sparritt, 2003; Jones, 1986). Because of the size of the local government area, which was then mostly limited to the coastal strip, land was at a premium and it was necessary for residential development to take place outside of the city's jurisdiction. Nerang and environs, and in particular the Nerang River floodplains, were perfectly located to accommodate the ever expanding development push from the Gold Coast City. The 1974 floods put a temporary stop to development along the Nerang River floodplains. Geoff Burchill (2005: 218) describes this period of growth and the effects it had on the township of Nerang:

*'Fried egg<sup>5</sup> shopping centres were built on both sides of the river. In less than 10 years, Nerang changed from being a genuine country small town with a saddler, a feed store and a pet vet that served hinterland farmers and rural residents.'*

By the 1980s the opening of the international airport, high rise hotels and residential towers, and the development of canal estates stretching the length of the coast consolidated the Gold Coast as a landscape of consumption (Stimson and Minnery, 1998). The opening up of the Gold Coast to

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<sup>5</sup> *Fried egg development* refers to the model that has an activity in the center being the yolk and the surrounding areas/activities forming the white of the egg. In the shopping context, the retail areas are the yolk and the car parking forms the white of the egg.



foreign visitors also stimulated the rise of unparalleled international investment in the city's property sector. By the 1990s the city had established itself as 'simultaneously brash, trendy, sophisticated, relaxed, overdeveloped and overurbanised' (Stimson et al., 1996: 196).

These characterizations have produced an image of the city that is epitomized by spectacle, hedonistic consumption, and competing moralities. As already stated, this image is not new, it began in the early 1950s. Davidson and Spearritt (2000: 146) write that the Gold Coast continues 'to offer sun, sand and sex, as it has always done ... [but] [t]he marketing ploy of ... the 1960s [has] been replaced with an aggressively commercial air, where shops and restaurants and accommodation providers [vie] with each other for market share.'

### **Structure of development and urban form**

Tourism urbanization, defined by Mullins (1991: 331) as 'an urbanization based on the sale and consumption of pleasure', is marked by seven distinct features: being spatially different and symbolically distinctive and distinguished by rapid population and labor force growth, a flexible system of production, a form of boosterist state intervention, a mass and customized consumption of pleasure, and a socially distinct resident population. 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 the Gold Coast is unique with its condominiums, canal estates, shops, restaurants, amusement centers and related infrastructure. He posits that mass tourism resulted in a spatial organization that encourages and promotes consumption. A recent study found that over 90 percent of Gold Coast visitors and residents surveyed considered the Gold Coast to be distinctly different from other tourist cities (Potts et al., 2013). But how different is the Gold Coast in reality? The rest of the profile will explore this question.

The Gold Coast covers an area of 1,333.8 km<sup>2</sup> less than 25% of which is urban (Figure 5). Goad (1997) describes urbanization on the Gold Coast as a series of linear strips or bands that run parallel to the coast: the beach strip, the high-rise tower/residential coastal strip, the highway strip, the canal estates, the suburbs, and the semi-rural hinterland (see Figures 5 and 6). One of the reasons the Gold Coast is not perceived as a real city is its lack of a central business district (CBD): ‘there is no radial hub, only parallel zones that are separated by their function - the coastal tourist strip, a belt for the suburban service class, and the “alternative” lifestyles and tourism of the hinterland behind this’ (Holmes, 2006: 112). In contrast to cities with a typical single dominant business center, it is a multi-precinct city with a distinctive urban form. It is strongly linear with a close alignment to its 57 kilometer coastline, the paralleling North-South oriented Pacific Motorway, and the hinterland mountain ranges (GCCC, 2005). On the Gold Coast, the uses typically found in city centers, such as government, law and cultural institutions are dispersed outside the dominant skyline of Surfers Paradise and Broadbeach. Parts of the Gold Coast may look similar to other cities at first sight, but those who are not familiar might be surprised with this unexpected image from a place viewed as a resort town of only half a million people (Figure 6). Physically it has an area that has the ‘look’ of a CBD with a concentration of high rises. However, in contrast to many places with a similar look, this mini-Manhattan houses not offices but residences and holiday rentals. Spearritt (2006: 61) reports that in 2006 the Gold Coast had 212 apartment blocks over twelve storeys high whereas Brisbane had ‘fewer than thirty’. The Gold Coast has the distinction of hosting the tallest building in the Southern Hemisphere: the 322.5 m (1,058 ft) Q1 tower (see Figure 7). When it was completed in 2005, Q1 was the tallest residential tower in the world (Sunland Group, 2006) until the completion of the Torch in Dubai in 2011 (Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, 2011).

INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

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The unique development on the Gold Coast resulted in other ‘firsts’ and ‘mosts’, and design and tenure innovations such as development of the first canal estates in Australia (Figure 8) approved in 1957 (McRobbie, 1991), which contribute to the distinctive physical structure of the city as much as the high rises do. Visitors and residents surveyed by Potts et al. (2013) identified the urban form of the city with the high-rise development along the coastline and suburban sprawl behind as being distinctly unique to the Gold Coast. Australia’s first gated community and master-planned resort, Sanctuary Cove, was established in 1986 on the Gold Coast (Coiacetto, 2009). The city was one of the pioneers of individually saleable strata titled<sup>6</sup> apartments and home to the first timeshare developments in Australia. Australia’s first homegrown major theme park, Dreamworld, opened in 1981 on the Gold Coast as ‘Australia’s answer to Disneyworld’ (*Amusement Park Journal*, 1985: 17). The Gold Coast is the theme park capital of Australia, as it has a greater concentration of theme parks, resorts, and tourist-oriented shopping centers than anywhere else in Australia, with 17 theme parks and 32 shopping malls (Holmes, 2006). It outstrips other urban areas in Australia in terms of numbers of retail square meters and car parking spaces (Holmes, 2001). The Gold Coast also hosted Australia’s first mechanized water-skiing park, Cable-Ski Water Park (Holmes, 2001) and is home to Australia’s first private university, Bond University, founded in 1987 and Australia’s first and largest purpose-built factory outlet shopping center, Harbour Town, opened in 1999. According to Holmes (2001: 182) even though the Gold Coast replicates most of the features of large-city urbanization, it is more distinguishable as a ‘pleisure’ (pleasure + leisure) landscape because here ‘the salient features of this postmodern “kitchenscape” are assembled in a display more concentrated than anywhere else in Australia.’

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<sup>6</sup> *Strata title* is a form of ownership devised for multi-level apartment blocks and horizontal subdivisions with shared areas. The ‘strata’ part of the term refers to apartments being on different levels, or strata. The term is the equivalent of *condominium* used in the United States.

INSERT FIGURE 8 ABOUT HERE

### **Population Growth and Demographic Structure**

In terms of population growth and demographic structure, Mullins (1990, 1991) found that in the early 1990s the Gold Coast had most of the characteristics of tourism urbanization, including high population growth rate, fewer children, more elderly residents, higher residential densities, more transient residents, low job skills, lower incomes, and high unemployment rate. This section of the profile examines whether after more than two decades this is still the case.

The Gold Coast has grown from a few settlements, which in 1933 had 6,600 (Hofmeister, 1988) and in 1961 33,716 people (including Tweed), to become Australia's sixth largest major urban center with a 2011 population of 557,822 (ABS, 2013b). The Local Government Area had a population of 494,501 in 2011 (ABS, 2013b). For more than five decades, the Gold Coast has been one of the fastest growing regions in Australia (see Table 1), doubling its population between 1954 and 1966, and again between 1966 and 1976, passing 100,000 (Mullins, 1979). The city registered the largest population growth among all Local Government Areas in Australia with 74,200 people and an average annual growth rate of 4.8% in the period between 1991 and 1996, during which Queensland was the fastest growing state or territory (ABS, 1997). Since then, it has consistently registered the second highest growth after Brisbane. The average annual growth rate was 3.6% between 1996 and 2006 (ABS, 2007). Despite the moderation of its growth rates in recent years, between 2001 and 2011 Gold Coast-Tweed still topped the list in population growth in major cities in Australia with 2.8% annual growth rate (see Table 2).

**Table 1: Population Change in Major Australian Cities, 1961-2007 (%) (ABS, 2008)**

Ranked Urban Areas	1961-1971	1971-1981	1981-1991	1991-2001	2001-2007	1961-2007	Percent of national population (2007)
1. Sydney	28.6	14.1	14.6	12.4	5.0	98.5	20.5
2. Melbourne	30.9	8.8	15.9	10.0	9.6	99.0	18.0
3. Brisbane	39.6	18.5	32.0	20.0	14.0	198.8	8.8
4. Perth	67.4	27.8	32.2	17.2	11.6	269.9	7.3
5. Adelaide	43.3	10.6	13.4	4.9	4.5	96.9	5.5
<b>6. Gold Coast-Tweed</b>	<b>120.2</b>	<b>138.8</b>	<b>57.6</b>	<b>69.9</b>	<b>22.9</b>	<b>1631.2</b>	<b>2.8</b>
7. Newcastle	68.5	10.7	14.3	10.7	6.3	151.0	2.5
8. Canberra-Queanbeyan	164.8	50.9	33.9	12.3	7.7	547.0	1.8
9. Wollongong	51.1	11.8	10.1	10.1	3.9	112.6	1.3
10. Sunshine Coast <sup>a</sup>	27.3	164.3	61.6	55.81	23.6	947.1	1.1

<sup>a</sup> Estimate only

**Table 2: Comparison of Gold Coast Demographic Structure with other Australian Cities, Queensland and Australia (ABS, 2013b<sup>c</sup> unless noted otherwise)**

Area	Annual population growth rate 2001-11 (%) <sup>d</sup>	Aged under 15 (%)	Aged over 55 (%)	Aged over 65 (%)	Median age	Population density (persons/km <sup>2</sup> ) <sup>d</sup>	Born overseas (%)	Internal migration (persons who lived at a different suburb 5 years ago) (%) <sup>e</sup>	Persons with post school qualifications of population aged 15 and over (%) <sup>f</sup>
Australia	1.6	19.3	25.6	14.0	37	-	30.2	34.5	45.1
Queensland	2.4	20.2	24.8	13.2	36	-	26.3	41.1	43.3
Brisbane GCCSA	2.3	20.1	22.6	11.8	35	918	23.1	42.0	44.8
<b>Gold Coast-Tweed SUA</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>18.4</b>	<b>27.5</b>	<b>15.7</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>553</b>	<b>33.2</b>	<b>44.7</b>	<b>45.5</b>
Sunshine Coast SUA	2.6	18.8	31.6	18.3	42	848	25.0	42.0	45.5
Sydney GCCSA	1.1	19.2	23.7	12.9	36	2037	40.1	33.1	48.1
Melbourne GCCSA	1.7	18.5	23.8	13.1	36	1566	31.0	34.3	47.0
Perth GCCSA	2.4	19.2	23.7	12.5	36	1213	40.4	39.5	46.6
Adelaide GCCSA	0.9	17.7	27.5	15.5	39	1374	29.8	33.0	44.2
Canberra- Queanbeyan SUA	1.5	18.7	21.4	10.6	34	1081	28.2	41.7	51.9
Greater Hobart GCCSA	0.9	18.8	28.2	15.4	39	1027	17.9	32.9	44.6

<sup>c</sup> Urban area statistics are for Greater Capital City Statistical Area (GCCSA) or Significant Urban Area (SUA)

<sup>d</sup> DIT MCU, 2010.

<sup>e</sup> DIT MCU, 2012. These figures are based on 'urban centre' for capital cities and 'statistical sub-division' for regional cities.

<sup>f</sup> ABS, 2013a.

Australian urbanization is different to that of other Western societies in the concentration of its population in capital cities. Historically, this has always been less prevalent in Queensland, whose population has been much more decentralized (Hofmeister, 1988; Mullins, 1988). The recent growth of the Gold Coast has been challenging the primacy of the state capital Brisbane even more,

compared to what other Australian capital cities are experiencing. In fact, the Gold Coast is more populous than some other state and territory capitals and within the last decade has displaced Newcastle as the sixth largest city in Australia.

Throughout 1991 to 2012 the most prominent growth in Australia outside the capital cities was along the coast. Table 1 shows that of the ten largest urban areas in the country, the coastal cities of the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast are the fastest growing. However, this growth might not solely be due to tourism urbanization as Mullins (1991) suggests, but to sunbelt growth, ‘a regional development phenomenon resulting from basic shifts in comparative economic advantage’ (Abbott, 1987: 8), as argued by others (Stimson, 1995; Guhathakurta and Stimson, 2007). The term ‘sunbelt’ originated in the United States in reference to ‘those South and Southwestern states that, because of geographic position, enjoy a natural advantage over places in the North’ as opposed to the ‘frostbelt’ and ‘implies that climate is mild, the air clean, and sunshine copious’ (Raitz, 1988: 14). The migration from the frostbelt to the sunbelt observed in the United States after the Second World War has been observed in Australia, starting in the early 1970s (Mullins, 1979; Stimson, 1995). Figure 9 shows the changes in the rank order of cities and towns in Australia’s national urban hierarchy between 1961 and 2011. The figure clearly illustrates the comparatively faster growth of coastal sunbelt cities (indicated with solid lines). All of these cities, with the exception of Townsville which does not have a tourist-based economy, have been rapidly rising in the rankings, with the Gold Coast-Tweed urban area showing the most remarkable rise from the eighteenth place in 1961 to sixth place in 2011. With the exception of Darwin, all of these cities are located in the fast growing state of Queensland (see Figure 1). The Gold Coast’s growth is consistent with the state and nationwide trends. Examining the proportion of the Australian population living in major cities, the 2012 *State of Australian Cities* report (DIT MCU, 2012) concludes that the rapid growth of the Gold Coast, the Sunshine Coast, and to a degree, Cairns and Townsville, reflects Australia’s version of the sunbelt migration that swept much of the developed world in the 1960s and 70s. A

supporting explanation is the seachange phenomenon (Stimson et al., 1996) which describes a form of migration in Australia that involves people abandoning city living in favor of a perceived easier life in rural coastal communities.

INSERT FIGURE 9 ABOUT HERE

The Gold Coast's significance in the Australian landscape does not only stem from its role as a large and rapidly growing regional urban area, but also from being part of the wider conurbation of South East Queensland (Stimson and Minnery, 1998), which for a long time has been one of the fastest growing regions in Australia. Peter Spearritt (2009: 87) calls this conurbation which extends from Noosa to Tweed 'the 200 km city'. He argues that (88) the economies of the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast 'are no longer simply dependent on holidaymakers and retirees, but have merged into the wider metropolitan economy that now dominates this coastline.' At the center of the conurbation, Brisbane played a crucial role during the early days of the Gold Coast's development by providing tourists and day trippers, but the dependence has greatly lessened since then. In 2011 77.9% of all Gold Coast residents were working within the Gold Coast-Tweed area, only 8.2% commuted to Brisbane and 9.6% worked outside South East Queensland (profile.id, 2013). In recent years (2010-2013) only 22-23.5% of the overnight visitors to the Gold Coast were from Brisbane (Tourism Queensland, 2010; 2011; Tourism and Events Queensland, 2012; 2013).

The Gold Coast clearly shows the rapid population growth typically seen in tourism urbanization as defined by Mullins (1991). In order to determine whether other characteristics of this type of urbanization still exist on the Gold Coast, Table 2 gives an overview of the demographic structure of the Gold Coast in comparison to the nation, its state, and other major urban areas in Australia (the capital cities and the Sunshine Coast). The Sunshine Coast has been included to provide for a control by being a noncapital high-growth city in the same state. Furthermore, it is the major

competitor of the Gold Coast in terms of tourism, and the Gold Coast is usually categorized with the Sunshine Coast as a resort town. The comparison will shed light on whether the Gold Coast is more similar to the capital cities or to the resort town and how it fares compared to state and national trends.

The Gold Coast is below the national and state averages in the percentage of population aged under 15 years, as expected. This proportion is only higher than that of Adelaide but is almost the same as Melbourne. However, between 1996 and 2011, among Australia's major cities the only places in which the proportion of children and youth did not decline were the Gold Coast and Cairns for population aged 0-14, and the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast for population aged 15-24 (DIT MCU, 2012). The commonly held belief that the Gold Coast is a city with an older population is not really accurate either. In 1981 26% of the Gold Coast's population was aged 55 years or more (Mullins, 1984). This figure has not changed much since (26% in 2006 and 27.5% in 2011), and is currently less than two percent higher than the national average, but is the same as Adelaide and lower than Hobart and the Sunshine Coast. In fact Hofmeister (1988: 151) reports that only 14% of residents were 65 years or older in 1988 which was only 4% more than in Brisbane, and concludes that '[i]t was not, as assumed, a great influx of interstate retired people that made for the rapid growth of the Gold Coast.' The 4% difference with Brisbane has remained the same since then. Stimson and Minnery (1998: 212) question 'the validity of the popularly held view that "sunbelt" migration to the Gold Coast is dominated by retirees' and report that Gold Coast migration flows for the period from 1986 to 1991 are characterized by an increasingly more balanced age distribution as well as a relative increase in the proportion of migrants with a degree level qualification and high incomes. The 2011 *State of Australian Cities* report (DIT MCU, 2011) confirms that the age profile of the Gold Coast-Tweed area largely mirrors the Australian average, despite a popular misconception that the area is predominantly a place to which people retire. Currently, the population aged 65 or over is less than two percent above the national average. The



median age (38) is lower than that of Hobart, Adelaide and the Sunshine Coast, and is only one year older than the national average. Between 1996 and 2011 the Gold Coast was the only major Australian city where the proportion of the population aged 65 and over has declined (DIT MCU, 2012). Clearly, the Gold Coast is getting younger, with younger people who are looking for opportunities moving in.

Contrary to expectations, overall population density on the Gold Coast is lower than all the other cities it is compared to. While parts of the Gold Coast, such as Surfers Paradise and Broadbeach-Mermaid Beach Statistical Local Areas, have much higher densities (3,728 and 3,910 persons per square km respectively) and new transit-oriented developments (TOD) such as Varsity Lakes are reaching 2,475 persons per square km (Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics, 2013), outside the coastal strip and the TOD areas the city reflects the historically dispersed, low-density pattern of urban development characteristic of the South East Queensland region (see Figures 5 and 6).

The Gold Coast also has an increasing multicultural profile and is becoming a major destination for international immigrants. The percentage of residents born overseas increased from 27.6% in 2006 (Dedekorkut-Howes and Bosman, 2011) to 33.2% in 2011, which is much higher than the national and state averages, surpassed only by Sydney and Perth. Another commonly held belief about the Gold Coast is that its residents have a lower than average level of education, but in fact the percentage of persons with post school qualifications on the Gold Coast (45.5%) is higher than the national and state levels and some of the other cities compared (Brisbane, Adelaide, Hobart). The data on the persons who lived in a different suburb five years ago seem to confirm the transient nature of the population on the Gold Coast, with the city claiming the highest percentage nationally. It is interesting to note however that the Sunshine Coast and Brisbane follow the Gold Coast closely in this indicator, and the comparatively higher percentages in Queensland and Perth suggest an

alternative explanation for this trend: these areas are among the fastest growing in the country and are receiving constant streams of internal migration due to the job opportunities they offer. Between 2010 and 2011 the Gold Coast-Tweed region was the third highest net gainer of domestic migrants after Perth and Newcastle, and was followed by the Sunshine Coast (DIT MCU, 2013).

## Economy

The Gold Coast is a classic sunbelt city, with its economy almost from the beginning being based on tourism and residential development. By the 1910 census almost 80% of employment in Southport was related to tourism and building industries (Vader and Lang, 1980) and not much has changed since, with construction, retailing, and service industries still underpinning the city's economy today (see Table 3). Construction is the most productive industry in the city, generating \$2,297 million (10.7% of the region's Gross Regional Product) and also has the largest output, generating \$8,393 million in 2012/13 (economy.id, 2014). The dominance of construction industries is a common feature in the seachange cities such as the Gold Coast, the Sunshine Coast and Cairns (DIT MCU, 2010). In the same time period, retail trade was the largest employer, generating 33,283 local jobs.

**Table 3: Industry Sector Contribution to the Gold Coast City 2012/13 (economy.id, 2014)**

Industry Rank (by percent of GRP)	Sector	Value Added (\$M)	Percent of Gross Regional Product	Percent of Total Output	Percent of Total Employment
1	Construction	2,297.7	10.7	17.8	11.2
2	Health Care and Social Assistance	2,189.0	10.2	6.7	12.9
3	Retail Trade	2,029.7	9.5	7.5	14.3
4	Manufacturing	1,948.5	9.1	14.5	7.5
5	Wholesale Trade	1,579.8	7.4	7.0	3.5
6	Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services	1,440.1	6.7	5.6	2.6
7	Financial and Insurance Services	1,367.4	6.4	4.2	2.2
8	Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	1,283.6	6.0	5.7	5.7
9	Education and Training	1,273.0	5.9	3.6	7.3

10	Accommodation and Food Services	1,176.4	5.5	5.5	9.5
11	Transport, Postal and Warehousing	923.4	4.3	4.4	3.4
12	Administrative and Support Services	918.1	4.3	4.2	5.1
13	Public Administration and Safety	855.8	4.0	3.4	3.8
14	Information Media and Telecommunications	629.3	2.9	2.7	1.4
15	Arts and Recreation Services	428.9	2.0	2.4	3.9
16	Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services	294.0	1.4	1.4	0.8
17	Mining	174.6	0.8	0.7	0.5
18	Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	115.9	0.5	0.6	0.3
	Other Services	540.9	2.5	2.3	4.3
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>21,465.9</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

The Gold Coast attracted more than 11 million visitors from July 2012 to June 2013. Of this 62.5% were domestic day visitors. During this period the number of day trip visitors to the Gold Coast increased by 5% and overnight visitors increased by 8% compared to the previous year. Of the total 4,442,000 overnight visitors, 18% were international, 43% were interstate and 39% were intrastate (Tourism and Events Queensland, 2013). The Gold Coast Airport at Coolangatta is Australia's fastest growing and fourth busiest international airport (Gold Coast Airport, 2010).

Urban areas with an economy based on tourism share some characteristics such as a high proportion of low paid service jobs, resulting low incomes, high unemployment rate, etc. (Mullins 1990, 1991). Table 3 illustrates the predominance of service jobs in the city's economy. Median household income and average taxable income are still below national and state averages (see Table 4). Data on unemployment levels on the Gold Coast show that employment in the city is more unstable than in other areas. In 2009 the unemployment rate was below the national average, as well as that of the metropolitan center of Sydney and Melbourne, and was much improved from the period from 1976 to 1986 when it was 16%, almost double the rates of Brisbane and Sydney (Mullins, 1990). However, by 2011 the unemployment rate was up to 7.5%, the highest among all areas compared, confirming one of the commonly held beliefs about the city. Mullins (2000) explains these fluctuations with the city's unstable economy based on the seasonal industry of tourism and the

wildly fluctuating industry of construction. The drop in the number of dwelling unit approvals from 7,130 in 2007 to 2,776 in 2011 can partially explain the rising unemployment rate (ABS, 2013c). Along with its fast growth rate, the number of building approvals on the Gold Coast in proportion to its population is among the highest in the nation. The number of tourist accommodations in proportion to population is much higher than most of the other cities, but is similar to its tourist oriented state and much lower than the resort town of the Sunshine Coast.

**Table 4: Comparison of Gold Coast Economic Indicators with other Australian Cities, Queensland and Australia (ABS, 2013b<sup>g</sup> unless noted otherwise)**

Area	Unemployment rate 2009 (%) <sup>h</sup>	Unemployment rate 2011 (%)	Service jobs (clerical, trade, service, sales) (%) (2006)	Median weekly household income	Average taxable income \$ (2008) <sup>h</sup>	Building approvals (total dwelling units) per 1000 (2009) <sup>h</sup>	Hotel motel serviced apartments (5 or more rooms) per 10,000 (2009) <sup>h</sup>
Australia	5.0	5.6	48.0	\$1,234	53,603	6.06	2.79
Queensland	4.4	6.1	49.4	\$1,235	50,591	6.54	3.48
Brisbane	5.9	5.9	48.7	\$1,388	52,909	6.31	1.12
<b>Gold Coast</b>	<b>4.9</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>53.6</b>	<b>\$1,125</b>	<b>48,485</b>	<b>8.53</b>	<b>3.53</b>
Sunshine Coast	5.3	7.1	52.8	\$1,011	46,236	8.43	5.63
Sydney	5.6	5.7	46.2	\$1,447	60,617	3.11	0.97
Melbourne	5.0	5.5	47.3	\$1,333	54,813	7.98	0.98
Perth	3.7	4.8	50.1	\$1,459	59,095	8.38	0.73
Adelaide	5.9	5.8	50.0	\$1,106	49,674	6.98	1.09
Canberra	2.9	3.5	46.0	\$1,891	59,575	8.17	1.71
Greater Hobart	4.2	5.7	51.3	\$1,065	47,926	6.78	3.49

<sup>g</sup> Urban area statistics are for Greater Capital City Statistical Area or Significant Urban Area.

<sup>h</sup> ABS, 2010.

The Gold Coast economy's heavy reliance on the tourism and construction industries has left the city vulnerable to the boom and bust cycles inherent in these sectors. The effects of the national and global economic shocks have been observed in the city over the past few years, with rising unemployment levels and decreasing building approvals (City of Gold Coast, 2013). Recognizing the vulnerability of the city's narrow economic base dependent on the success of tourism and construction industries, the Gold Coast's *Economic Development Strategy 2013-23* aims to

diversify the economic base of the city into other sectors, such as education and health (City of Gold Coast, 2013).

The changing economy of the Gold Coast can be observed through some recent trends. Since the year 2000, the contribution from the Manufacturing and Accommodation and Food Services sectors to Gross Regional Product have been decreasing, while the contribution from Health Care and Social Services, Retail Trade, and Wholesale Trade is increasing (economy.id, 2014). In terms of industry rank, Accommodation and Food Services has dropped from the fourth place to the tenth by percent of GRP, and the third place to the eighth by percent of total output between 2000 and 2013. Initiatives such as the *Gold Coast Health and Knowledge Precinct*, described as a fully integrated health, medical, technology, research, and innovation center for learning, innovation, knowledge creation, and commercialization; *Robina Health Precinct*, and *Varsity Lakes Business and Innovation Precinct* (Business Gold Coast, 2013) support the rising sectors. *The Southport Priority Development Area* aims to position Southport as the Central Business District of the Gold Coast.

## **Conclusions**

This city profile showed that the city of the Gold Coast, although unique in the Australian landscape in many ways, is a typical city for its size in others and is more than an overgrown tourism destination. An examination of the city's history shows many first and unique developments. Its rapid growth based on tourism related development adds to its unique attributes. While the city is physically different and marked by rapid population growth, demographically and socioeconomically it is no different to other major Australian cities. Its physical differences stem from historical factors, that is, its origins as a tourist resort. The Gold Coast's lack of a CBD, number of high rise buildings, theme parks, and shopping centers per capita, and its spreading canal estates may create an unusual urban form in the Australian landscape, however, this is by no means

unique in the world. In fact, other cities sharing the same characteristics have grown from small resort towns in different parts of the world (Dedekorkut-Howes, 2013). Fort Lauderdale in Florida is a famous example (Mayere et al., 2010). Rapid population growth is not peculiar to tourism areas but is also observed in other regions in the country which are experiencing resource booms. The sunbelt migration phenomenon and the rapid growth of the South East Queensland region as a whole also fuel this growth. The Gold Coast is no longer marked by low income and education levels, constantly high unemployment rates, and larger proportion of elderly residents. Examining the latest figures, demographer Bernard Salt commented that as the Gold Coast is getting bigger it is normalizing and becoming a more sophisticated city (Ardern, 2013). The Gold Coast is a case in point which shows that for some places, tourism urbanization as defined by Mullins (1991) is a stage in the development of a city that it may simply grow out of, evolving into a diverse city in its own right. Due to its physical amenities and history, tourism will always play a major role in the economy and development of the Gold Coast, and its physical manifestations will be greatly visible in the city, but the Gold Coast is no longer a one-industry town with a socially distinct resident population relying solely on consumption of pleasure.

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**Figures:**

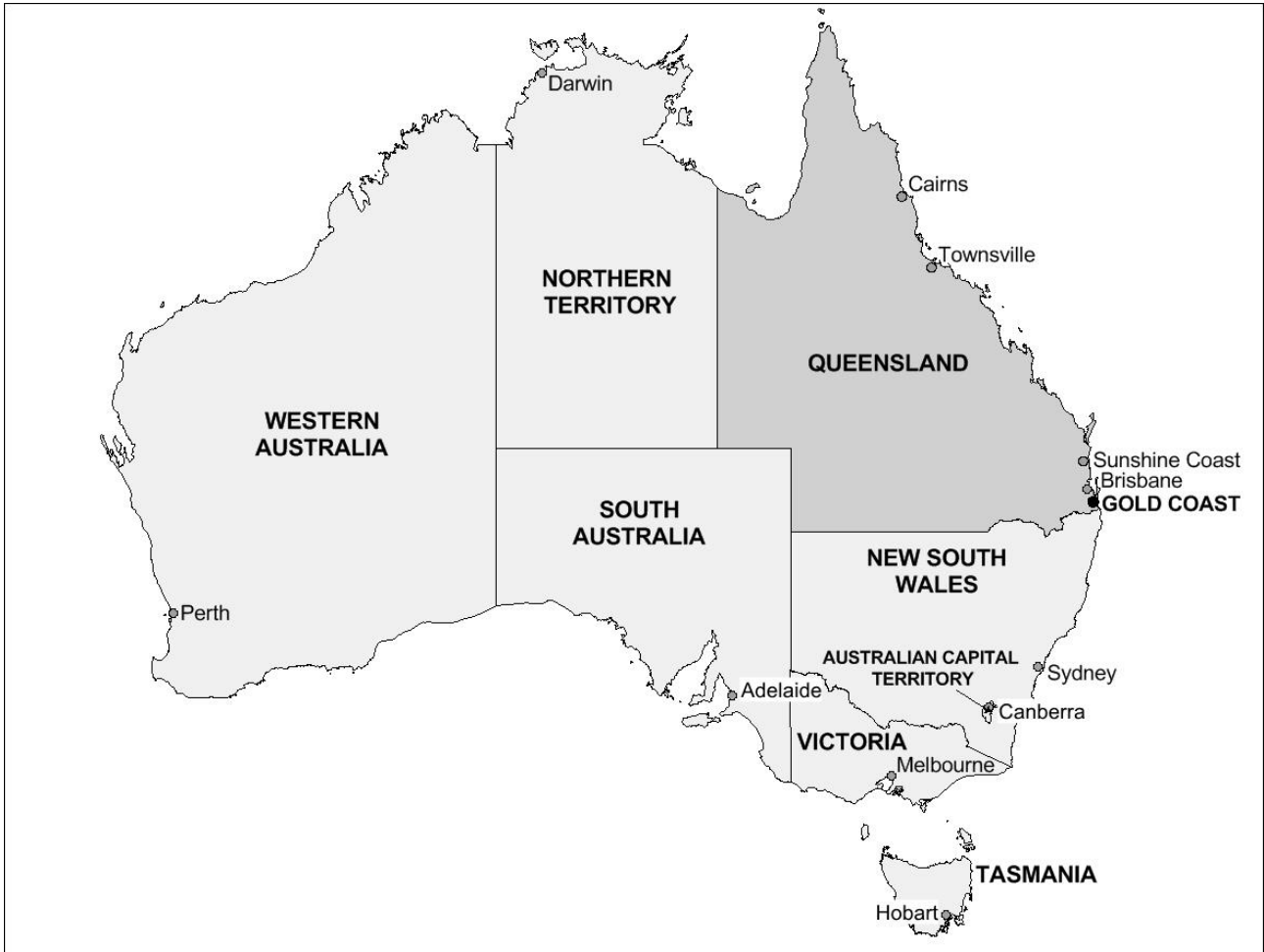


Figure 1. Gold Coast locator map (Map courtesy of Mariola Rafanowicz, 2014)



Figure 2a. Looking north from Q1 observation deck (Image courtesy of Aysin Dedekorkut-Howes, 2012)



Figure 2b. 1960s meter maid (Image courtesy of Surfers Paradise Meter Maids)

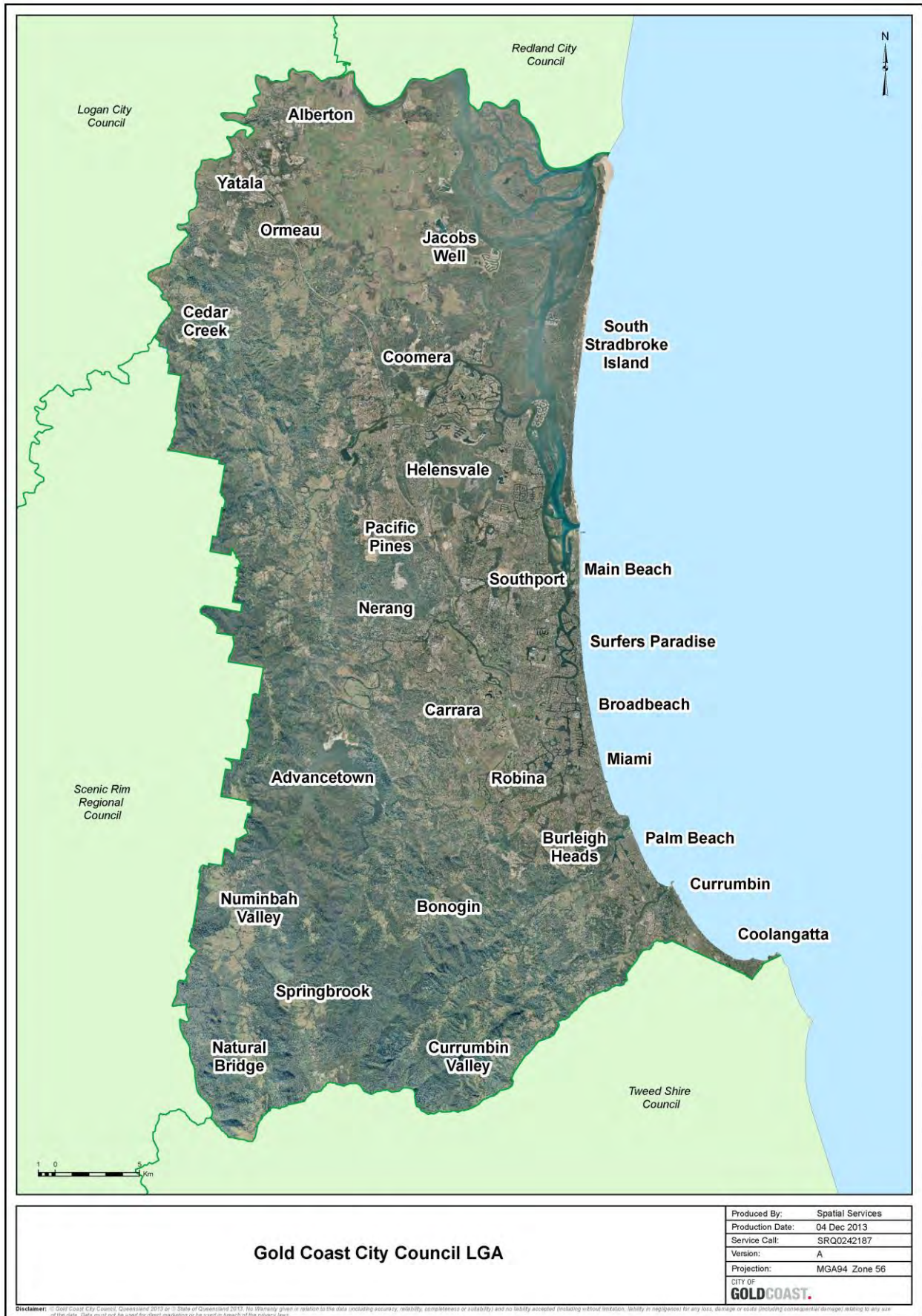


Figure 3. Gold Coast City Council area map (Image courtesy of City of Gold Coast, 2013)

Figure 4. Development of Surfers Paradise in time (Images courtesy of City of Gold Coast, Local Studies Library)



Figure 4a. 1955



Figure 4b. 1969



Figure 4c. 1977



Figure 4d. circa 1980s

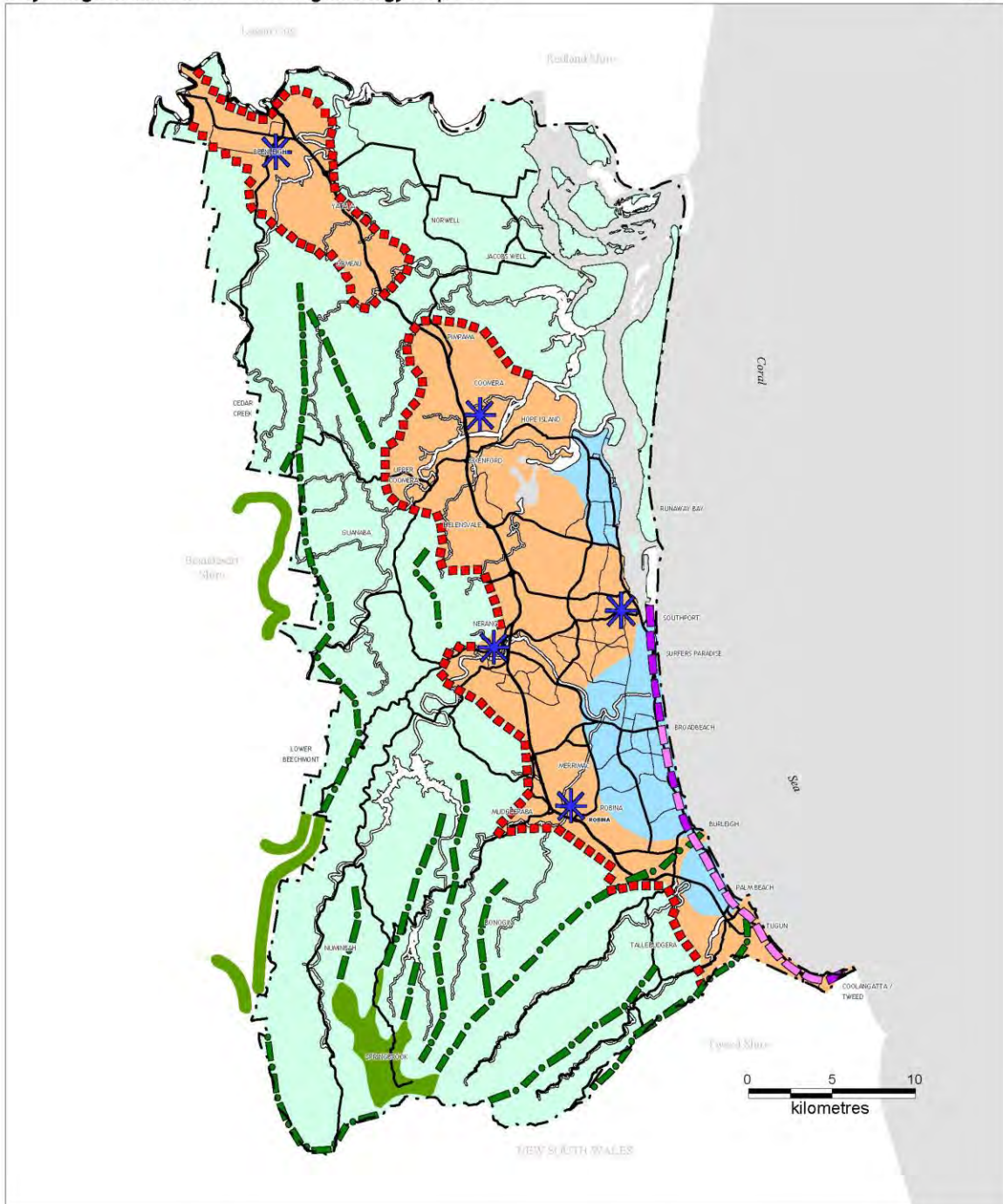


Figure 4e. Graham Weeks, circa 1999



Figure 4f. Daryl Jones, 2005





**Legend**

	<b>COMMERCIAL CENTRES</b> - MIXED BUILDING FORMS AND HEIGHTS		<b>CHARACTER DISTRICTS</b> CANAL ESTATES
	<b>HIGH RISE SPINS</b> - MAJOR CONCENTRATION		SUBURBAN ESTATES
	MINOR CONCENTRATION		RURAL HINTERLAND AREAS
	<b>URBAN / RURAL INTERFACE</b>		PLATEAUS
	<b>MAJOR RIDGELINES</b>		

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Figure 5. Gold Coast urban form (GCCC, 2008)



Figure 6. Looking north to Gold Coast coastal strip - Broadbeach and Surfers Paradise (Image courtesy of Gold Coast Tourism, 2013)



Figure 7. Gold Coast skyline featuring Surfers Paradise and Q1 (Image courtesy of Gold Coast Tourism, 2013)



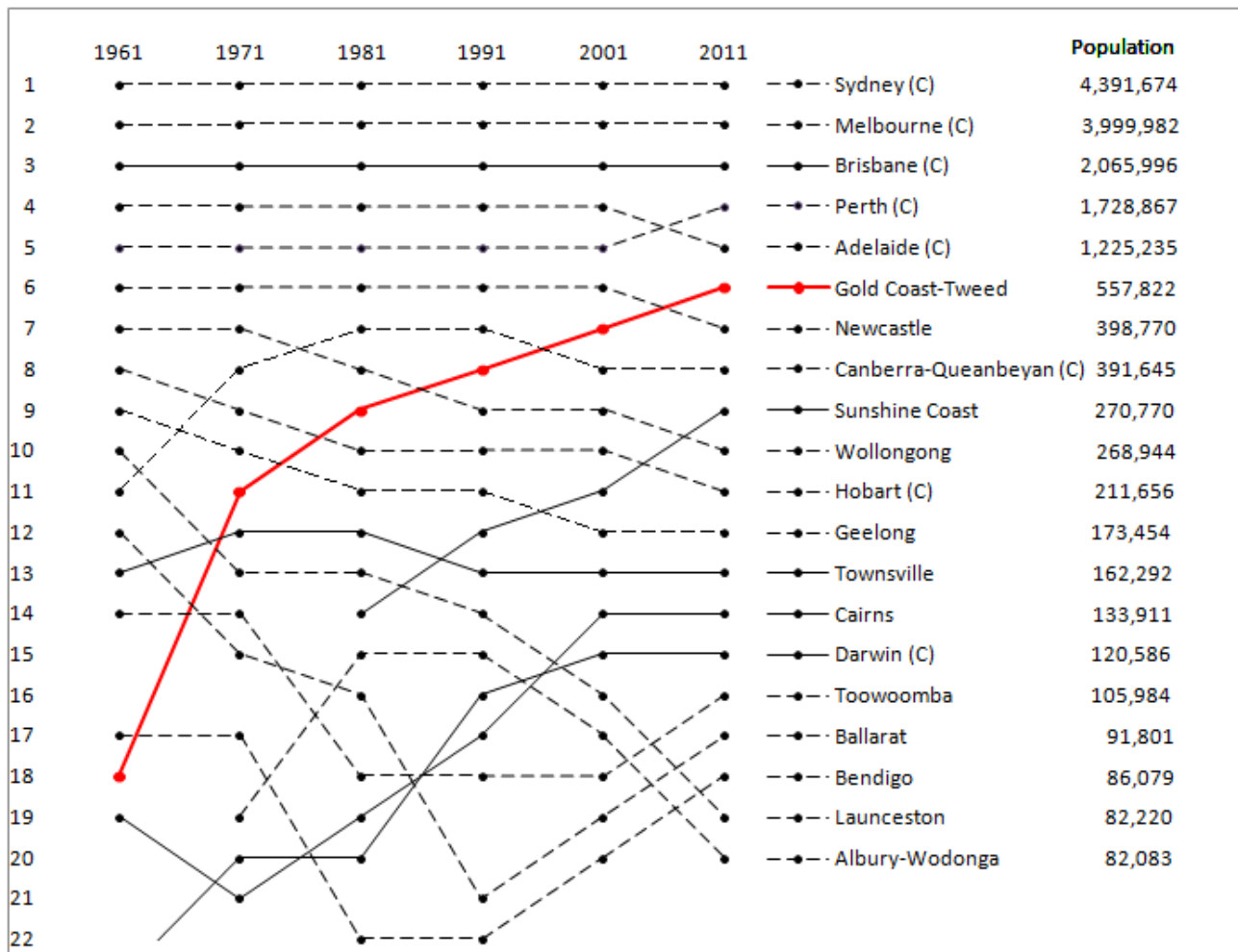


Figure 9. Changes in the rank of Australia's twenty largest urban centers<sup>b</sup>, 1961-2007 (Data source: 1961-2001: ABS, 2008; 2011: ABS, 2013a)

<sup>b</sup> Capital cities are marked with (C) and solid lines indicate sunbelt cities.