

**Growing Pains:  
Adolescent Urbanism  
on the Gold Coast**

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## **Abstract**

This paper sets out to better understand the particular nature of urbanisation on the Gold Coast in South East Queensland and of urbanism in general. In developing this understanding it draws on the conception of adolescence as a stage in the physiological and psychosocial development of children into adults. The characteristics of adolescence including rapid growth; identity confusion; developing sexuality; growing analytical capacity and ego-centrism are used in the analysis of Gold Coast urbanisation. As a young Australian city the Gold Coast displays many of these adolescent characteristics in the way it has grown and is now managed and led. The paper concludes by proposing a more ambitious and comparative research agenda for analysing similar cities in Europe, North and Central America and extending our understanding of more general processes of urbanisation.

## Introduction

Anyone whose prevailing urban experience is of European cities is likely to feel a degree of culture shock when they first encounter the Gold Coast in South East Queensland. Google images may have provided something of a foretaste and fleeting views glimpsed through a plane window while descending into the airport at Coolangatta offered a brief snapshot of its spectacular beachfront, but the grounded reality is still disconcerting to many visitors.

One hundred years ago it was a collection of modest towns and villages on the coast and



floodplain and it is now a city with a population of almost half a million and growing rapidly. In that sense at least it is a popular city. Its population is growing mainly because people (like me) move to it from abroad and from elsewhere in Australia, although its rate of natural increase is also positive and growing (Department of Infrastructure and Planning, 2009). However, it has no central business district and no central place containing major cultural or political edifices

such as a large church, a town hall, museum or concert hall or even a major square. Because of the youthfulness of its built form there is little of what Sudjic calls the ‘picturesque crust’ of typical European cities (1992:296) and buildings constructed in the 1960s and 70s form a significant proportion of those on the local heritage register. Public transport is limited to a meagre bus network and a rail line connecting the western edge of the city to the State capital some 90kms away and only 6% of all trips within the city involve public transport. Walking is a feasible or pleasant option in only a limited number of places and the demands of private car users dominate transport policy discussion. Walter Benjamin would probably have given up as a flaneur and gone to Hertz for a rental car if the Gold Coast had been on his itinerary.

The contrast between the European traditional notion of the city and the city of the Gold Coast seems to support Amin and Thrift's claim that 'we can no longer even agree on what counts as a city' (2002:1). If the foundations of our understanding of cities are rooted in European and North American urban sensibilities, how should we go about understanding this place? What kind of city is it? Is it typical of Australian cities or significantly different? Are there other places like this elsewhere in the world? Does it tell us anything about the shape of things to come, about a new form of urbanism, a new type of city?

There are, of course, many ways to understand cities and scholars of the urban delight in constructing new conceptual frameworks, new models and new theories to explain the structure, experience, nature and growth of cities: fluid cities (Dovey, 2005); mongrel cities (Sandercock, 2003); vortex cities (McManus, 2005) splintering urbanism (Graham & Marvin, 2001); recombinant urbanism (Shane, 2005) and so on. Some are purely analytic while others put their models and theories at the disposal of those with responsibility for managing and planning cities and hope they will be used to make cities better places. Some adopt an ecological perspective and analyse cities as spaces of material flows; others focus on quantitative measures of production, consumption and exchange while others are concerned with the lived experience of cities and how they both shape and are shaped by the behaviour of those who live in them.

In this paper I will set out some preliminary thoughts on how we might go about trying to understand the Gold Coast as a particular city and speculate on the contribution this might make to our appreciation of urbanism in general. Because it is a young city that is growing rapidly I use the notion of adolescence as an analytic device in this analysis and speculation.

Adolescence is an analytic construct that emerged in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to characterise a particular and distinctive stage in the psychosocial and physiological development of humans. The characteristics of adolescence include brashness and self-confidence; insecurity; insensitivity to the feelings of others; times of frenetic activity punctuated with periods of torpor; identity crisis and a susceptibility to the vagaries of fashion. It is therefore a construct or device associated with the analysis of processes of growth and development and with the idea of stages of development. It is also associated with conceptions of maturation and this in particular prompted me to explore the value of this construct in trying to better understand the Gold Coast as a city and as an exemplar of a particular form of urbanism.

The paper briefly reviews the scholarly tradition of analysing cities in terms of their stages and patterns of growth and then considers how adolescence has been conceptualised and analysed as both a stage of development and as a developmental process. These are then applied in an analysis of the growth and development of the Gold Coast. The paper concludes with a proposal to extend the analysis to a comparative study of similar cities in other parts of the world.

### **Theories of urban growth and decline**

There is an approach to the analysis of urban change and city growth that assumes initially that the whole life course experienced by humans apply also to cities, in other words that cities are born, grow up, mature and die. Patrick Geddes (1915) for example drew on his early training in biology to present a macro-historical view of the evolution of cities culminating in physical decay and cultural decadence, while the Australian archaeologist Gordon Childe (1936) built his theory of human and urban development on a more materialist analysis of the relationship between community protection and food production. Mumford's sweeping and forensic analysis of the city in history (1961) was designed to demonstrate the significance of past decisions when addressing the contemporary challenge of resisting or submitting to the progressive loss of consciousness implied by the rise of 'post-historic man', while Diamond (2005) has brought a geographical and ecological perspective to the analysis of societies that choose (often unwittingly) a path to systemic collapse.

But this life course view, with the inevitability of death as its conclusion, may not be the most fruitful way of approaching the analysis of cities. Clearly cities are born in the sense that a certain point in time they are recognised administratively as a city (of course the precise qualification for this status varies in time and place) and their growth is manifest in a number of different ways: population, economic function, governance, position in urban hierarchy, culture and so on. But do cities always die; is their death inevitable? Some cities now exist only as archaeological sites [Tikal, Angkor Wat, Ur]; some suffer severe trauma and appear to be at death's door [Beirut, Sarajevo, New Orleans] while others appear to be dying slowly [Venice]. And while Davis (2002) in his 'Dead Cities' has shown how prophecies of urban catastrophe often come true, Glass (1989) provides a more measured analysis in her description of the many 'clichés of urban doom'.

However, we need not embrace completely the full life cycle conception of urban growth to accept the more banal point that cities change substantially over time in terms *inter alia* of

their size, their shape and form, their dominant economic base, their civility and their ease of movement (see for example, Bosselmann, 2008). The pace and nature of these changes may also be broadly consistent to the extent that we might conceive of and summarise these changes as stages in development. This does not mean that the direction of change is consistent or that it is impossible to revert to former stages in the sense that a set of characteristics associated with another earlier stage may subsequently reassert themselves.

Many of the canonical texts of historical urban studies, including those by Childe and Mumford, are concerned with cities in the early stages of their development. However, the cities in question were at this stage in their development many decades or centuries ago; they were less concerned with contemporary cities at these early stages. But in this case we are concerned with comparatively young cities that are facing a significant transition to a qualitatively new phase in their development. This is not, of course, to suggest that after this transition it will be plain sailing. We know from our own lives that a host of difficulties present themselves throughout adult life (not least the joys of parenting adolescents) which we negotiate with varying degrees of success, but the adolescent period of transition can be especially significant in laying an important foundation for later development.

### **Concepts of adolescence**

It is widely accepted that until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the transition from childhood to adulthood was relatively brief (Erikson, 1968), although it may well have been just as traumatic a transition as that experienced by young people today. Marked by rites of passage in many different societies this period of transition has typically been extending over a longer period of time: children become adolescents at a younger age and become adults at an older age. For example, while formal and juridical markers such as the age at which a young person can own property, assume legal responsibility for their actions and get married have remained relatively static in most western societies, many argue that the age at which young people become sexualised and begin to act as relatively autonomous consumers is dropping (Beder, Varney and Gosden, 2009)

Regardless of these extensions to the period of adolescence, it continues to be seen by developmental psychologists and behavioural analysts as a relatively troublesome period or state of being. It is associated typically with emotional turmoil, occasional displays of

aggressive behaviour, anxiety, heightened risk taking, mood swings and significant and often rapid physical growth.

The study of adolescence emerged as an academic discipline in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. GS Hall's (1904) foundational work suggested that certain forms of behaviour represented a re-enactment of stages in the general evolutionary development of humans, for example what he described as the 'unruly behaviour of high school students' reflected a more general behavioural trait of more barbaric and savage epochs of human development. By the 1920s and 1930s the pioneering work of Mead (1929) and Malinowski (1932) had brought the emerging techniques and principles of ethnographic and anthropological study to bear on adolescent development and demonstrated the importance of cultural context in properly understanding the nature of adolescence and the processes affecting the transitions into and through it. During the second half of the century Piaget's work (eg Inhelder and Piaget, 1958) on the stages of cognitive development among children highlighted the growing capacity for abstract thought and analytical reasoning as a defining feature of his fourth and final stage: adolescence. Erikson's (1968) work also delineated stages of development and described adolescence as the fifth of eight stages, characterised as a period of identity formation in which children draw on their past experience in trying out and settling on an identity for their transition to adulthood.

Drawing on all of these traditions and perspectives (Adams, 2000) we can construct a simplified schema of the characteristics of adolescence to be applied in the analysis of Gold Coast urbanism. No attempt has been made to weight these characteristics according to their theoretical significance and it is not suggested that the list is exhaustive. These key characteristics are:

- Rapid physical growth and significant transformations in size and shape
- Identity exploration, including exploration and adoption of new identities and occasional crises of identity
- Emerging sexual awareness and sexuality
- Development of analytical capacity and application of logical principle
- Self absorption and ego-centrism

In the next section these characteristics are applied in describing and exploring the development of the Gold Coast as a city.

## The case of the Gold Coast

### *Rapid physical growth and significant transformations in size and shape*

In 1958 South Coast Town Council adopted a new name: Gold Coast Town Council and one year later became the City of the Gold Coast. Since then it has been a city characterised by rapid growth. It recorded the largest population increase of all Local Government Areas in Australia between 1991 and 1996 and the second largest increase between 1996 and 2001 and in the year to June 2008 grew by just over 13,000 people, an increase of 2.7% over the previous year. Since 1987 its net annual growth has ranged between 10,000 and 19,000 and it is projected to grow by around 15,000 people per annum over the next twenty years, reaching one million early in the 2030s. In addition to these permanent residents, the city accommodates an average of 40,000 visitors each night and over 11 million people visit the city each year.

To house this growing population developers have been building houses, apartments and tourist accommodation at a prodigious rate for many years.



While the recent economic crisis has seen a significant slowdown in new housing construction, Queensland in general and Gold Coast in particular have been at the leading edge of the house construction boom for many years, notwithstanding rapid growth in mining areas (UDIA, 2009).

The urban footprint of the Gold Coast has expanded over the decades and the form of new housing has often been innovative in terms of its design (high rise and canal estates for example) and its tenure (strata and community title and timeshare for example). From the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century parcels of land in Southport and what became Surfers Paradise were subdivided for residential development but from the 1930s onwards new building land was created in the flood plains of the Nerang & Coomera

River by pumping sand from the riverbed and while there was initial reluctance to build on sand by the 1950s this approach had become widespread.

Despite the reservations of some planners (Jones, 1986:24) about the suitability of the Gold Coast as a major holiday resort, during the 1950s and 60s it grew rapidly as the prime location

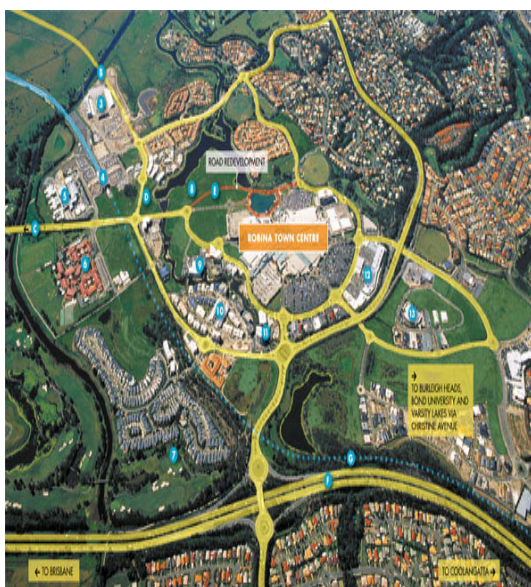


for weekender houses and units for people from Brisbane.

A wider and more sophisticated property market emerged in the 1970s on the back of favourable tax breaks for property investors, the abolition of death duties by the Queensland government in 1977 and growing confidence among individual investors in buying off-plan via ‘innovative’

financing schemes offered by local developers (Burchill, 2005). At the peak of the property boom on the Coast in 1981, almost 2500 high rise units were sold and over 3500 under construction (Jones, 1986:43). One year later a major crash occurred with property sales dropping to virtually zero in 1984 and prices for high rise dwellings falling by 50-60% (Jones, 1986: 52).

While the top end speculative market for high rise buildings on the Gold Coast went through periodic boom and bust cycles, in the suburbs growth was less spectacular but more steady. In the north-west the new suburbs of Pacific Pines and Coomera expanded quickly throughout the 1990s, while in the central area of the city, Singaporean developer Robin Loh embraced the principles of master-planning in his development of 4,000 acres of land into the relatively self-contained township of Robina.



The major challenges facing city leaders now are how to cope with the continued population growth projected for the city without compromising the iconic assets of the city and how to pay for the provision of infrastructure needed to support this growth. While higher urban densities and the selection of a limited number of regional growth centres appears to be the way forward preferred by

the State in the latest edition of the South East Queensland Regional Plan (DIP, 2009), representatives of the development industry portray the Gold Coast as a city bursting at its seams and suffering from over-inflated house prices as a consequence (UDIA, 2009).

The adolescent city can either discard the things that constrain its growth and make it uncomfortable, in other words its current urban growth boundaries, and create room to grow by moving further into the hinterland and peri-urban fringes, or it can look to grow in different ways. While debates about higher density are often presented as a choice between the very high rises of the coastal strip and the conventional low density suburban form, there is scope for selective infill at higher density than is normal without building Q1 equivalents everywhere. In terms of our analytical device, it is perhaps most relevant to note that the reduction of all debate to starkly contrasting alternatives is itself a notable trait of adolescence.

*Identity exploration, including exploration of new identities and occasional crises of identity*

Although the town of Elston was renamed Surfers Paradise in 1917 as part of a growing movement to transform the identity of the area, the adoption of the soubriquet ‘Gold Coast’ by Brisbane-based developers and real estate interests in the 1940s saw the separate towns of Southport, Nerang, Burleigh, Coolangatta and Mudgeeraba beginning to merge in the popular imagination into a new place. The outcome of this imaginative transformation and indeed its intention was to promote the Gold Coast as a place not only for local tourists and occasional visitors from the inter-state, but increasingly as a place to come to make a new life (Griffin, 1998).

This transformation from a place of tranquil villages to a ‘sunny place for shady people’ continues to animate local debate about the future of the Gold Coast: whether it should strive to retain the remnants of its tranquil past (often expressed in contemporary debates as ‘relaxed lifestyle’), continue to trade on its louche and risqué reputation or adopt a more modern and sophisticated image as an international or global city.

Recently the city has attempted to develop a more sophisticated and mature identity, emphasising its growing cultural base and the significance of its ‘knowledge industries’ in the form of its two universities and an expanding health related R&D sector. Through its Bold Future strategic visioning exercise the City Council has made a concerted effort to emphasise the ‘green, gold and blue’ of the city (epitomised by its hinterland forests, beaches and

waterways and the sea) but in particular its 'green' credentials. The vision for the city proposed by the Bold Future process and endorsed by the council states,

*Defined by our spectacular beaches, hinterland ranges, forests and waterways, the Gold Coast is an outstanding city which celebrates nature and connects distinct communities with the common goal of sustainability, choice and well-being for all.*

(Bold Future Advisory Committee, 2008)

This aspirational vision of a comparatively 'green' future is in stark contrast to the dystopian vision offered by Brisbane Courier Mail writer and novelist Matthew Condon who last year described the 'sinister underbelly' of Surfers Paradise in a piece headed:

*Malice in Wonderland – They used to call it paradise. That was before the guns, gangs and hoons cast their shadow over Surfers.* (Condon, 2008)

In this he speaks with young people watching an early evening street fight who tell him, "This is what we come out for." The epitome of this volatile mixture of young people, alcohol and occasional violence is the annual Schoolies when around 30,000 school leavers visit the Gold Coast over three weeks and where, according to the Mayor, they can 'unwind before embarking on tertiary studies or beginning a career' (Schoolies website). While some bemoan the anti-social behaviour of young people at Schoolies, only a few weeks before this in the Gold Coast social calendar adults get a similar opportunity. Since 1991 this three day event has attracted over 300,000 visitors to watch IndyCars and V8s race through the streets of Surfers Paradise and some adults clearly behave in ways others find distasteful. According to newspaper reports the Queensland Premier took offence at some of this bad behaviour,

*A sleaze crackdown at this year's Gold Coast Indy has been ordered by Premier Anna Bligh, who warned revellers they will face arrest if they "cross the line". Ms Bligh was offended by "lewd" behaviour, including women flashing their breasts on high-rise balconies, during her first visit to Indy as Premier last year and has told organisers to clean up their act.* (Brisbane Courier Mail, 15 August 2008)

Of course the reality of day-to-day life for most residents is rather different: it is usually neither another day in paradise nor a walk on the wild side. But we are concerned here with the public identity of the place as a whole and in particular with how the city leaders have attempted to promote a particular identity. In this respect there has been a tendency in recent years to play down the free-wheeling developer identity of earlier times captured best by the

image of the 'white shoe brigade' and to move on from the identity of playground to both the rich and famous (staying at the Palazzo Versace) and to the ordinary working families evoked so often by the Prime Minister (staying at the Ashmore Palms Holiday Village). There is now a concerted effort to project an image of 'greenness' and modernity via the promotional material of the Council's Economic Development and Major Projects Directorate, including brochures entitled 'Gold Coast Innovation City' and 'Competitive Gold Coast City'.

It remains to be seen whether these new and more mature identities take hold or whether the adolescent personae of shonky, white shoe developments and beach front debauchery remain.

### *Emerging sexuality*

In the 1930s Jim Cavill's Surfers Paradise Hotel, the only hotel in the area at that time, acquired a reputation as a venue for 'naughty weekends' among Brisbane's young and mobile population (McRobbie, 2000). This helped establish the area's image as a place with a more relaxed attitude to sex than the rest of conservative Queensland. By the mid-1950s local entrepreneur Bernie Elsey, already operating a flying boat service between Sydney and Southport, had opened the first of his Beachcomber hotels in Surfers Paradise and in 1957 launched his infamous Beachcomber Pyjama Parties. For two years these proved extremely popular with locals and tourists and attracted extensive national press coverage. They also attracted the attention of the Queensland Police Commissioner, Frank Bischoff and regular raids by police officers became part of his broader crusade throughout the state against immorality, teenage drinking and abortion, supported at one stage by the visiting Dr Billy Graham (McRobbie, 1982).



This image of a sexually relaxed place, or rather of a place never shy of using scantily clad women to sell its virtues, was reinforced in the 1960s when the need to raise money to pay for mobile beach patrols at Surfers Paradise led the Council to introduce parking meters.

This so angered the local Progress Association that its President, the aforementioned Bernie Elsey, employed Meter Maids to top up any expired meters they encountered to spare tourists a fine for overstaying. These gold lamé bikini clad young women can still be

seen around the streets of the Gold Coast although their original tiaras have been replaced with cowboy hats.

Bikinis had of course been introduced to Australia by the Gold Coast's Paula Stafford in the early 1950s, boosted unsurprisingly by a highly publicised attempt in 1952 by the Council's beach inspector to ban them from local beaches. Some years later Mayor Bruce Small employed a team of bikini-wearing young women on a tour of Australia to help promote the Gold Coast as a place of profitable investment as well as a major tourist destination.

Apart from an inclination to rely on women in bikinis to promote itself and some of its events, the Gold Coast has no particularly prominent reputation or identity now as a place of sexualised activity. Five legal brothels now operate on the Coast since prostitution was legalised and regulated by the Beattie government in 2000, but they typically are located away from the main centres of tourist activity. The Southern Queensland Workers In the Sex Industry (SQWISI) claims the industry barely makes enough money to cover its regulation fees and operating costs, but in the words of a famous former sex-worker, Mandy Rice-Davies, 'they would, wouldn't they.'

There is nothing to compare with the Mardi Gras events that have run in Sydney for the last thirty years and gay travel guides such as Pink Guide and Gay Traveller, Queensland describe the Gold Coast in terms that are virtually indistinguishable from straight tourism promotional material,

*The Gold Coast Hinterland, a gay traveller's regional delight...*

*As night falls the Coast changes, the bright lights come on and the gay girls and boys come out to play. Themed clubs and fabulous bars provide meeting and entertainment places to dance the night away (Gay Traveller, Queensland website)*

It would appear therefore that the Gold Coast is more adolescent in its sexuality, preferring the allure of scantily clad young women to the rather more challenging bohemian and gay-friendly environment that Florida (2005) claims to be the foundation of successful cities throughout the world.

#### ***Development of analytical capacity and application of logical principle***

The reputation of the Gold Coast as a place of unbridled capitalism in which a combination of luck and optimism prevailed was established in the 1950s and continued, despite the bust periods in the 1970s and 80s, through to the early 1990s. Although a Gold Coast Strategic

Plan was adopted in 1969, it provided little check on the ambitions of local developers and as the National Party member for Southport said in 1982, ‘...because of the wide discretionary powers contained in the town plan for the Gold Coast, the City Council can change anything overnight. It is not a town plan, it is simply a convenience document’ (Jones, 1986: 62).

Jones goes on to claim,

*The Gold Coast has been developed without modern town planning methods; this may be the key to its success and vitality...The virtual absence of town planning enables the Gold Coast real estate economy to respond to sudden changes in demand and so develop and crash remarkably quickly..(Jones, 1986:62)*

But as we know from critiques of planning from a Marxist perspective (eg Dear & Scott, 1981), planning by the local state in capitalist societies performs an essential role in regulating the excesses of the market, providing a degree of certainty and predictability that is conducive to profitability and managing the externalities of unfettered development. It is not surprising, therefore, that even in a ‘free market city’ like the Gold Coast the demand for more planning and regulation grows, not just from local residents concerned with bad neighbour developments, but from the development sector itself.

From the 1990s a more assertive and proactive city council began to produce and implement planning schemes that were increasingly comprehensive in scope and bold in their ambitions to regulate development in pursuit of a broader notion of a better city. The city hoped to become known more for the quality of its architecture and urban design than for its ‘innovative’ approaches to development financing and real estate marketing.

In 2006 the Council agreed to consider seriously the long term future of the city, including its economic, social and environmental sustainability. In June 2007 it launched its Bold Future visioning project and appointed an Advisory Committee to oversee the production of a long term vision, a set of strategic action statements and a complementary set of performance measures. The Advisory Committee met over the following year to receive a set of analytical reports synthesising research and best practice on a range of issues as well as the results of an extensive programme of public consultation and submitted its report to Council at the end of 2008. This was endorsed in January 2009 and has since been used as the foundation of a number of more focused statutory plans. The Council’s Corporate and Operational Plans embody the Bold Future principles; a major review of the Gold Coast Planning Scheme will take on board the key principles of sustainability and place making and a Community

Engagement Strategy is being prepared to give weight to the Bold Future commitment to openness and transparency in decision making.

This process of community-based, long term and strategic planning has been challenging for many who have grown up with a more informal, reactive and instinctive approach to planning for the future. The 'she'll be right' stance, taken even further by former Premier Joh Bjelke-Peterson's 'don't you worry about that' mentality seems finally have to be overtaken by a more forward looking and analytical approach to thinking about and planning for the future of Gold Coast.

### *Self absorption and ego-centrism*

Adolescence is often a time of great introspection punctuated by periods of extroversion and egocentrism. Adolescents can be preoccupied with themselves and find it difficult seeing things from the perspective of others. They can also resort easily to hyperbole when describing themselves and their plans for the future.

Many places display a high degree of hyperbole in their promotional material (Gold & Ward, 1994) and hubris is never far below the surface of much that is written about the Gold Coast by its boosters and promoters. Beyond the evocative name changes of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Shark Bay became Main Beach, MacIntosh Island became Paradise Waters and Goat Island became Chevron Island, great claims have always been made about Gold Coast.

The City Council captures this tone in its 2007-08 annual report describing the city as,

*Naturally the world's best place to be...because we will create a city that is recognised internationally for the quality, diversity and sustainability of its lifestyle, economy and environment. The Gold Coast's future will be secure as Australia's most desirable place to live and favourite place to visit.*

Similarly the Chairman of the Bold Future Advisory Committee prefaced its report to Council by saying,

*We are lucky to live in one of the best places on earth. Visitors have described it as living in paradise between the mountains and the sea (Bold Future, 2008)*

while the inward investment agency, Business Gold Coast claims,

*Gold Coast City is not only the perfect place to live but is also the perfect location for the growth and development of business (BusinessGC website)*

From further afield, the Intelligent Communities Forum, an international think tank promoting IT connectivity in social and economic development included the Gold Coast in its listing of Smart21 Communities of 2008, prompting local headlines claiming the city was ‘the most intelligent in Australia’.

This hyperbolic tendency is not the same as introversion and egocentrism, but there are signs of this as well. While promoting itself as a destination for national and international tourism and as a major conference city, the City Council is rather more ambivalent about its capacity to learn from elsewhere or to allow senior officers or councillors to travel abroad experience at first hand how similar local governments manage the problems they face. In the face of a concerted campaign in the local press to define any trips inter-state or abroad as ‘junkets’, the Council has wavered over its policy on supporting promotional or study trips. Local Federal MP, Steve Ciobo has argued that while federal members clearly need to travel overseas, local councillors should stay at home and ‘deal with grassroots issues’ (Gold Coast Bulletin, 25/6/09) while the Mayor was reported as saying that ‘he would prefer to stay on the Gold Coast to represent the needs of local residents’ (Gold Coast Bulletin, 12/6/09) rather than attending the second meeting of the Australian Council of Local Government in Canberra. In short the city is happy to proclaim itself as one of the best places to live in Australia and to encourage others to visit and move here, but unwilling to allow its civic leaders to venture aboard, even to Canberra. The logic of this position presents no challenge to the adolescent mind.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has approached the task of trying to better understand the nature of Gold Coast urbanism by employing the notion of adolescence as an analogical analytical device. At the outset this appeared to offer some promise simply because the Gold Coast is such a young city by European standards, is growing quickly and appears to be suffering some growing pains similar to those experienced by adolescents. Some of the key psycho-social and physical characteristics of the adolescent stage of development in humans have been used to explore aspects of the development of the city and there is some value in this form of analysis, although the scope for a more sustained and rigorous exploration is limited in a paper of this scale.

However, there are also flaws in the heuristic value of adolescence as an analytical device for understanding processes of urban change. One of the most obvious is the absence of a

parental equivalent. Children are born of parents and even if their parents are absent when they become adolescents, in most cases someone else takes on the role – *in loco parentis*. In human development a major aspect of adolescence is conflict with parents and other authority figures. Parents and others typically impose the restrictions that frustrate adolescents and often prompt further episodes of challenging behaviour. Adolescents choose to accept or more often to reject the preferences and values of parental figures in searching for their own distinctive identity, even if they embrace them at a later date.

But cities do not have parents in this sense, even though we may talk of ‘city fathers’ [although rarely if ever of ‘city mothers’]. While other bodies – state or federal agencies for example – may encourage the expansion of towns and anticipate their transition to places with city status, there is a greater degree of self-determination in the formation of cities, at least in an Australian context. This is not to suggest that political conflict between the tiers of government and especially between city and state governments is not serious and profound, but the relationship is not so clearly analogous with that of a parent and child. In other words it would be stretching the analytical analogy too far to place jurisdictionally superior bodies such as state or federal governments in the role of parents, even if city governments usually owe their constitutional existence to these bodies.

Insofar as adolescence is a phase that virtually everyone passes through and even though we may sometimes speak of perpetual teenagers suffering from arrested development, the majority make the transition without too much difficulty. While parents are often concerned that patterns of behaviour in adolescence will play an important part in the future development of their children, in retrospect things are usually not quite as significant as they might have appeared at the time. This may well also apply to young and rapidly growing cities. At times they may appear to be on a self-destructive path: growing too quickly, making exaggerated claims about their abilities, engaging in risky behaviour and mixing with the wrong kind of people. But if we look at the history of most mature cities we will see similar stages of development that in retrospect did little to affect their urban trajectory or stunt their growth as they grew into more mature cities.

But if there is some merit in understanding the Gold Coast as a particular form of adolescent urbanism, can we go further and conclude that this can be found in other cities at similar stages of development? This will clearly require further research, but there are cities in North and Central America and in some European Mediterranean countries that have grown rapidly on the back of tourism and are now looking to strengthen and diversify their economic base,

to take a more conservative attitude to their environmental assets and to develop a more mature cultural identity. In this respect we may well be witnessing a distinctively modern stage in the development of some young cities that is amenable to further analysis along these lines.

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