Gold Coast Icon
Gold Coast architecture and development from 1945 to the present

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This paper outlines the Gold Coast Icon project, a research project being undertaken by the Council of the City of Gold Coast that aims to explore and reveal the places and spaces that tell the quintessential and important stories of the Gold Coast’s development during the post-war era.

The period from the end of World War II to the present has been a time of extraordinary growth and invention for the Gold Coast. It was when the Gold Coast as we know it today came into being. The Coast was transformed from a string of early seaside villages and rural settlements into a tourism and lifestyle mecca of international renown. Swamps were transformed into canal estates, farms into shopping centres and suburbs. Fibro beach shacks and motels sprang up along the highway, and they in turn have given way to gleaming high-rise and resorts. People from all nations and walks of life settled here, drawn by the city’s economic opportunities as well as its mild, sunny climate. Most chased a dream, and many have literally given their dreams physical form through the shaping of their homes, businesses and public spaces. In doing so, the residents of the Gold Coast have often demonstrated playfulness and lack of inhibition, encouraged by the city’s culture of entrepreneurialism and relaxed social attitudes.

Developers, architects and property owners have drawn from a rich pallet of ideas from around the world. Some have turned to future-looking International Modernism, others to suburban conventionalism or architectural fantasy based on imagined pasts and exotic lands. This cherry-picking has combined with economic booms and busts, successive waves of immigrant wealth, and the continual reshaping of the city’s tourist attractions to create an eclectic and dynamic built environment.

To many observers the Gold Coast remains a very new city that appears to be devoid of a history. However the past 70 years has been a significant span of time in terms of human activity and it has established a richly layering of places, stories and artefacts that depict the evolution of a unique place and one that is important in Australia’s national culture.

Despite the importance of this post-war history, its very recentness means that much of it is unappreciated and under threat of loss. Given that the Gold Coast is still constantly changing, the
reality is that these linkages to the past may disappear unnoticed and undocumented. Through the process of recording and discussing this built heritage, public appreciation can be sparked and efforts focussed to conserve key sites and collect important histories.