Ironic Icons
Hypersexualisation and the Surfers Paradise Meter Maid

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The Surfers Paradise Meter Maid wears a gold bikini to promote the region of Surfer’s Paradise on the east coast of Australia. The “celebrity” Meter Maid first appeared in 1964 and can be mapped to coincide with a range of conflations during that time where women were groomed to perceive beauty and women’s power and prestige as inextricably linked. The nostalgia associated with the Meter Maid has kept her buoyant, even through feminist campaigns against women’s objectification. Zoom forward to 2016 and the Meter Maid and Surfer’s Paradise are still present, but charged with new responsibilities firmly located in a hypersexualised world. Newspaper articles make regular reference to the original Meter Maids seeking to recognise their iconic entity as “historic landmark” entrenched in what the Gold Coast “represents” as a liberal and freedom-seeking holiday destination.

This paper explores the precinct of the Meter Maid as “live” and mobile advertising, employed as a “brand” and able to imbue a hypersexualised aesthetic into the urban space of the Gold Coast. The gold lamé bikini is the “institutional skin” that identifies her specific function yet also defines the behaviours of others. In the same territory as six Surfer’s Paradise strip clubs her female body is idealised, responsive, spontaneous and flexible and able to represent a range of promotional requirements that extend the presence of the sex industry. Her mobility means that she is not subject to the same kinds of regulation as built forms of urban media. As street encounters with the “iconic” Meter Maid accumulate and are reiterated, they normalise sexy and sexist behaviour constructing social interaction in specific ways that fail to contribute to women’s equity and equality.

Keywords: Surfers Paradise, hypersexuality, Meter Maid, urban planning, sexuality.

Icons often emerge in a context of controversy and debate. Many architectural icons obtain increased cultural capital from this dichotomy where, in recent years, the power of advertising and social media has increased. In this paper my primary discipline of architecture and urbanism is explored alongside theories from cultural studies and gender studies to establish that the iconic Surfers Paradise Meter Maid has become an ironic, hypersexualised icon in a media-saturated
economy. At a time when sexual violence is a key agenda for social politics it is imperative that we develop a dynamic understanding of sexualized representations of women in public space. By exploring the hypothesis that the meter maid prompts urban hypersexualisation I suggest that her continued presence normalises gender stereotypes and women’s objectification.

Like the evocative Surfers Paradise skyline, sentiment about the Meter Maid is divided and full of nostalgia. Originally a place that challenged the conservative positions of the 1950s, Surfers Paradise became a premium beach destination for holidaymakers and attracted those with liberal ideas about individual and sexual freedoms. From the 1970s to 1990s Surfers Paradise experienced a building boom that transformed the beachside town into a booming metropolis complete with its own iconic skyline. Since the 1990s the city has seen a decline with its small centre now a notorious cluster of strip clubs. Within this urban and cultural change the Meter Maid has persisted for fifty years. As a “good-girl-turned-bad” she tries hard to sparkle on the streets of Surfers Paradise yet fails to mask the systemic and sexualised problems in the area.

![Figure 1: Surfers Paradise Meter Maid Veronica Taylor in 1966. (Source: http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/parking-meters-a-fine-way-to-boost-kitty/story-fn6ccwsa-1226052817534)](image)

Bernie Elsey implemented the “good girl” initiative on the “glitter strip” in 1964 to address the backlash from local businesses when parking meters were installed. Dressed in a gold lamé bikini and adorned with a cape and tiara they rode around on scooters and fed 5-cent coins into expired meters leaving a “calling card” on the car windscreen. The card stated: “To save you the inconvenience of a fine, our Meter Maid has inserted a coin in the meter. By courtesy of the Surfers Paradise Progress Association.” (Marks, 2010). Local government and businesses along the parking meter-affected strip contributed a few dollars a day to the Meter Maid’s salary.

The iconic status of the Meter Maid developed in the late sixties and was fed by the burgeoning “cult of celebrity”. Coinciding with a time when women were groomed to perceive their beauty and their value as inextricably linked, beauty pageants became increasingly popular and well publicised during this time. Miss World (founded 1951), Miss Universe (founded 1952) and Miss International (in 1960) were demonstrably similar feminine “types” to the early Meter Maid with their “wholesome” disposition, swimsuit and sash (figure 2). Similarly the bikini clad Meter Maids were widely broadcast on television and in the press media from the mid 1960’s and were initially controversial and considered “racy” by some (Bartsch, 2000).
In 1967 the Meter Maid was acclaimed for their role in helping to promote the region after a tropical storm dramatically affected tourism. This was a positive turn for the Meter Maid and a time when Australian’s began to connect with the ‘angelic’ social service that the Mater Maid provided. By the 1980s the Meter Maids were so iconic that they greeted the then Prime Minister Bob at the local airport. Over the next two decades the Mater Maid became further institutionalized in Gold Coast culture. Her status began to neatly fit with Rojek’s polarised definition of celebrity as both “glamorous” as well as “notorious” (10, 2001).

The notorious aspects of the Meter Maids were amplified when they were forced to transform their role after the implementation of meters with a non-coin credit card system. Their functional task disappeared risking their irrelevance. Various incarnations of the Meter Maid are documented in the media. For example, in the 1990s some Meter Maids began to pose for soft – and sometimes hard-core – pornographic magazines. One of these was Penthouse – a magazine that “tends to be more explicit in its focus on women’s genitals, simulated sexual intercourse, sexual violence and group sex” (Dines, Jenson, Russo 1998). This boosted their profile but also shifted the iconic status into a transgressive context associated with pornography. The sexualised foray of the Meter Maid placed her firmly in the middle of the thriving “raunch culture” or “bad girl” phenomenon of the 1990’s which encouraged women to publicly objectify themselves as an expression of transgressive sexual empowerment (Lumby, 1997). At the time the insistence of the female body as a sexualised subject meant that the Meter Maid was able to claim that her position rejected conservative standards of feminine behaviour to suggest newly politicised discourses of pleasure.
By 1997 the sexualised development of the Meter Maid brand was under fire when the Sunday Mail reported that they were, in fact, touting for the local strip clubs (Stoltz, 1997). In 1999 an issue was tabled about the Meter Maids being mistaken for women who promote venues “for the sex industry.” Roberta Aitchinson stated that she hoped that people will see that “that’s not what it’s about (Bartsch, 1999). We have bikinis and things – it’s a bit cheeky but tasteful”. More touting for strip club allegations occurred again in 2001 – this time reported by the Courier Mail (Sommerfield and Doneman, 2001). In 2010 the Herald Sun reported that Councillor Bob La Castra of the Gold Coast City Council supported the Meter Maids when issues about illegal “touting” for the local strip clubs were raised once more, he stated: “We recognise clearly that the Meter Maids are an iconic entity and very much part of our history” (Bartlett, 2010).

Zoom forward to 2015; the Meter Maid is still present in Surfers Paradise, but both her task and the context in which she works has changed. Now privately owned by one-time Meter Maid – Roberta Aitchison – the tasks of the women who work the glitter strip requires them to replicate aspects of striping culture and is framed by the sexualised context now deeply aligned with Surfers Paradise. While the perception of transgressive sexual behavior in the public sphere is certainly nothing new the determining difference with regard to the hypersexualized culture presented by the Meter Maid is the public’s interactivity with the sexualized and porno chic syntax that she communicates.

The term hypersexual is used to describe the overwhelming abundance of simulated sexual images, practices and narratives where the representation of sex and sexuality undermines or becomes dissociated from sexual experience. Borrowing from the aesthetics of pornographic and strip club culture, hypersexuality intertwines female personal power with sexualised identity. This is directly linked to the media’s publicity of the Meter Maid; all of which challenge our calibration to the nuances of this hypersexual icon.
The incongruous coupling of the Meter Maid as an “iconic” part of the Gold Coast but simultaneously a “bad girl” parallels the irony embedded in some post-feminist rhetoric. For post-feminism the use of irony means that “unpalatable sentiments” can be expressed without the implication of what these sentiments might mean (Gill, 2007). Placing the Meter Maids’ autonomy, choice and “beauty” against the surveillance, discipline and vilification required to meet these standard (Gill 2007, 163) creates an urban contradiction. For the Meter Maid, as well as for the Surfers Paradise “glitter strip”, this kind of paradox has dire consequences for urban life.

Constructing a nuanced argument around the Meter Maid requires understanding the sexualised context and underlying connections to hard-core porn media. In this research I refute post-feminisms suggestion that women’s participation in the sex industries may be an empowered choice. I argue that the sexualised culture of Surfers Paradise does not evidence positive, neo-liberal attitudes to sexuality but, indeed, a heterosexist engagement with porno-chic culture and the sexual exploitation of women and girls. The aim is to make a clearer and more nuanced position around the iconic and sexualised Meter Maids of Surfers Paradise in order to impact future planning and legislation in the area.

**Glitter Strip: an Urban Strip Club**

The “glitter strip” in Surfers Paradise is a precinct of streets operating across 2000 square metres (figure 4). The consolidation of strip clubs in the district coincides with the IBIS report on Australian ‘sexual services’ that notes continued annual revenue growth at a rate of 4.2 per cent from 2009 to 2014. The Meter Maid is deployed in this sexualised nexus of strip clubs, nightclubs and bars. Cavill Avenue, Orchid Avenue, The Esplanade and the Gold Coast Highway are the edges of her roaming territory with an environment that includes: Hollywood Showgirls (Orchid Ave), Player’s Showgirls (Orchid Ave), Bad Girls (Cavill Ave), Santa fe Gold (Orchard Ave), Crazy Horse (Orchid Ave), The Toy Box Showgirls Gentlemen’s Club (Surfers Paradise Boulevard). While it may be a coincidence, on February 20 2009 the Courier Mail reported that these clubs have been regularly “caught breaking adult entertainment laws against a backdrop of sexual assaults on dancers and prostitution claims”, and many of these crimes have impacted on the urban spaces of Surfers Paradise.
The Meter Maids’ daily camaraderie involves engaging and managing the jibes of men “trained in the commercial sexual use of women” (Jeffreys 2008, 152). Meter Maids are required to sell sexualised merchandise to supplement their income. The merchandise itself reflects her iconic yet sexualised status. For example: $10 for a Meter Maid Poster; $20 for a Meter Maid calendar as well as “Bikini” Coolers (sculpted to the form of a women’s torso and breasts shaped to sit around a can); T-shirts, mugs and bar runners, all rendered with images of hypersexualised and scantily clad Meter Maids. A photo with the Meter Maid is $10.
The “hidden” activities of the strip clubs are reciprocally play out by the Meter Maid under the guise of tourism promotion and “harmless sexualised fun” (Jeffreys, 2010). For example, the Meter Maid (despite no longer filling expired meters) is often photographed fondling a parking meter pole. This directs a syntactic relationship to the pole apparatus used for pole dancing and furthermore to the aesthetics of stripping per se (figure 6). These playful yet heterosexist tropes further conflate direct connections to stripping and prostitution. Some people may nostalgically perceive the Meter Maid as a local icon yet dressed in a gold bikini and stiletto heels she is an actively hypersexualised and mobile billboard that promotes and reinforces the sexualised “glitter strip”.

The nostalgia associated with the Meter Maid has kept her buoyant and allowed an iconic status to persist against feminist critic. Newspaper articles make regular reference to the original Meter Maids and their iconic place in the tourist-focused society. Headlines read for example: “From dunes to carpet” (1983), “Golden girls still maid to measure after 35 years” (2000) and “Golden idea still going strong” (2005). On August 3 2006 the ABC news reported that “Gold Coast meter maids nominates as Qld icons” when the Meter Maid was one of 36 nominations for Queensland cultural icon status at the Queensland Museum. While they did not make the final cut, the proposition stirred public debate and helped to perpetuate media around their iconic position within the community. When reporting on a new local Meter Maid museum in 2007 Brian Mossop relays the first Meter Maid – Annette Bryant’s – fond memories of her time as an “ambassador”. These continued nostalgic attitudes discount the feminist challenges to the Meter Maid and more broadly to women’s objectification.

**Transgression: From Margin to Centre.**

In 2014, the global revenue from the strip club industry was estimated at 75 billion dollars (Jeffreys 2009, 86) and this figure is reflected in the social acceptance of strip clubs and sexual precincts in late capitalist cities. The normalisation of stripping propels porno-chic trends and the glamorisation of the sex industry. As evidenced by the Meter Maid and the Surfers Paradise “Glitter Strip”, stripping and sexualised practices are no longer marginalised on the urban fringe or in liminal sites of society but are part of mainstream urban life.

While stripping is not a new phenomenon, the perception that stripping is a sensual dance, a harmless carnivalesque undressing or form of sexual empowerment needs to be revised. This concern is address by academic Annette Lynch where she suggests that the focus in stripping has moved increasingly to more explicit forms of exposure (Lynch 2012, 178).

The social acceptance of strip clubs and sexual precincts is difficult to separate from other ways women are systematically prostituted. My research supports a feminist critique that understands stripping as integral to the larger system of prostitution and that stripping forms part of the organised industry that profits from sexual violence (Stark and Whisnant 2004, 40). Problematically, strip club precincts and mobile sexualised extensions of stripping – like the Meter Maid – reinforce the larger systems of prostitution that profit from sexual exploitation of women. In turn, hypersexualised culture comes to shape behaviours and relationships within these urban spaces with dire consequences for all women (Stark and Whisnant 2004, 40).
The shaping of urban life occurs in the harmful stereotypes and heteronormative behaviours that extended from behind the façade of the strip club to be publically legitimised by the Meter Maids. Her acceptance, longevity and, at times, celebration means that some people may come to expect women to accept less than equal relationships, even sexual harassment. Spatial and interactive analysis of strip clubs show how men remain in control in the space of the strip club and direct the nature of the interaction (Erikson and Tewksbury, 2000); these same behaviours and prescriptive modes of relating may become present when the aesthetically similar apparatus and syntax of the Meter Maid enter the public space of Surfers Paradise. When transferred into urban space, the same exploitative and often violent behaviour is likely to follow. For example, the Meter Maid is offered financial incentives to sell merchandise and to manage sexually harassing behaviour whilst being remunerated for a photograph. These are similar incentives to those women in strip clubs where men who pay more money will have more access to their bodies, to their nakedness and often to physical contact.

Like the stripper the Meter Maid is required to wear a bikini “uniform” and high heel stilettos that are representative of strip club stereotypes signaling that certain behaviours may be tolerated. The dancer and the client relationship in the strip club may also extend into urban space as a result. This may mean that women are expected to mimic aspects of the sex industry and subjugate themselves to men’s desires. Similarly, it may mean that sexual aggression towards women becomes expected and tolerated (Jeffreys 2009, 86-106). Meter Maids are certainly expected to perform their roles playfully, to be receptive to their audience and to be happy. They are symbolically primed to be viewed as sexually desirable through both their attire, make up and grooming implied by their “uniform” and accessories. Male behaviours from the strip club may make a previously un-sexualised urban space into a hypersexualised space. Importantly, as these behaviours emerge in social life, then urban space legitimises and affirm this highly specific type of hypersexualisation “pervaded by images and norms that openly objectify women” (Erikson and Tewksbury 2000, 289).

Other nuanced affects in the urban space which planning regulations find difficult to quantify. A report by activist group OBJECT titled “Stripping the Illusion: Countering Lap Dancing Industry Claims” (2015) found that Strip clubs create “no go zones” that “reduce ... [women’s] sense of security and entitlement to public space”. Public infrastructure and transportation zones like bus stops become sites of harassment, intimidation or any anti-social behaviour. Where hypersexual representation dominates, women’s perception may be that their occupation of these “no go zones” is only partial and conditional.
Hypersexualised phenomena and the post-feminist rhetoric of sexual empowerment are saturated with references to women who choose to participate in sexualised culture. The press media assist in enabling these positions by reporting on the iconic and desirable status of the Meter Maid with “dreams realised” instead of on the reality of their daily role. My research is interested in challenging the tendency to privilege individualised and subjective experience of empowerment over the social impacts that the Meter Maid brings to Surfers Paradise. I am particularly interested in how a post-feminist position may obscure the meaning given to these activities by a wider audience.

The rhetoric of choice avoids the deeper, complex issues of hypersexual urbanism, professing to accommodate “most” viewpoints. Under the mantra of “choice”, women appear to be granted the “right to choose”, men choose whether or not to participate, others choose whether or not to look, and not participating is also a “choice”. This “choice” rhetoric assumes that if women are undertaking the role of stripper or Meter Maid without coercion, this evidences her sense of “agency”. But what about the “choice” of women on the street, when hypersexuality moves into urban space more broadly? Or, indeed, when the women who move through these spaces are potentially impacted by men’s offensive or sexist or violent ways of relating to them?

Women may minimise and deny the abuse that they have suffered as a way to cope. Others may be influenced by dominant post-feminist rhetoric, as they may not wish either to describe the
hypersexualised events and associated sexual harassment as offensive or to see themselves as victims of assault (Kelly 1989, 145). Jeffreys (1997, 252) offers the following insight:

naming the abuse in prostitution as work or entertainment makes it particularly hard for women to identify what is happening to them as abuse. The cheerful accounts of stripping or tabletop dancing that are obtained by journalists or researchers who do not start from a sensitive understanding of male violence are possible only because the prostituted women have not developed ways of talking about sexual harassment.

This suggests that there may be psychological issues that can affect women’s reflexive response to sexual violence.

Hypersexualised phenomena and the post-feminism rhetoric of raunch, as indicated in the discussion of the Meter Maid, are saturated with references to choice. The reliance on individualised experience privileges the primary act of choosing, but may also obscure the how meaning is given to these actions.

The notion of subjective “choice” for women in sex industries is insufficient when the reality of the impact of the commercial sexualisation is explored. Like the strip club owners who reap the benefits of the work of stripper, the Meter Maid is working to benefit sexualised urban culture whether directly as alleged touters or indirectly as sexualised bodies to be harassed and leered at. Furthermore, the urban exposure of the Meter Maid places the responsibility on the female worker to “distinguish between paid-for sexual attention and sexual harassment” (Jeffreys 1997, 265). As such, the Meter Maid circulates the urban space of the Glitter Strip where “power operates ... not by silencing or suppressing female sexual agency, but by constructing it in highly specific ways” (Gill 2008, 53). The hypersexualised Meter Maid not only celebrates heterosexist masculinity but also perpetuates a mistakenly positive perception of the sex industries. This constitutes a form of sexual violence (Coy, Wakeling and Garner 1990, 442). Social worker and academic Christine Stark (2006) suggests that “stripping, massage parlours and brothels, saunas, prostitution rings, international and domestic trafficking, mail order bride services, street prostitution, escort services, phone sex, live sex shows, peep shows, and pornography” must not be analysed as occupations but as “organised sexual abuse”. Detailing the way in which sex as commodity creates an interconnecting structure, she states: “prostitution rings may make pornography, sell women and girls in strip clubs, escort services, massage parlours, saunas, and on the street; put on live sex shows; and traffic women and girls domestically and internationally”. The Meter Maid teeters alongside these sexualised practices to reinforce larger systems of exploitation and violence against women and girls.

This precarious position is nuanced and layered and can be highlighted by the photographic work of Fiona Morris. In the introductory catalogue essay to the 2013 exhibition “Sexualising the City” at the Gold Coast Art Gallery, Virginia Rigney (2012) reflects on the place of the sexualised image on the Gold Coast. She suggests that while it is a strong motif, there are other representations that emerge from the visual culture of the region and also shape the city. One example Rigney provides is the documentary-style photographic works of Morris, who spent a week with the Meter Maids in 2005. In one daily portrait of a Meter Maid Morris tracks 15-year-old “Hannah” as she travels from her life at high school to assume her identity as a Meter Maid and in another Meter Maid “Michelle” is set in contrast to domestic life.
Morris’s work seeks to redefine the iconic street presence of the Meter Maid through a quotidian excavation of the mundane aspects of her life. These images can therefore serve as a supporting case study as to why the Meter Maid should not be portrayed as a Surfer Paradise icon. In Morris’ images the reality of the Meter Maid’s hypersexualised position keeps appearing. Among the portraits are a mini-van full of wolf-whistling larrikins and leering men alongside images of Hannah repetitive checking her scantily clad buttocks, bosom and general appearance. The photographic documentation also announces concerns about the age of the Meter Maid who is describes as 15 years old and under the Australian age of consent and therefore potentially appealing to pedophilic men. The images, while revealing the individual and vulnerable identity of the girls and women who perform as Meter Maids cannot reframe the effect of their sexualised presence in urban space and reciprocally the effect of the urban context on the Meter Maid herself.

As the “iconic” Meter Maid unravels she reveals a hypersexualised body as “live” advertising, Employed as a transgressive brand for Surfers Paradise and expected to imbue a hypersexualised aesthetic into the urban space of the Gold Coast for commercial purposes, she is a satellite site that indirectly and directly refers to strip clubs and strip club culture. Here, the Meter Maids’ body is idealised, responsive, spontaneous and flexible, and able to represent a range of promotional requirements. The Meter Maid is expected to provide “teasers”, to increase awareness of her merchandise and to create an association in the consumer’s mind between her brand and a sexualised “idea” of space. Her mobility means that she is not subject to the same kinds of legislation or regulation as built, static urban space is. While these planning policies attend to infrastructure and land use the Mater Maid slips between a fixed business model and the anti-touting laws aimed
to control the selling of goods to tourists. As the unregulated street encounters of the Meter Maid are reiterated and accumulate, they normalise sexy and sexist behavior. The Meter Maid communicates Surfers Paradise as a highly sexualised space where you will find women continuously available and agreeable. She constructs social interaction in specific and stereotyped ways that fail to contribute to women’s equity and equality.

**Hypersexualisation and violence in urban space**

Issues of women’s inequity and inequality are evidenced by the violent behaviors towards Meter Maids documented in the local press. A Meter Maid stalker named “Cameron” follows the girls intensely, taking photos of them and wearing these images of the girls around his neck. On July 1, 2014 a newspaper headline in the Daily Mail states “Meter Maids on the Gold Coast have found their biggest fan... and he follows them around twice a week”; this article minimises offensive and potentially violent behavior by applying the euphemism “fan” to the person who sexually harasses these women. Gill (2007, 147-166) discusses post-feminism’s relationship to irony and states: “if we suspend disbelief in the notion that it’s ‘just a laugh’, we are left with a fast-growing area of media content (itself profoundly influencing other media) that is chillingly misogynist”. This is highlighted by a 2014 report by Ryan Keen in the Gold Coast Bulletin where he describes not the sexual harassment of the Meter Maid but instead the “playful” jibes of men. This contributes to ways the objectification and subjugation of all women may remain unchallenged. Indeed, the acceptance of such harassment may also be a learned aspect of being a Meter Maid. In 1975 Meter Maid Debbie Thomas conveys her own strategy for managing sexual harassment in the Gold Coast Bulletin. She states: “If anyone says anything rude I just give the person an extra big smile. Like this week. A car of yahoos kept following me up and down Orchid Ave. Eventually they got tired of their game when I just kept smiling at them”. Like the stripper in the strip club, the Meter Maid’s presence creates a “hypersexualised, heteronormative environment” where men receive guaranteed sexual attention “even if counterfeit” from female entertainers (DeMichele and Tewksbury 2010, 550).

This shaping of urban space has consequences for all women. When hypersexualised promotion is sited in urban space with sexualised interaction – and where women may be required to dress or act in gender specific and sexualised ways – the implications necessitate analysis. For example, the consumer’s connection to the hypersexualised “live” experience of the Meter Maid shapes behaviour in social space, and is reciprocally observed by many others who may be involuntarily engaged as forced participants. Similar to the interior strip club environment where women are objectified, men’s sexual desires may become dominant in social interaction and reproduce the expectation that the possibility of these desires being refused is miniscule. This may also affect other women in urban space and not only the hypersexualised employee. This condition makes it acceptable for men to display sexist and harassing behaviour towards women in urban space. Indeed, accepting this harassing behaviour, at peak times, security staff were employed to ensure the Meter Maids safety. Architect and planner Leslie Kanes Weisman suggests that a general fear of sexual harassment and rape, perpetuated by unsafe areas of the city, is actually present as a “constant state of fear” for women in urban space (1994, 69). This recent installment of an external urban “bouncer” in Surfers Paradise indicates that the threat is not just imagined but real and replicates the infrastructure inside strip clubs where the bouncer is employed to observe strippers and patrons to ensure women are not sexually assaulted.
Conclusion

In 2014 ABC Gold Coast reported a new pitch for the Meter Maids to act as “tourism ambassadors” that could warn beach goers “about the hazards and the dangers of the choices they’re making”. More recently the Gold Coast Bulletin reported that an application had been made for the Meter Maid to serve food and drinks to punters on the beach via an iPhone app ordering system (2014). Amid this, local business owners continue to debate whether the Meter Maids are in breach of the council’s anti-touting laws and the Gold Coast Central Chamber of Commerce president – Peter Yared – told the Courier Mail on April 18 2015 that time had expired for the meter maids: “I think it’s time they moved on,” he said.

In this paper I questioned why – despite the changes in the Meter Maids role and contextual connections – she continues to shape the territory of Surfers Paradise. Reciprocally connected to the commercial strip club industry, the persistent recitation of the Meter Maid as a cultural icon reveals a concerning visual, spatial and mediated construction of hypersexuality in the urban spaces of Surfers Paradise. My discussion of the Meter Maids mobile and hypersexualised body suggests that she can transform any urban place into a hypersexual space, thereby negating planning legislation and advertising as fixed, static or able to be “zoned” or controlled.

The occupation of urban space by hypersexual representations plays an important role in crafting sexual norms that reflect sexist practices. The veiling of the Meter Maid as an hypersexualised “icon” raises concerns about how urban space shapes identity, legitimising some types of conduct and offering social incentives for hypersexualised behaviour. In most cases, the hypersexualisation of urban space works in subtle ways, informing our social relations, self-perceptions and perceptions of others. But as these experiences are reiterated and accumulate, they normalise sexist behaviour and thereby have a negative impact upon women’s experience. As Coy et al state: “The process of the normalisation and increased visibility and availability of sex industries in urban space contributes to the ‘gendered consumption of women’s bodies by male buyers’” (2011, 442).

The Surfers Paradise Meter Maid provides an example of how strip precincts create urban spaces that aim to entertain men with the “physical, sexual and emotional labour of women” (DeMichele and Tewksbury 2010, 556). I argue that architectural researchers, planning policy-makers and spatial practitioners need to pay attention to the iconic Meter Maid’s industry’s power to legitimise the larger infrastructures of sexual exploitation and stereotypes that already oppress women.

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