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A HISTORY OF VISIONS AND PLANS FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF A COASTAL TOURISM CITY INTO A KNOWLEDGE CITY: AUSTRALIA'S GOLD COAST

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Many coastal mass tourism centres have attempted to reinvent themselves as they have grown from informal coastal towns into large cities. Lifestyle migration boosts urban growth as these cities become home to 'permanent tourists' attracted by the characteristics that attract tourism. Australia's best known resort, the Queensland Gold Coast, provides a case study of a resort region experiencing similar transformations to those noted in Honolulu, Miami and Sitges, Spain. These cities have pursued broader socioeconomic resilience rather than the common strategy of simply expanding or improving their tourism appeal. Using literature review and documentary research, this paper traces how ideas of a 'knowledge city' have featured in Gold Coast planning history since the 1980s, through proposals including an 'innovation corridor', 'research triangle', a designated knowledge precinct and the development of universities and hospitals under plans and strategies for economic development. Although implementation has been sporadic, the case study demonstrates a continuity in narrative that has shaped outcomes towards the desired 'knowledge city', thereby creating a more cohesive urban structure integrating knowledge nodes, town centres and urban transport infrastructure investments. This case study will add knowledge to inform planners grappling with the transformation of similar coastal tourism areas into significant cities.

Keywords

knowledge based urban development (KBUD), Gold Coast, coastal tourism city, knowledge city, health and knowledge precincts.

How to Cite

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INTRODUCTION

The Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia, is a city of almost 600,000 people that has emerged from the amalgamation and rapid growth of a series of coastal resort areas and rural towns founded in the late nineteenth century¹. The city became Australia's best known coastal tourism resort area after World War Two, pursuing similar paths of amplification and diversification of its tourism offer to those implemented in international coastal mass tourism resorts, such as the addition of theme parks and events². It has grown to become the nation's sixth largest city in its own right, as well as merging with the expanding city region of South East Queensland around the state capital of Brisbane. Since at least the 1980s, the growth of the Gold Coast resident population has been accompanied by calls for greater economic resilience through the widening of the economic base of this tourism and lifestyle based city.

Using literature review and documentary research, this paper traces how ideas of a 'knowledge city' have featured in the city's development narrative and planning history since the 1980s, through public and private sector proposals including an 'innovation corridor', a designated health and knowledge precinct, a 'research triangle', and the development of universities, hospitals and research precincts under state and local government plans and strategies for economic development, city culture and transport.

The analytical framework of the paper is to explore how ideas of knowledge based urban development (KBUD) have been developed and/or adopted in efforts to transition the Gold Coast from a narrow economic focus on tourism and construction to a more resilient and diversified economy. This paper thus seeks to investigate how KBUD ideas have been used to reposition the Gold Coast as a resilient coastal mass tourism city whose socioeconomic future and character will be broader than just being based on tourism. Definitions of KBUD are surprisingly elusive and tentative in the literature, though the best attempts are made by Yigitcanlar, who notes that innovative cities were beginning to adopt KBUD by 2005 as "a development strategy tool for enhancing the competitiveness of cities within the context of expanding [the] knowledge-based economy and society, and forming prosperous knowledge cities"³. The literature celebrates the knowledge economy as a source of prosperity and identity for knowledge cities and knowledge regions and these terms seem to be used interchangeably with 'creative cities' and 'creative regions'. The openness of definition is useful to the current investigation of how such ideas have been employed in the case of the transformation of the coastal mass tourism city of Gold Coast.

MATURE COASTAL MASS TOURISM CITIES IN TRANSITION

Internationally, many centres of coastal mass tourism have experienced a need to diversify in order to remain economically sustainable. Much of the literature to date has dealt with how such centres diversify in terms of their tourism product, for example appealing to different markets by introducing new tourist attractions, or meeting the challenge of adapting to climate change⁴. Well-known coastal resort towns have found it necessary to redefine and reimagine themselves as they have grown from informal coastal towns into larger cities and city regions. For example, Miami and Honolulu have grown into major cities in which tourism is just one element of the economic and social life of a city region. Similarly, the resort town of Sitges, on the Costa Brava, has become part of the broader metropolitan region supporting Barcelona as the Catalan capital⁵. Lifestyle migration boosts the urban growth of these expanding cities as they become home to 'permanent tourists' attracted by similar destination characteristics to those that attract regular tourists on holidays.

There has been considerable research interest in how tourism has been introduced into pre-existing coastal cities whose traditional economic base was declining – as in many Greek coastal ports and industrial cities⁶ and fishing villages of the Mediterranean and other coastal zones throughout the world. There has been less academic research on those coastal settlements that have grown into cities based on tourism and then sought to diversify

their economies beyond tourism and construction in the interests of long-term economic and social resilience – though Miami was noted as having transformed from tourist resort to ‘real’ city with ‘global city’ characteristics as early as the 1980s⁷. Consideration of life-cycle models of mature coastal tourism resorts, such as Butler’s 1980 Tourist Area Life Cycle Model, seems to continue the focus on tourism rather than on more diverse socioeconomic futures for these cities⁸. Baum’s proposed mature stage of “reinvention”, with the option of a coastal resort city “taking the exit route” from tourism dependency, remains a rare exception⁹. Its implications of tourism decline and total economic transformation have little relevance to the current case study or to the international examples mentioned above.

More recently, claims have been made that international coastal mass tourism destinations have great potential to generate “creative capital” and thereby become cities of innovation¹⁰. The current paper presents an Australian case study of a growing coastal tourism city seeking to transition to a more sustainable economy based on KBUD to underpin the tourism and lifestyle migration that spurred its rapid growth in the past half-century.

EMERGING VISIONS OF THE GOLD COAST AS A KNOWLEDGE CITY IN THE 1980S: THE BIRTH OF THE FIRST UNIVERSITY AND RESEARCH PARK, AND AN ABORTED TECHNOPSIS

The idea of injecting knowledge into the city’s economy underpinned intense lobbying for the establishment of a university on the Gold Coast. In a country with no tradition of private universities, and lack of government interest in establishing a public university on the Gold Coast at that time, Australia’s first private university, Bond University was founded in 1989 with initial funding by entrepreneur Alan Bond and the Japanese investor, EIE. A ‘technology park’ was designated immediately adjacent to Bond University and the first ‘technology park’ premises were established and privately let to technology entrepreneurs¹¹. The Bond University research park bore similarities to ideas of technology parks and office parks that were current in the United States¹² and emerging in Australia in the 1980s (for example the area adjoining Sydney’s Macquarie University). The Bond University technology park provided lettable space for start-up research firms in close association with the university and with residential accommodation for students, researchers and other technology workers rather than fully replicating the single-use, isolated office park model.

Property development consultant Brian Orr had raised the idea of founding Australia’s first private university on the Gold Coast in 1976¹³, but it was another decade until the idea gained wider support, most significantly from the nationally known entrepreneur Alan Bond, who had been unsuccessful in a 1970s bid to establish a private university as part of his new urban development, Yanchep Sun City in Western Australia. In 1984, Albert Shire Council¹⁴ advertised for community support for a local public university, and key advocates of the eventual private Bond University became active community lobbyists for a university. The community lobbying coalesced with Orr’s preparation of a Bond University of Applied Technology proposal in 1986, and widened to gain government support leading to the opening of Bond University in 1989. From the outset, it was intended that the university be developed in conjunction with an industrial park, hospital and joint research facilities – in other words, a knowledge precinct rather than an isolated university campus.

Progress towards the opening of Bond University was breathtakingly rapid. The Queensland Premier announced the state government’s support for the university in 1986, and the university opened in 1989 following the formation of a legal entity by the founding partners, the securing of finance, approval by three levels of government and the design and construction of the main campus buildings and the first stage of the technology park. The University was immediately beset by financial troubles in the 1990s recession, resulting in the undeveloped technology land eventually being sold to national developers, Delfin Lend Lease, who developed the transit oriented new neighbourhood of Varsity Lakes during the decade commencing in 1998, belatedly realising many of the originally intended knowledge precinct benefits. Figure 1 provides an aerial view of Bond University and Varsity Lakes.

Another early formal occurrence of the idea of a knowledge city on the Gold Coast was an aborted concept for a “Multifunction Polis” (MFP) on the northern Gold Coast in the period 1987-1990 (Burchill 2005). A Gold Coast consortium of property developers joined with the local and state government in a bid lodged in response to a call by the Australian (Federal) Government for a new city to be funded by Japanese investment through Japan’s Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI). The Queensland government put forward the consortium’s plan for a “technopolis” on a 3200 hectare greenfields site at Coomera on the northern Gold Coast. The Gold Coast MFP proposal was the most northerly node of a contemporaneous five-node knowledge corridor proposal for the developing 70 kilometre linear city, formulated by the Gold Coast 2020 Syndicate, a collaboration between local government representatives, universities, business and development associations and interested citizens.¹⁵ This five-node knowledge corridor was clearly a precursor to the 1990s Pacific Innovation Corridor strategy discussed below.

The federal government rejected the Gold Coast MFP proposal in favour of one from the South Australian government located in Adelaide’s outer northern suburbs. There are allegations of federal government “prejudice about Gold Coast land owners and developers” with its reputation as the domain of “the white shoe brigade”¹⁶, but this complaint overlooks the structural economic challenges facing South Australia’s manufacturing sector as a result of globalisation. With the decline of the Japanese economy in the early 1990s, together with a major economic recession in Australia at that time, the Adelaide proposal was ultimately watered down into a smaller ‘knowledge precinct’ around a new campus of the University of South Australia at Mawson Lakes – ironically developed in the decade around 2000 by the same developer as Varsity Lakes.

The first public university on the Gold Coast was established as a campus of the Brisbane-based Griffith University in 1990. For many years, this campus remained as an isolated single-purpose destination inland from the declining traditional administrative centre of Southport, until the formation of the Gold Coast Health and Knowledge Precinct described below.

It is significant that these early visions and plans for knowledge development in the Gold Coast were emerging when the city’s population was growing rapidly from about 162,000 at the 1981 census to 270,000 by the 1991 census¹⁷ (and which had doubled by the 2011 census).



FIGURE 1 Bond University and Varsity Lakes

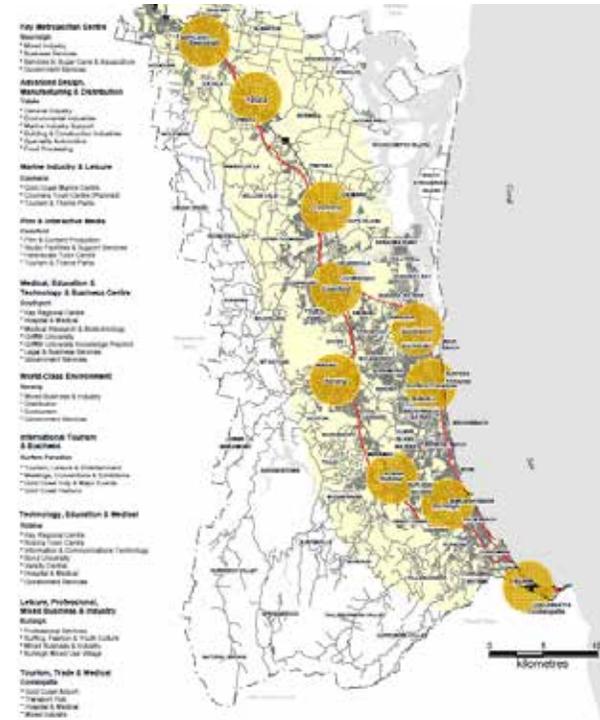


FIGURE 2 Pacific Innovation Corridor (PIC)

INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: CONCEPTUALISING AND IMPLEMENTING A SMART STATE, INNOVATION CORRIDOR AND RESEARCH TRIANGLE

The Queensland Government introduced a ‘Smart State’ policy via a series of policy documents between 1998 and 2005¹⁸, aimed at transitioning the state towards a knowledge economy. The Smart State suite of initiatives took on an urban and regional expression with support for the “development of technology incubators, parks and precincts”^{19 20}.

In parallel with the Smart State strategy, in 1998 Gold Coast business leaders drew on the knowledge developed in the MFP proposal, and joined with academics and State Government regional directors in a group to promote a Pacific Innovation Corridor (PIC) on the Gold Coast, expanding on the five-node knowledge corridor mentioned above²¹. The PIC became Council policy in its 2003 Economic Development Strategy, and was incorporated into the Gold Coast Planning Scheme 2003 (see Figure 2). The corridor designation sought to build on nascent strengths by grouping creative industries, innovative businesses and health and knowledge infrastructure in ten clusters spread along the two main north-south transport corridors serviced by the Pacific Highway, Gold Coast Highway, Gold Coast Railway and future public transport extension routes. While some claim a major benefit of the PIC was to expedite ICT investment along the corridor by government and private industry, the PIC was also criticised for failing to generate any significant knowledge industry outcomes²². The following initiative, the Gold Coast Health and Knowledge Precinct, constitutes an important element of the implementation of the PIC and counters the early criticism in relation to the key Southport knowledge node.

In the early 2000s, the Queensland government and Gold Coast City Council announced plans to consolidate health and knowledge infrastructure around the formerly stand-alone campus of Griffith University. Plans for the 200 hectare Gold Coast Health and Knowledge Precinct (GCHKP) co-locate Griffith University, the new Gold Coast University Hospital (opened 2013)²³, a private hospital (opened 2016), a selective health science-oriented senior

public high school (opened 2008), various research institutes, a mixed-use residential community for health and knowledge workers (opening 2018), and the first stage of the Gold Coast Light Rail (opened 2014)²⁴.

Realisation of the vision and plans for a GCHKP has been able to be expedited through the development of the mixed use residential precinct initially as the Commonwealth Games Village for the 2018 Commonwealth Games which are to be hosted in the city. 1252 apartments and townhouses are currently being privately developed for this purpose on seven hectares, with an adjacent seven hectares of open space (Figure 3). After the Games, the site will play a key role in the Knowledge Precinct when it will provide business premises, research facilities, interaction spaces and housing for knowledge workers²⁵.

Researchers have drawn attention to a tendency in the boosterist rhetoric of Gold Coast City Council and the Queensland government to highlight only the GCHKP around the biggest local university and hospital, rather than recognising the broader research “network” or ‘triangle’ based around three groupings of universities, hospitals and adjacent town centres within the coastal sprawl of the Gold Coast²⁶. This deficiency was soon to be addressed to some extent in collaborative planning by the City of Gold Coast and local business leaders.

In 2013, the City of Gold Coast released an updated *Economic Development Strategy 2013-2023*. The new strategy sought to “bring back the ‘have a go’ spirit” that underpinned earlier decades of Gold Coast development, and which resulted in achievements such as the rapid establishment of Bond University in the 1980s²⁷. The clarity and boldness of the PIC is not continued into the 2013 Economic Development Strategy, although elements of it are carried through and/or rebadged – notably the advanced design, manufacturing and distribution hub at Yatala in the north, the GCHKP at Southport, and the tourism trade hub around the Gold Coast Airport at Coolangatta in the south. The GCHKP is identified as a signature project, “a globally competitive precinct driving knowledge, innovation and commercialisation”²⁸. A “university research triangle” is identified in the strategy, with the GCHKP around Griffith University at the northern corner, Bond University at the central corner, and Southern Cross University at the third, southern corner at Gold Coast Airport. The inclusion of the research triangle nominally addresses earlier criticism of the focus on a single knowledge precinct (GCHKP) when the Gold Coast has two other potentially significant health and knowledge clusters²⁹. While this lack of balance, and lack of detailed strategies for two corners of the university research triangle is disappointing, the concept has been incorporated in City Plan 2015 with a greater level of detail. For example, under the Strategic Intent of “Globally Competitive Economy”, the Plan “will protect existing business and economic areas and provide capacity for expansion and growth of business and economic development and investment into the city by [among other things] promoting and facilitating knowledge, innovation and commercialisation activities in the city’s Research Triangle, including Griffith University/Gold Coast Health and Knowledge Precinct, Bond University/Varsity Central and the Southern Cross University/Gold Coast Airport”³⁰. Specific outcomes for “making modern centres” are identified for the centres around which two of the three universities are located (Southport and Robina), and the plan recognises the importance of improved public transport, a significant cultural centre and high quality public open space to the achievement of the research related outcomes³¹.

The single GCHKP is an important first step, but if this sprawling polycentric city region is to truly diversify its economic base, identity and the opportunities available to residents, it will need to pursue the ‘knowledge triangle’ ideas to realise a network of knowledge nodes to create a cohesive and productive urban structure linking its three university campuses, several hospitals (both public and private), town centres and expanded public and active transport infrastructure.



FIGURE 3 Gold Coast Health and Knowledge Precinct (GCHKP) under construction adjacent to Gold Coast University Hospital in 2016. The precinct will initially be used as the Commonwealth Games Village when the Gold Coast hosts the Games in 2018.

CONCLUSION: RECONCEPTUALISING THE GOLD COAST AS A KNOWLEDGE CITY

The qualities that continue to attract tourists to the Gold Coast – the natural environment, beaches, subtropical climate, recreational opportunities and relaxed lifestyle – have attracted the major population growth of the past half century. Just as permanent residents have been attracted by these qualities, the availability of these qualities can be expected to add to the attractiveness of the Gold Coast’s new knowledge precincts to knowledge workers.

This paper has shown that visions of the Gold Coast as a knowledge based city began to be formulated on a number of fronts in the 1980s, at a time when the current city of over half a million residents had a population of only around 200,000. Further planning and implementation for this new vision of the Gold Coast has proceeded at an uneven pace. Bond University, the first university on the Gold Coast, having been conceived only in 1986, opened as Australia’s first private not for profit university in 1989. The speed of this achievement is an example of the “have a go’ spirit” that exemplified the Gold Coast during its post-war growth³². Elements of the adjacent Bond University ‘technology park’ opened simultaneously, but the ‘knowledge based’ and ‘transit oriented’ Varsity Lakes community took another decade to be planned and then progressively developed in the early 2000s. The delay, although financially painful for Bond University, enabled Varsity Lakes to take on a more integrated ‘transit oriented development’ form rather than the 1970s ‘science park’ ideas that informed its conception.

The Gold Coast’s second university, a local campus of then Brisbane based Griffith University, quickly followed in 1980, reassuring the advocates of a more broadly based Gold Coast that their vision was a realistic one. It remained a stand-alone campus for thirty years until the creation of the surrounding Gold Coast Health and Knowledge Precinct incorporating major public and private hospitals and supportive urban development and public transport infrastructure. The challenge now is to develop the other corners of the ‘research triangle’ into significant knowledge nodes.

There has been continuity and persistence by the public and private sector advocates of a Gold Coast knowledge city and key foundations have now been established in this first generation of the idea. Together with the implementation of the first stages of an urban light rail network by 2014, after first being mentioned in planning

documents only in 1998, these achievements show that the Gold Coast's reputation for bold innovation is indeed intact. This innovation culture has moved from showy developments and boosterist promotions to a more sophisticated level through the conception and implementation of these city building proposals.

Although implementation has been sporadic, the case study demonstrates a continuity in narrative that has shaped outcomes towards the desired 'knowledge city', thereby creating a more cohesive and resilient urban structure integrating knowledge nodes, town centres and urban transport infrastructure investments. This case study will add knowledge to inform planners grappling with the transformation of similar coastal tourism areas into significant cities and city regions. It is hoped that future research will include comparative international case studies of coastal mass tourism cities that broaden their socioeconomic resilience beyond tourism to include knowledge based urban development.

Disclosure statement

The author is employed by Bond University as Associate Professor Urban Planning.

Notes on contributor

Dr Daniel O'Hare is Associate Professor Urban Planning in the Faculty of Society and Design at Bond University. He holds a PhD and MA in Urban Design from Oxford Brookes University, UK, and a Bachelor of Town Planning (Hons, Medal) from UNSW Australia. Before coming to Bond, he co-ordinated the postgraduate Urban Design Program at QUT from 1993-2006. His main research interests are the transformation of coastal tourism areas into sustainable city regions; cultural landscape interpretation and management; and urban design for walkable cities.

Endnotes

- 1 Bosman et al. 2016 provide a comprehensive picture of the urbanisation of this 'off the plan' city, showing how, for most of its history, Gold Coast planning has been private development-oriented and characterised by a strong laissez faire ethos.
- 2 cf Bramwell 2004; Ivars et al 2013
- 3 Yigitcanlar 2011: 389
- 4 Bramwell 2004; Agarwal and Shaw 2007; Jones and Phillips 2010
- 5 Campillo-Besses et al 2004
- 6 Economou and Vrassida 2005
- 7 Sassen and Portes 1993:473
- 8 eg Ivars et al. 2013
- 9 Baum 1998, in Butler 2011
- 10 Romero-Padilla et al. 2016
- 11 Cracknell 1994; Saunders 2014
- 12 Rowe 1991
- 13 Saunders 2014 is the source of information on the establishment of Bond University.
- 14 Albert Shire, covering the Gold Coast's inland areas, was amalgamated into Gold Coast City Council in 1994. Albert Shire's early interest in a university is noted in Saunders 2014.
- 15 Information here is from Burchill 2005. Research of local archives is necessary to establish exact dates and sequence of these early knowledge city ideas.
- 16 see Burchill 2005: 334
- 17 These census figures are cited in Saunders 2014 and Stimson and Minnery 1998 respectively.
- 18 Mort and Roan 2003; Couchman et al. 2008.
- 19 Queensland Innovation Council 2001
- 20 The first statutory *South East Queensland Regional Plan (2005)* for the region based around the state capital, Brisbane, aimed to "support existing and emerging clusters of science, innovation, and research and development" by designating 14 "knowledge hubs", including Griffith and Bond Universities in the City of Gold Coast (as cited in O'Hare et al 2012). These ideas were carried through in the updated *SEQRP 2009-2031* with greater recognition of the health component of the knowledge sector.
- 21 Burchill 2005
- 22 Burchill 2005 is positive while Couchman et al. 2008 are scathing in their (perhaps premature) criticism.
- 23 "Australia's first University-named hospital", according to the State Premier's media announcement of the opening of the new public hospital on 30 October 2013.
- 24 City of Gold Coast, Queensland Government and Griffith University (nd) GCHKP fact sheet.
- 25 Queensland Government Department of State Development, Commonwealth Games Village, accessed 5 April 2016 at <http://www.statedevelopment.qld.gov.au/index.php/major-projects/venues/gold-coast-2018-commonwealth-games/1062-commonwealth-games-village>.

- 26 O'Hare et al 2012
- 27 The decline of that spirit was a theme of lament in Burchill 2005.
- 28 Gold Coast Economic Development Strategy 2013-2023, p15.
- 29 O'Hare et al. 2012.
- 30 Gold Coast City Plan 2015 version 2, section 3.2.3.
- 31 This aspect of City Plan 2015 is in line with the arguments contained in the literature of creative cities and the knowledge economy.
- 32 The 'have a go' spirit behind the rapid urban growth of the Gold Coast is noted by Bosman et al. 2016, in *Off the Plan*, as a key aspect of the city's historically laissez faire approach to planning driven by the property development industry.

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Image sources

- Figure 1: Bond University, c2006 (with permission).
- Figure 2: Gold Coast City Planning Scheme 2003 (amended 2009).
- Figure 3: Daniel O'Hare, May 2016.

