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More Than Sunshine: Australia's Gold Coast Museologically Considered

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Introduction

City branding has become a feature of contemporary life. A marketing technique to attract tourism and investment, it neatly commodifies urban character and identity usually by being unapologetically hyperbolic. Most city brand statements suggest possibility, opportunity, and invite participation. The Gold Coast’s brand statement distils the city’s personality down to about 100 words in fun and cheeky prose. However, city branding does not always represent the richness of its subject. In the case of the Gold Coast, its complex cultural identity is ignored by its brand statement, leaving citizens, visitors and potential tourists none the wiser about how to meaningfully engage with and appreciate the full extent of its urban heritage, character and cultural identity.

For the Gold Coast, this superficial stereotyping needs to be challenged if the city’s distinctiveness is to be properly revealed and justly cherished. Most cities have a museum which helps to mount this very challenge by defining the current urban condition within a considered historical context. The Gold Coast is a substantial city by any measure, yet it lacks a city museum to present a coordinated program of urban history collection or conservation of significant aspects of the city’s heritage.

The International Council of Museums advocates for the importance of museums about the past, present and future of cities through its Committee for the Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities (CAMOC). It is therefore pertinent to ask:

“What is an appropriate museological construct for the Gold Coast?”

Objectives

This research aims to address an apparent opportunity to posit a hybrid museological approach for the Gold Coast that respects, reflects and supports the city’s unique position in Australian urbanism.

The approach extends from the conclusions of my Urban Design Masters Degree research published in 2001 under the title of “Invisible Landscapes” which developed theoretical and practical outcomes to interpret the unconventional cultural landscape of Surfers Paradise.

In particular, this new research takes a museological perspective and seeks to design efficient and effective ways for deployment of digital technologies that enable informatics, the semantic web, crowdsourcing, open data and community-creation. The ultimate objectives of this endeavour are to optimise curation of rich and meaningful content and collections, facilitate complex perception and derive more nuanced representations and interpretations of the city.

The research process will include implementation of a public project to develop deep understandings of the distinctive architectural typology of the Gold Coast’s tall buildings. The intention of this project is to pilot and refine an optimal mix of tools and techniques that can be replicated for any particular aspects of the Gold Coast, or indeed, any city.

How do you define the Gold Coast? Beach-side style or Brisbane’s backwater? A theme-park ride with a colourful past and an enviable future? A tourist mecca always on the verge of something big? Am I a stunning backdrop to a luxurious lifestyle? The icing on the cake? All show and no substance? Everyone has their opinion of me. The good. The bad. The ugly. But I am much more than the sum of my parts. I am many different things to many different people. But no single sentiment can define me. I am proud, unapologetic, independent. I am home, an endless summer holiday, a dynamic business environment. I am opportunity. I am lifestyle. There’s no other place in the world like me. I am the Gold Coast. Full Stop.

Outcomes

Theoretical
Advancements in cultural landscape appreciation theory that:
• reveal unexpected relationships arising through the emergence of new digital technologies; and
• facilitate more nuanced representations and interpretations of the city.

Practical
A guide comprising theories, principles, techniques and resources that can be used to derive effective and meaningful approaches to the curation of the distinctive features of cities.

This will be primarily geared for application by Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) sector. It will also benefit built environment students, design practitioners, and policy-makers.

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Brandgoldcoast.com.au
Novelist, Matthew Condon
writing about the Gold Coast
as a strange alchemy in
A Night at the Pink Poodle (1995:41)