

Gold Coast Motels, From Riches to Rags

Judy Austin, Heritage Team Leader Gold Coast City Council

Abstract

The majority of Australia's early motels were initially constructed on the coastal strip of the Gold Coast. Their presence epitomised the postwar shift towards a culture of leisure, mobility and consumption in Australian and western societies. One of the earliest motels built in Australia was the El Dorado in Surfers Paradise. When it opened in 1954 it was one of only three American-style motels in the country, and at the time was considered a modern and luxurious development. The popularity of motels grew quickly and by 1960 there were 36 motels established on the Gold Coast.

The term 'motel' is derived from 'motor hotel' and results from the need to accommodate motorists travelling away from home. The introduction of motels was a major revolution in holiday accommodation. Originating from a time when the motor vehicle was revered and car ownership was skyrocketing, motel design focussed on lodging the motoring public in private suites within close proximity to their vehicles. Motels also incorporated luxuries and novelties not commonly found in the average household such as bed-head radios, wall mounted televisions in the bedroom, in-ground swimming pools, mood lighting, ensuites and bedside phones. Lavish and innovative, motels became a much desired form of accommodation and part of the holiday experience.

However, in order to maintain its sense of fantasy and popularity as a tourist destination, the Gold Coast is continually re-inventing itself.. Although quite a novelty when they started emerging along the coastline in the 1950s, motels on the Gold Coast now go unnoticed in the landscape. Readily described as vernacular, post-war motels and other elements of the city's contemporary heritage are threatened with demolition to make way for modern development. The skyline of the Gold Coast, towering over the beach in a thin strip along the coastline, is the image now most famously associated with the city. The heritage challenge faced on Gold Coast is to selectively conserve important benchmarks in time in an environment where change has become part of the culture.