The beach house

The beach house holds a special place in the history of the Gold Coast and its built environment.

While the Gold Coast now has a permanent population of more than 500,000, its nineteenth century origins were as a holiday destination for people from Brisbane, Ipswich and surrounding areas. Some of the first houses built at Southport were holiday villas and beach houses. Indeed the Governor of Queensland, Sir Anthony Musgrave, built a holiday house at Southport in 1885 called Summer Place, which later became The Southport School. This official vote of confidence encouraged the growth and development of Southport at the time and others followed suit, constructing holiday houses at Southport and other parts of the coast into the twentieth century.

However for many the term beach house brings to mind a specific type and form of house of the mid-twentieth century period – a small house (or shack) of a few rooms, located near the beach, often single storey and usually constructed of fibrous cement sheeting, or “fibro”.

Fibro is also known as asbestos cement or AC sheeting. As a building material fibro gives a particular look that appears to suit the beach environment, and the fibro beach house is the quintessential beach house – a place to relax and take it easy, away from the stresses and strains of everyday life in a more tranquil setting.
What is fibro?

Asbestos is a mineral found in the ground, which contain strong fibres that have excellent durability, fire resistance and insulating properties. When bonded with a cement, it produced versatile sheeting and other products for building construction.

Materials containing asbestos were very common in the Australian residential building industry between the 1920s and late 1980s, before their production stopped. The strength and durability of asbestos fibre found a huge number of uses, not just for buildings, but also for insulation, brake linings, paper, textiles and packaging. It was ubiquitous, well received and popular.

However it’s now known that the breathing in of asbestos fibres causes asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma. People who contracted serious health problems from inhaling asbestos had usually been exposed to high levels of asbestos for a long time.

The use of all forms of asbestos has been banned in Australia since 2003. The ban is not retrospective and does not apply to asbestos installed prior to this date. There is no legal requirement for houses that were constructed of this material to be replaced, demolished, or have the asbestos removed.

Asbestos has not been used in domestic building materials since the 1980s, with cellulose fibres now used in building materials, and non-asbestos fibres such as glass now used in insulation products. This means that there are modern materials available, free from asbestos, which can be used to replace fibro in houses if so desired. The term fibre cement sheet (not “fibro” cement) is commonly used for modern day sheeting that does not contain asbestos.

Fibro in history

Fibro was first used as a building material in Australia in the early 1900s, being imported from England. The first manufacturing plant in Australia was established by a company called Wunderlich in Sydney in 1916. A year later another company, James Hardie & Co, also opened a plant in Sydney. Both companies subsequently opened plants in Brisbane where asbestos cement sheeting was manufactured, together with a range of other products for the building industry. Given its durability, fire resistance and insulating qualities outlined above, it was a very popular building material for a long time in Australia.

Fibro was also well suited as a building material for beach houses. It did not corrode, it was cheap, easy to transport, easy to cut to size, lightweight, and easy to work with. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many beach houses on the Gold Coast were constructed as holiday houses or weekenders for Brisbane residents, and in some cases were built by the owners themselves. This meant cost and simplicity were primary factors in the construction of beach houses, making fibro a popular material.

Both Wunderlich and James Hardie actively promoted the use of asbestos cement in beach houses. One brochure prepared by the Wunderlich company claimed:

Asbestos-cement is the logical choice when erecting buildings near the sea-shore. Besides possessing outstanding attributes as regards strength and the ability to withstand rigorous weather conditions, this material is unaffected by the disintegrating effects of salt-air.

While whole houses could be constructed of asbestos cement sheeting which was applied to a timber frame, this was not the only use for asbestos in a house of this period. It was used in drainage and vent pipes, in roofing and guttering, and for house interiors, in particular to line kitchens and bathrooms. It was also commonly used for sheds, garages and other outbuildings.

A fibro beach shack at Surfers Paradise, one street back from the Esplanade – a small, single storey house constructed on the ground, that is modest and unassuming.
The Gold Coast and fibro

Some parts of the Gold Coast feature a large number of fibro houses. Not everyone likes them, they are often small, they may be shabby and by today’s standards are considered quite basic. Yet they have a charm and simplicity of design that is increasingly being appreciated.

Many of these beach houses are located near the beach, while some were well away from the water. Some were shacks with a few rooms, while others were built in the standard house forms of the period but clad with fibro instead of weatherboard. As many were holiday houses, people often felt free to be more adventurous or informal with the design compared with their primary residence in Brisbane or elsewhere. Most of the Gold Coast fibro houses are single or double storey, constructed on a concrete slab or a low brick base. Some are elevated on low stumps, some on high stumps with a garage beneath. Many also had corrugated ‘super six’ asbestos cement sheeted roofs.

This quote from the Queensland architect Lindsay Clare captures the contribution of the fibro house to the built environment of Queensland:

*The small-scale fibro beach house plays an important role in the history of Queensland housing. The buildings had an economy of construction and attention to detail, and they developed their own character and architectural language.*

*They were modest in plan, elevated on stumps, and had simple skillion roofs. Often they were groups of single-room pavilions, separated for living, sleeping and washing. The addition of a front verandah was commonly expressed with a butterfly roof.*

*These humble dwellings rarely approached the respectability of the traditional Queensland timber and tin house, but they nevertheless created a distinct identity of the community. Somehow the limited choice of materials and colour added to the character and scale of the dwellings within the coastal landscape. They became an intrinsic part of our history and an expression of aspirations for a relaxed lifestyle.*

The fibro house was such a common element on the Gold Coast that Victorian architect and critic Robin Boyd, made the following observation about Surfers Paradise in 1957:

*Here is a fibro cement paradise under a rainbow of plastic paint. It is any Australian country town plus optimism. It is a Utopia of souvenir shops, bamboo bridges spanning murky rock pools, night clubs, ‘fabulous floor shows’, ‘bikini bars’ selling floral wisps of bathers and Hawaiian shirts through windows open to the footpath…beer gardens in no hurry to close at 10, shops open as long as there are customers awake, Sunday movies, signs, hoardings, posters, neons, primary colours – purple, green, and orange straight from the brimming pot.*

Fibro houses are found in many suburbs along the coastal strip, from Southport to Surfers Paradise, Mermaid Beach, Palm Beach to Coolangatta. They provide a snapshot of a particular time in the history of the Gold Coast at the middle of the 20th century, when small, unassuming houses were constructed on what must have been relatively cheap blocks of land, when the beach house was a small weekender, and not a place of permanent accommodation, and when the pace of life on the Gold Coast was much quieter than it is now.
Examples

Examples of Gold Coast fibro houses. Some could be described as beach shacks, but others are just standard houses of their period.
Ar Dee at Tugun. Construction began in 1955 but was not completed for a number of years. Like many such houses, it was a holiday house built by the owner and his family in stages when they came down from Brisbane for seaside holidays.

## Dealing with fibro

It is often difficult to identify the presence of asbestos by sight. The only way to be certain of the existence of the material is to have a sample analysed by a laboratory. Sampling is in itself hazardous and should only be done by a competent person and the material analysed only in accredited laboratories. Where materials are not tested it is safer to treat it as if it does contain asbestos, particularly if it is a product of a type and age that typically contains asbestos.

However knowing that your home is made of fibro or asbestos does not mean your health is at risk or that your house needs to be demolished tomorrow. Current scientific and medical evidence supports the fact that simply living in a building containing asbestos is not dangerous as long as the asbestos is in good condition (i.e. undamaged and undisturbed). Issues usually arise when people are unaware of the hazards of working with asbestos cement and do not take appropriate precautions.

It is important to keep the fibro or asbestos cement sheeting in good order so that the asbestos fibre is safely sealed by the cement within the material. However, if fibro is cracked or broken, asbestos particles are likely to be released. Also, if left unpainted, fibro can eventually weather exposing asbestos fibre, so it is safer to keep exterior surfaces painted.

Adapting and conserving

The fibro beach house should not be overlooked as an important cultural icon and a defining element of the Gold Coast built environment. These houses do not need to be demolished just because they are constructed of fibro but should be celebrated as a part of the Gold Coast’s history and culture.

In adapting or making changes to a fibro house, there are two approaches:

**Keep the material**

- By keeping the material painted and well maintained it should continue to last into the future.
- If necessary, internal fibro sheets can be covered over with new fibre cement sheets. Timber cover strips and mouldings can be reused, replacing damaged pieces with matching new material where necessary, and setting them out as they were.
- An asbestos roof can be safely sealed or encapsulated rather than replaced.

**Replace the material with a similar material**

- If the material is not, or unlikely to be, well maintained it is possible to have the fibro sheeting replaced with modern fibre cement sheets. This is a very similar material and largely maintains the look, feel and overall aesthetic of the original fibro.
- Internally, fibro sheets can be removed and replaced with new fibre cement sheets. Again, timber cover strips and mouldings can be reused. Custom made replacements can be made from glass reinforced concrete or fabricated from sheet metal.
- If the asbestos roof sheeting has weathered badly, it may require replacement. There are companies which can custom make corrugated “super six” roofing from glass reinforced concrete, or roll sheet metal to the same profile.

Any work to remove original fibro sheets should be carried out by licensed contractors who will ensure the work is done properly and the asbestos disposed of safely. The removal of the original building fabric of a fibro house may not be considered a major problem when addressing issues of authenticity or integrity.
References


Thom Blake, Gerard Murtagh and Catherine Brouwer, At the beach: the cultural significance of beach settlements and beach houses, 2001.

http://www.deir.qld.gov.au/asbestos/ [an essential web site for all home renovators and anyone else working with asbestos]

Further information

Where do I obtain further information?

Further information visit our web site at http://heritage.goldcoast.qld.gov.au or contact;

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