Nineteenth century rural

The very earliest houses in the wider Gold Coast region were not in the towns but were farm houses in rural areas. European settlement in the Gold Coast occurred from the mid nineteenth century with timber cutting, cotton and sugar growing, small scale cropping, dairy farming and other agricultural and pastoral endeavours. Houses were constructed on farms in Beenleigh, Yahwulpah, Pimpama and Nerang from the 1860s and 1870s.

These early farm houses had a number of common elements. They were nearly always single storey (there were few, if any, two storey farm houses) and constructed of timber, either slabs hewn from the many trees around the area or from milled timber boards once local mills were operational. The houses were either constructed with their bearers directly on the ground, or were elevated on low timber stumps.
Houses elevated on high stumps tended to be constructed a bit later. A distinctive feature of many rural houses of this period was the custom of exposing the timber stud frame on the exterior of the house by lining only the inside face of the frame – since termed “single skin construction”. This meant that houses could be built more quickly and cheaply. The method usually demonstrates a relatively early construction date as it went out of fashion by World War II.

In the 1860s and 1870s roofs were clad with timber shingles. Once corrugated iron sheeting was manufactured, from the 1870s and 1880s, this material replaced timber shingles. The roof form was typically a longitudinal ridge with a gable at either end. Later, roofs with hips (sloping sides at each end) forming pyramids or short-ridged roofs became more common.

“Core” is sometimes used to refer to the central part of an early house, that is exclusive of verandahs and kitchen.

While some roofs were true pyramids with pointed apexes, others had short ridges usually running side to side, but still with the appearance of a pyramid. Often this was because houses had central hallways which made them rectangular rather than square.

Internally the houses were usually small, two or perhaps three rooms wide and only one or two rooms deep. Sometimes houses that were only one room deep were extended out the back by adding a second, similar module or a skillion. In small houses there were usually no hallways – this was considered a waste of precious space. Rooms opened onto one another or access was via the verandah. Hallways tended to be features of larger houses. Kitchens and bathrooms were in fully or partially detached buildings at the rear of the house, if constructed at all.
These houses usually had at least a front verandah, to provide shade to the house, help cool the internal rooms and provide extra living space. A rear verandah was also common. Sometimes verandahs extended around the four sides of the house, particularly on those built close to the ground. Sometimes the verandah roof extended directly out from the main roof but at a less steep pitch creating a bell-cast, or broken back, roof. However the stepped verandah became more common, where the verandah roof came off the building below the roof of the core.

In the simplest dwellings, often the verandah had no railings or ornamentation. In more substantial houses, balustrades (usually vertical dowel but sometimes a diagonal cross balustrade) were normally used and verandah posts could be decorated with timber brackets and mouldings. Wooden lattice screens provided shade and privacy. The use of cast iron lattice was relatively uncommon.

Veivers family in the garden at “Talgai Homestead”, Mudgeeraba, Queensland, circa 1900. This single skin house was built of red cedar in 1879, and had a pyramid roof and encircling verandah with a stepped roof, timber post brackets and dowel balustrade. (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library)

This rural building form was not confined to the earliest period of European settlement in the Gold Coast region, but continued into the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The main change was that by the Federation period of the early 1900s, the stepped roof was replaced by the bungalow style roof. This is where the building core and verandah are protected under a single roof with no change in pitch. Cast iron decoration also went completely out of fashion and external timber ornamentation showed the influence of the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements. Towards the end of the 19th century, high stumps became commonplace as they had advantages in hilly or flood prone areas as well as providing extra living space beneath the house.

Laurel Hill was constructed in 1884 for the Pimpama arrowroot grower and manufacturer, William Doherty, as his farm house. The house, located west of Coomera, is entered in the Queensland Heritage Register and the Gold Coast Local Heritage Register. The single storey house is elevated on low stumps and was constructed of timber with exposed timber studs to the front (single skin) wall of the house under the verandah, and weatherboards to the other walls. The roof has a longitudinal ridge and is covered in corrugated iron sheeting. The house has verandahs to four sides, with a separate kitchen wing to the rear.

The Schmidt farmhouse at Worongary is also entered in the Queensland Heritage Register and the Gold Coast Local Heritage Register. The house was constructed in circa 1890s as a farm house for a small dairy and cropping farm at this location. Constructed of timber and on low stumps, the house has exposed timber studs to the front wall (under the verandah), with timber weatherboards to the side and rear elevations. The front section of the house is two rooms covered by a roof with a longitudinal ridge, with an attached kitchen or service wing of another two rooms at the back of the house. The roof is covered in corrugated iron sheeting, but was originally shingled. The verandah roof to the front has a different pitch to that of the core of the house.
This is an example of a large rural house built in the 1880s or 90s for a prosperous landowner. Note the decorative woodwork on the verandah which is usually absent from humbler dwellings. Instead of dowel balustrades, the house has diagonal cross balustrades. The verandah entrance has a gable fretwork pediment.

Chigigum in the Numinbah Valley was built about 1910. It has a later bungalow roof form and extensive timber balustrades. It is set on high stumps and has single skin timber construction (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).

Friedensheim, built at Rocky Point in 1914 by the Heck family, kept the earlier stepped roof form, but used Art Nouveau style decoration that was popular during the Federation period (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).

One housing style that was once quite significant on the Gold Coast, especially to the north around the Logan, Albert and Coomera Rivers, was introduced by German settlers. In the nineteenth century large numbers of German immigrants set up farms in this area and built houses following the traditions of their homeland. As the image below shows, these dwellings were barn-like dwellings with exposed timber frames and brick or plaster infill (a technique generally known as half-timbering), and had a storage area in the roof space.

A German house in the 1870s. Although this house was in Bethania, it typifies the half-timbered style of construction used by German settlers on the Gold Coast. (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).

While there were no doubt many houses constructed in the rural hinterland of the Gold Coast in the mid to late nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth, only a small number survive now. No German-style houses are known to exist within the city.
Nineteenth century urban

The first truly urban houses were constructed in Southport, the first major town of the Gold Coast. The town was initially settled in the 1870s, as a resort for the wealthy of Brisbane who found it a desirable location for day trips and seaside holidays. A long esplanade, Marine Parade, was surveyed along the foreshore, and by the end of that decade the first houses and hotels were constructed here, many by Brisbane residents as weekenders or holiday rentals. People also began to settle at Southport rather than just visit, and by the early 1880s Southport had a permanent population of about 200. At the end of that decade the population of Southport had increased remarkably, to almost 1,000.

Photographs of this period of Southport show the housing stock of the late nineteenth century town. Some of these early Southport houses were not unlike the rural farm houses described earlier, which is not unexpected as they were constructed at largely the same time.

By the 1890s the four room cottage had evolved. This was a house constructed of timber (now often chamferboard) on low stumps, with a square (or almost square) four room core rather than rectangular plan. As the planning evolved the roof form changed from the earlier parallel ridge to a pyramidal or “short-ridge” one.

Kitchens were at the rear of the core under the verandah roof or fully or partially detached from the house. Verandahs were built to the front and rear, and perhaps one or two sides, and their roofs tended to be separate from that of the main core and were often in a curved or “bull-nose” profile.

As an area became more urbanised and houses were constructed close together, side verandahs became less common. An asymmetrical design was also introduced, with one of the front rooms projecting forward as a gable. Service areas such as laundries and washhouses were normally out the back, either as separate structures or lean-tos. Toilets were also placed in the rear yard, and were either set over a cesspit or had a pan that was emptied by the daily nightsoil collector.

Given the growth of Southport and the Gold Coast generally since the 1880s very few late nineteenth century houses survive here. Surrey House, in Nerang Street, Southport, is one of the oldest houses remaining. Early photographs of the house show its original form – timber construction with exposed studs, square plan, pyramidal roof sheeted in corrugated iron, verandahs around three sides with a separate verandah roof. Other smaller cottages of the period survive as well – the four room core with a separate verandah roof.

These nineteenth century houses are predominantly found in Southport and at few other locations around the Gold Coast.
Early twentieth century cottage

In the early twentieth century (1910s to the 1920s) the small four room cottage of the late nineteenth century period was continued, but altered slightly. Basic building materials of timber framing, timber weatherboards or chamferboards and a corrugated iron sheeted roof were still popular. The roof remained generally pyramidal. However by the twentieth century cottages tended to be elevated on stumps of around 6 feet (1.8 metres) in height, and the separate verandah roof was dispensed with, as the verandah roof continued in the same plane as that of the core. This form gave rise to the commonly used term of “bungalow” in describing this type of house.

The internal arrangement of these houses was very simple. Almost square in plan, a front verandah provided access to the core of the house that typically contained two bedrooms, a living room, and a dining room. Most had a central hallway. A stove recess was provided in the kitchen located at the rear of the core, and often under a hipped roof running off the main roof. Stairs to the rear led to the bathroom which was often located under the house or separately in the yard. This was the simplest version of this cottage. Some had another two rooms at the rear, for a third bedroom and an internal bathroom, but essentially the square or rectangular plan was the standard. Sometimes a side verandah was added, as shown with the adjacent layout, or a front room extended forward under a gable.

Small cottages of this type were promoted by the State Advances Corporation or Workers’ Dwelling Board (the forerunner to the Queensland Housing Commission) under its “workers dwelling” scheme. Initiated in 1909, the workers dwelling scheme was supported by government legislation that allowed for the granting of government loans to allow people of limited incomes to build and own a house for themselves.

Designs were provided by architects of the Queensland Department of Public Works, which were constructed under the supervision of the State Advances Corporation on land owned by the people themselves, with simple terms of repayment and low interest. Many people across the state took advantage of this scheme as a means to build and own their own home, including parts of the Gold Coast.

Also influential later in this period were the “kit homes”, the prefabricated houses promoted by the Brisbane-based building companies such as Campbells and Redicut. These companies also promoted their own designs for houses in this period, and were very similar to the designs of the workers’ dwellings prepared by the State Advances Corporation.

The workers’ dwellings of this type and form are common occurrences in Brisbane suburbs and regional towns of Queensland. A number of these small cottages can be found in the Southport as well as Kirra and Coolangatta, which were settled and developed in the 1910s and 1920s.
An early twentieth century cottage at Coolangatta. Like many of these surviving houses, the verandahs have been enclosed to create more living space.

A specialised form of accommodation that appeared during this period was the shop/house. This had a commercial space facing the street and a residential section for the proprietor and their family either at the back or on an upper level. An awning or first floor verandah over the footpath was a common feature. Shop/houses were built in the main streets of Southport, Nerang and other commercial centres through to the early 20th century. By the 1950s competition with new shopping centres and supermarkets, the decline of the traditional retail centres, and changing social expectations, particularly the growing desire to live in a modern, detached house in the suburbs, saw their popularity fall. Some still survive in older areas of the Gold Coast, but often without any residential function.

The West Burleigh Store, built in 1935, is a rare surviving example of a double storey shop/house.

Hotels

Hotels were the first purpose-built structures on the Gold Coast for accommodating travellers. In the opening decades of non-Indigenous settlement, they appeared at the main coach stops on the roads from Brisbane to the New South Wales border, such as Yatala, Pimpama, Nerang, Southport, Elston (Surfers Paradise), Burleigh and Tallebudgera. Later, when the railway (1887-1904) was introduced, hotels sprang up at stations such as West Burleigh.

During this period, hotels played a far greater community role than they do today, and so were far more numerous. Not only did they provide meals, accommodation and refreshments to travellers, but before the establishment of civic infrastructure such as town halls, they often served as venues for public meetings, licensing courts, post offices, dances and local socialising. In addition, they could offer the services of a blacksmith, laundry, tobacconist and other commercial enterprises.

The earliest hotels were modest wooden, single storey structures built along similar lines to the houses of the period: slab, weatherboard or single-skin construction with one or more verandahs. They usually contained a public bar, dining room and a number of rooms for guests. To the rear would be the kitchen and various service buildings and areas, including stables and paddock for travellers’ horses. Toilet and bath facilities were shared, although chambers pots, wash stands and portable zinc bath tubs meant that guests could conduct their ablutions within the privacy of their rooms.

The hotels built from the late 1870s became larger and usually double storey, with extensive verandah areas on all levels and fine architectural detailing. In general, the public areas were housed on the ground floor and the accommodation was on the top floor.

Thomas Hanlon’s Ferry Hotel, 1872. The hotel was erected in 1871 on the southern bank of the Albert River, at the Yatala ferry crossing. It was of timber single-skin construction with a shingle roof (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).
B. Cockerill’s modestly built Nerang Hotel, Benowa, 1872 (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).

The Southport Hotel was one of the oldest and most fashionable hotels in Southport. Opened in 1878 by Richard Gardiner, it was a popular meeting place for workers from nearby sawmill or passing horsemen (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).

The magnificent American style Grand hotel, Deepwater Point, Labrador, was erected in 1886 by a syndicate of Brisbane and local businessmen, and at the time was the finest hotel in Queensland (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).

Hotels along these early lines were still being built in the early 20th century. However wooden construction was vulnerable to fire and decay, and by the 1930s, some of the older hotels were replaced by modern brick buildings.

The heyday of such hotels, though was passing. Better public infrastructure, competition with newer forms of accommodation such as motels, and changes to liquor laws that allowed other venues to sell alcohol, were among the reasons for their mid-twentieth century decline. Some old hotels, such as the Railway Hotel in Southport (which became the Del Plaza) were replaced by new structures during this period, while some completely new hotels, such as the Kirra Beach Hotel (established 1956), were built.

The first Hotel Cecil, top, was erected in 1908 on the southwest corner of Nerang and Scarborough Streets, Southport. It was replaced in 1938 by a masonry building, above, in a modernist streamline style (images courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).

Lennon’s Broadbeach Hotel was built in 1956 and at the time was the tallest building on the Gold Coast. This luxury, five-storey hotel contained two public bars, a private bar, a vast swimming pool, landscaped gardens and 100 accommodation units (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).
Early twentieth century boarding house

The boarding house, or guest house, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a common feature of the Gold Coast. They provided accommodation and meals for holiday makers and other travellers who did not want to stay at hotels. Less noisy or rowdy than hotels, they tended to offer their guests a family-style environment. As they were a direct result of the coast’s popularity and role as a place for holidays and leisure they were less common in other places.

In scale and materials the boarding house appeared little different from other houses, but it was, however, a slightly different domestic building form. The boarding house was constructed of timber weatherboards with a roof of corrugated iron sheeting, or for the better establishments Marseilles tiles. Roofs were pyramidal, or hipped and gabled. While most residences of this period were single storey, the boarding house was invariably two or even three storeys, to maximise the available accommodation. Verandahs to all levels were common for shade and for providing areas for rest and relaxation.

Some boarding houses were created from existing large houses, while some such as the Chelmsford at Southport, the Stella Maris at Coolangatta and Greenmount at Greenmount were purpose built. The Stella Maris advertised itself as a high class boarding establishment, offering every convenience to visitors. Rooms were lighted throughout with acetylene gas, bathrooms had hot and cold water, with modern toilets and spacious balconies.

Guest houses were particularly popular in Coolangatta, where they also persisted for well into the twentieth century. Even in the 1950s and 60s, they attracted many holiday makers, who tended to be very loyal to their chosen house. A fierce but friendly rivalry existed between the Coolangatta guesthouses, played out by patrons in the streets and on the beach through the famous hokey pokey dances and other competitions.

Few if any boarding houses are thought to survive. Like the early hotels, the boarding house was made redundant by the more modern motels and holiday apartment buildings that came afterwards, and the changing taste of the holiday clientele.
Interwar bungalow

In the period between World Wars I and II the Gold Coast witnessed a spurt of development. With changes to banking legislation and the appearance of government housing schemes, access to housing loans became easier, making home ownership across the nation affordable to a wider section of the population. Shorter working hours, the development of the highway from Brisbane, and growing private motor car ownership also encouraged more visitors to the seaside. Numerous weekenders and guesthouses were built alongside the residences of the locals within Southport, Coolangatta and the little villages in between.

The simple four room cottage of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries changed substantially. The houses in this period became larger, with up to three bedrooms. At the same time they were more compact and rationally designed, with kitchens and bathrooms integrated into the house, and the dining and living rooms often being open plan and differentiated by an timber fretwork arch. Externally houses were usually asymmetrical rather than the symmetrical.

The houses of this period demonstrated the influence of the Californian Bungalow, an American domestic design imported into Australia towards the end of World War I. Not to be confused with the bungalow roof style, its influence was strong throughout the country, and in Queensland it was adapted to the existing domestic building and design traditions. Some features of the Californian Bungalow style, such as low pitched roofs, deep eaves and verandahs, half-timbered or shingled gables, and bay windows were applied to the traditional Queensland timber bungalow, resulting in a unique style of house now often referred to as the “Queenslander”.

Timber weatherboards became the preferred external cladding material and roofs were still finished in corrugated iron sheeting. Roof forms became more complex and featured one or more projecting gables to the street. Often between the gables was a small verandah, or porch, to the front of the house; sometimes a verandah was added to one of the sides as well. These often evolved into “sleep-outs”, a semi-open space somewhere between a traditional open verandah and an enclosed room. The verandahs usually had timber posts with slat balustrades rather than dowel, or were partially enclosed with weatherboards. The central hallway of earlier periods was largely done away with, often replaced by a small entry vestibule.

Some variations on this style departed from the traditional bungalow roof form, with the main roof instead being gabled, running either perpendicular to the street or parallel to it, with additional smaller projecting gables at the front and often the sides.

Again, the State Advances Corporation or Workers’ Dwelling Board had an important role to play in this period in the design of houses in Queensland. The scheme of low cost loans to people on limited incomes continued into the 1920s and 1930s, with designs provided by architects of the Queensland Department of Public Works, and the houses built under the supervision of the State Advances Corporation. Many of these were of the porch and gable form, with projecting gables, front and/or side verandahs, square plans, raised on high timber stumps.

The houses of this type and form are common in Brisbane suburbs and regional towns of Queensland, and a number of them can be found in the Gold Coast suburbs of Southport, Coolangatta and Burleigh. Some examples demonstrate this overall building form but were constructed in fibre cement sheet rather than timber weatherboards – reflecting the coastal setting and the relative ease of building in this material.
Other inter-war styles

In the 1920s and 30s there were a number of building styles that were important nationally. These were the period styles – Georgian, Mediterranean, English Domestic and Spanish Mission – and Modernism, which was a reaction against historical revival architecture. On the Gold Coast these appear to have had limited direct influence on housing, possibly because they did not particularly suit the area’s holiday lifestyle.

The period styles tended to be formal and reserved for prestigious dwellings, while Modernism was considered avant-garde and therefore of limited appeal to the largely conservative Australian public at this period. When seen on the Coast, these styles were mostly used for public buildings. However, a few need to be discussed as a small number of houses were built in these styles, while some of their design features were incorporated into the more popular bungalow type.

The English Domestic was a picturesque style harkening back to the rural buildings of 16th century England. It was notable for steeply sloping roofs, one or more gables facing the street, and facades of fake half-timbering. The half-timbered look was achieved with white stuccoed or painted fibro or brick walls with dark painted timber battens attached to the outside to mimic traditional posts and bracing. Other common elements included small paned (often leadlight) casement windows and decorative brickwork.

The most elaborate version of the style became known as Stockbroker Tudor because it was used for prestige homes to give them the look of a stately manor. Humbler suburban homes adopted a simpler version, sometimes known as English Cottage. This could be reproduced in brick, timber or fibro, and saw the appearance of quaint, steeply roofed houses with features such as painted shutters, crooked chimneys, leadlight windows and arched brick entry porches.
The Spanish Mission style was popular for some of the municipal buildings constructed on the Gold Coast, including the Southport and Main Beach Bathing Pavilions, and the surf life saving club houses at Main Beach, Surfers Paradise, Broadbeach and Burleigh Heads. The style was characterised by masonry construction, roughcast stucco (stones were put into the stucco mix to create a textured pattern), twisted columns, white or pale colours, and terracotta tiled roofs. Few houses of this period were constructed in this style, but one known example is Santa Nita, a house constructed for Robert Johnson in 1936 in Southport (now Somerville Funerals).

The Modernism movement of the 1920s and 30s comprised two main schools. One was the Art Deco or Jazz style, which began in France after the end of World War I as a sophisticated high-end style based on fine craftsmanship, and was notable for luxurious finishes and materials, rich colour and stylised images of such subjects as deer and flowers. However during the 1920s it found a wider audience through mass production and evolved into a diverse style that drew from a wide range of influences, including Cubist art, jazz music, skyscraper architecture and aerodynamic design.

Amongst the repertoire of motifs at this period were geometrical patterns such as zig-zags, sunbursts, zigzurats and chevrons. Some experts are of the opinion that the term Art Deco should only be applied to the original French-derived style of the early 1920s, and that what came later is better described as Modernism. Rightly or wrongly, the Art Deco label has found widespread usage and been applied to many buildings of the interwar period, including the former Southport Town Chambers and some commercial buildings in Southport and Coolangatta.

The former Southport Town Chambers, built in 1935, is an example of the Art Deco style applied to a public building.

The second school of Modernism, often referred to as Functionalism or International style, rejected decoration for purely functional design that was free of applied ornamentation. In practice within suburbia, many of the houses built in the modern genre mixed and matched features from both schools. One notable version which appeared in the early 30s was the Streamlined or Ship style, which drew inspiration from the design of the ocean liners of the period. It was characterised by horizontal lines, curved corners and windows, and flat roofs. Other features could include porthole windows and tubular steel railings.

A good example of the streamline style is the commercial building, Trustee House, in Southport.
Mid-century house/flats

The mid-century house/flat is another phenomenon of the Gold Coast, like the boarding house, which is not as common in other cities of Queensland, being a product of the Gold Coast’s holiday environment.

Using a domestic building form, and importantly on a single residential allotment, enterprising individuals would construct a residential building of usually two storeys which provided at least four flats – two up and two down. The flats would have a common party wall with their neighbour. Each flat had its own front door, and for those on the upper floors, each had its own staircase. The flats were no doubt small, and there was little provision of car ports or garages. Typical building materials varied, and examples can be found of timber buildings demonstrating these qualities, or fibre cement sheeted buildings, with roofs of concrete tiles or corrugated asbestos cement sheeting.

By providing four separate flats or units on the one block of land, these flats maximised rental returns and provided options for holiday letting or more permanent rental accommodation. In the days before strata-titling (pre-1960s), individual units or flats could not be sold separately so it would appear that these buildings were constructed and owned by a landlord and rented out to separate tenants.

Few if any documentary records exist about the construction of such buildings. Analysis of the physical evidence suggests that these buildings were constructed from the 1920s to about the 1960s, when they were superseded by other more popular building forms that provided better returns again.

These house/flats could be found at any and all locations along the coastal strip on the Gold Coast, including Southport, Surfers Paradise, Broadbeach and Coolangatta.

Queen Vista, a two storey asbestos cement sheeted residential building at Surfers Paradise, is another example of the two storey residential building providing a number of flats. Although of different materials and a slightly different form, in many ways it is a similar building to the one above.

Antonio’s Holiday Apartments (now demolished), in Coolangatta. This was an example of a block of flats based on the inter-war bungalow with front porch.

A two storey timber residential building at Coolangatta providing four flats – two up and two down. It has the form and size of a single house but contains a number of flats.
Conventional and Post-war austerity

During the Second World War (1939-1945) domestic building largely stopped in response to the war effort. At the end of the war, life slowly returned to normal. With returned service personnel starting families, and improving wages and working conditions, a national housing boom began. This boom was particularly evident on the Gold Coast, where many service personnel who enjoyed ‘R&R’ during the war had now decided to settle here and set up businesses. With the introduction of paid annual leave, more holiday makers also came to the coast and there was also a surge in the building of holiday houses.

By 1947 the population of the Gold Coast had passed 12,000, and there were just over 3,000 houses, mainly of timber and fibre cement sheeting. This represented a doubling of the population since 1933. In the post-war period the Gold Coast grew significantly in population and extent.

From 1946 to 1952 there were restrictions on private building construction. Houses could only be built to a maximum size of approximately 110 square metres, building materials and labour were in short supply and expensive. This meant houses got smaller and verandahs and porches all but disappeared as they were included in the measurements in the overall size of houses. Elaborate historical revival styles lost favour because they were too costly, and out of necessity people began to embrace the simplicity of Functionalism. Because of the shortage of builders, many owners undertook the construction of their houses themselves.

By the late 1930s houses in the style known as Conventional had appeared in Australian suburbs. Having evolved from the traditional asymmetrical bungalow, they were not modern in design, but were stripped of all period detailing. The medium pitch roof was either hipped, gabled or hip and gable. The most common forms were double- or triple-fronted (stepped back in plan so that two or more faces are orientated to the street). Entry was usually through a small porch and windows were plain. Brick or brick veneer with a tiled roof was the ideal, and this basic form is still being built today, and can be seen in abundance in the Gold Coast housing estates of the 1970s onwards.

During the post-war period, this style evolved in response to building restrictions into what has been termed the Post-War Austerity style. Post-war modest is another term used. This typology refers to extremely plain, compact, usually single storey, houses, built on the ground on concrete slabs or on a brick base. They were often square or L-shaped in plan, but triple fronted examples were also built. External materials could be timber, or equally brick, or fibre cement sheeting. Windows were often vertical sliding sashes with horizontal glazing bars. This grouping includes the “fibro beach shack”, which is discussed in more detail in Guideline No.10.

Internally, the modern kitchen arrived with its stainless steel sink and built-in cupboards. Internal flushing toilets also became desirable, but the introduction of sewerage to the Gold Coast was slow, with many parts not connected until the 1970s, so septic systems were required. These were really only available to wealthier households, so in many areas the traditional outside ‘dunny’ remained.

Above are two examples of the Post-war Austerity style. The house on the top is double fronted and made of weatherboards with a tile roof. The house above is triple fronted fibro with a super 6 asbestos roof.

These houses are found in many places on the Gold Coast where new subdivisions were developed in the 1950s and 60s, including west Southport, Labrador, Surfers Paradise, Miami, Mermaid Beach, Kirra, and Palm Beach.

Further example of a post-war austerity house built of fibro. This house was built in Coolangatta during 1952 (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).
Post-war modern

In the 1950s and 1960s a series of houses were constructed on the Gold Coast that can be termed Modern or Contemporary. These houses could be single or double storey, constructed of fibro, timber and/or masonry, and had either a low-pitch gable, flat, skillion or butterfly roof. Glazing became more prominent in the design, with large areas of hopper windows, glass curtain walls, and glass doors. In plan they could be L- U- H- or T-shaped, or enclose a central courtyard.

Stone feature walls, murals and panels of strong colours were utilised in the exteriors of these houses. Other fashionable features included patios, pergolas, car ports, angled posts and geometric wrought iron balustrades.

The influence of Abstract Art could be seen in the dramatic juxtaposition of angled roofs and complex geometrical forms, while the Space Age was clearly reflected in tapering columns that looked like the fins of rockets. The modern style proved very popular on the Gold Coast as it was relatively easy and cheap to build, which suited the numerous amateur builders. As a whole, these houses exhibit a high level of inventiveness and diversity as people experimented with the idiom to suit their budgets, tastes and needs.

These two fibro houses are of the Modern typology. They feature skillion roofs, geometrical detailing and massing, and, often, large areas of glass.

These Broadbeach houses demonstrates some other popular features of the Modern style: a low-pitched gable roof, murals, vertical cladding, glass walls and concrete breezeblock screens.

The above two houses show two more popular post-war elements. The house on the top has a stone feature wall (in this case it also includes a chimney) and the house below a ‘butterfly’ roof.
Continuing in the same vein, Newell also described some more ‘modern’ designs of the later 1950s period:

...tremendous activity commenced in the building of flats, serviced rooms, motels, coffee bars and shops. The cult of the ‘modernistic’ was now firmly established. Appearing everywhere were skillion roofs and butterfly roofs, leaning walls and leaning posts, varnished cypress pine, log mould feature walls, “sunburst” balustrading, lacquered waterworn stones and uninhibited colours.

At the higher end of the market, architect designed homes were produced. In particular, the Brisbane architects Hayes and Scott were important figures in this period. They designed many distinctive modern houses that added to the architectural experience of the coast – most were single storey, slab on ground, with a rectangular plan, low pitched asbestos cement roof (or flat or butterfly roof) and wide eaves as described by Newell above. These houses reflected a more sophisticated approach to interpreting the principles of international modernism. Many such houses were constructed on the newly developed and very fashionable canal estates and the various islands adjacent to Surfers Paradise – the Isle of Capri, Chevron Island, Florida Gardens.
Two further post-war Modern house designs, at Coolangatta on the left and Broadbeach on the right. The Broadbeach house has a butterfly roof and stone feature wall while the Coolangatta house has a flat roof, wide eaves, and extensive use of glazing.

With their flat roofs and box forms, these three Modern houses show a strong architect influence.
Other Post-War styles

As occurred during the inter-war period, after World War II there were a number of nationally popular styles that seem to have had limited impact on the Gold Coast. One of these was the Waterfall style, which had evolved by the 1940s from the streamline or ship style of the previous decade. This style continued the horizontal lines and sweeping curves of the former, but owes its name to the use of descending curves, which resembled a waterfall, on vertical features such as chimneys and fence columns. It could be found on substantial masonry houses as well as austere, often fibro-clad, buildings.

These two post-war austerity houses in Palm Beach show streamline influence in the horizontal cover strips on the fibro walls.

The English Domestic and Spanish Mission styles carried over into the post-war period, but in a simplified form. The Californian Ranch style also had some influence: this was a low, sprawling home, derived from traditional American ranch houses, that combined modern planning and design with rusticated touches such as whitewashed rough-cast or weatherboard exteriors. Typical of the style was a large picture window overlooking a cactus garden.

This Tugun house, called Green Gables, is a rare example of post-war English Domestic style on the Gold Coast. It is of rendered concrete brick, and was built just after the end of the war.

These two houses are examples of the post-war Cottage style. The example at the top is in Palm Beach and the one below in Southport.
This post-war modest house has a twisted pillar in the entry porch, a feature left over from the Spanish Mission style.

Nerang Hall (now demolished) was built in a Spanish style in 1954 in Fern Street, Surfers Paradise (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).

**The motel**

In the 1950s a new and quite revolutionary style of accommodation appeared on the Gold Coast – the motel. Originating in America, the motel was expressly designed to cater for the growing numbers of motor car owners who were taking driving holidays. The same trend was occurring in Australia, and local Gold Coast entrepreneurs quickly imported the motel idea.

During the 1950s and 60s, the Gold Coast was a national leader in motel development. Strategically placed along the Gold Coast Highway and other busy roads, motels vied with each other for passing motorists through vibrant signage and bold, modernist architecture. They tried to create a sense of glamour and fantasy, and provided guests with a taste of many novel luxuries that were largely unseen in average post-war households, such as ensuites, televisions and modern décor.

In layout, motels were fairly simple, with one or more one- or two storey rectangular wings, and an office towards the front. Each self contained unit had its own entrance and usually a covered car parking space immediately outside. One of their main selling features was the in-ground swimming pool that took pride of place in the front yard and which, rather than being hidden behind fences and privacy screens as they are today, was unenclosed and visible to all passersby. Some of the earlier or smaller motels were built of wood and fibro, but most were of masonry construction.

After the 1960s, the fast pace of development on the Gold Coast and the introduction of resort developments meant that motels became outmoded. Their rooms were basic and pokey compared to the luxurious apartments now on offer, and their features, which were once novel, were now standard or surpassed. Although they continued to be built into later decades, they were no longer a major attraction for holiday makers. Because they have lost much of their economic rationale, and generally occupy prime development sites on main roads, the Gold Coast’s early hotels have steadily disappeared.
The Tarzana Motel (demolished), Coolangatta (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).

The Broadway Motel (demolished), Labrador (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).

The El Dorado Motel (demolished), Surfers Paradise (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).

The Pink Poodle Motel neon sign. The original motel site has been redeveloped, but the neon sign and some other elements have been retained and are listed on the Gold Coast Local Heritage Register.

The Ocean View Motel, Coolangatta, is a rare surviving motel. It is unusual in being three stories high.
1960s “walk-up”

The 1960s “walk-up” is a multiple dwelling unit, and largely a later version of the house/flat of previous periods.

With the introduction of strata titling in Queensland in 1965, residential units within a larger building could be sold as a separate title. This encouraged significant activity in the building of flats and apartment buildings as developers could construct a series of individual apartments in the one building and on-sell them to others, rather than maintain them as rentals.

These buildings were constructed of face brickwork with flat metal roofs and wide eaves. In some examples, the building was oriented to the side boundary with the frontage to the street being the side of the building. A screen of breezeblocks often provided light and ventilation to the units beyond. Walk-ups were usually three storeys, with car parking on the covered ground floor, and two storeys of apartments above. Access was provided by staircases and not lifts (these were walk-ups), often with external access to each unit along a shared verandah. Staircases and verandahs had thin steel balustrades.

Two examples of 1960s “walk-up” units at Surfers Paradise – three storey form, car parking below, masonry construction, access via staircases.

Again, this was a way in which a single residential allotment could be developed for a multiple residential purpose, with significant site coverage and provision for car parking, but for permanent tenants rather than holiday makers. Examples of “walk-up” flats are found in many places on the Gold Coast.

The Broadway Motel (demolished), Labrador (image courtesy City of Gold Coast Local Studies Library).
1960s “high rise”

The high rise apartment building of the 1960s and 1970s is well documented, and is a characteristic and defining element of the urban environment of the Gold Coast.

The first of these high rise residential buildings was Kinkabool, which was constructed in Surfers Paradise in 1959-60. It was a 10 storey “giant”, and while it is small and modest today it towered over its two and three storey neighbours at the time.

Many other similar buildings followed throughout the 1960s and the 1970s. The introduction of strata titling strongly encouraged the development of more of these high rise residential buildings. While some were built as holiday accommodation, many were built for permanent residents, and were sold as individual units. In this period the Gold Coast became Australia’s leading apartment city, with flats comprising a third of its total dwellings by 1966.

This high rise residential construction continued into the 1980s and 1990s. By the mid 2000s, the Gold Coast had more than 200 apartment buildings of 10 storeys or more. High rise residential towers are found in many distinct parts of the Gold Coast, but not all areas. While they were concentrated at Surfers Paradise initially, they have since extended to Broadbeach, Burleigh Heads and Coolangatta.

Determining the age of your house - some very basic rules of thumb

There are some basic rules of thumb to observe in trying to determine the age of houses on the Gold Coast, from an observation of the physical elements of these houses alone. House construction and styles and forms were very fluid and evolved over time. Building elements varied in popularity in their use, and the period styles described earlier have blurred and overlapping, rather than precise, boundaries.

Timber houses on stumps tended to be constructed in the first half of the twentieth century, or the late nineteenth century. Fewer houses constructed after 1945 were raised on tall stumps. Timber verandahs largely disappeared after the Second World War as a result of the building restrictions imposed in the late 1940s. After this period the verandah was more or less replaced by the small brick patio, and earlier houses with verandahs often had them enclosed to form additional living space.

A pyramidal-shaped roof sheeted in corrugated iron or later, asbestos cement, on a timber house also probably indicates a house constructed in the first half of the twentieth century. A timber house with projecting gables and an asymmetric form probably indicates a house constructed in the 1920s or 1930s.

A house with a hipped roof, flat roof, a skillion roof, a butterfly roof, or a shallow pitched roof, constructed of either fibro, timber or masonry, was probably constructed in the 1950s or 1960s. These houses tended to be single storey, and were constructed on low concrete stumps or a low brick base, but some were two storey.

A fibre cement sheeted house could be constructed anywhere between the 1910s and the 1950s. This material alone cannot determine the age of a house. Earlier houses were often re-clad using this material.

The “walk-up” residential apartments and the high rise residential towers were constructed in the 1960s, 1970s and later.
References and further reading


Peter Cuffley, Australian Houses of the Forties and Fifties, The Five Mile Press Pty Ltd, 1993


Where do I obtain further information?

See Guideline No. 4, “Researching the history of your place” to find out more about your property’s history and time of construction.

Guideline No. 10 deals with the beach house, in particular those made of asbestos cement, or fibro.

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

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