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GOLD ON THE SAND, GOLD ON THE DOOR

A year before the RAIA journal Architecture in Australia treated the new Queensland city of Gold Coast to close scrutiny in a monographic issue, E. J. (Eddie) Hayes in 1958 penned an article reflecting on the problem of designing for a booming seaside town quickly outgrowing itself: “Gold on the Sand.” Schooled in Southport, Hayes was one of a very small number of architects practising in the Gold Coast in the post-war decades. This paper places his published reflections on the city into dialogue with his domestic architecture, demonstrating strategies for an architectural practice invested in the Coast as an urban and developmental situation. These comprised principally of houses produced along the coastal strip and its waterways that addressed the problem of the long narrow lot – reconciling the logic of development as expressed in plot ratios with a beach topography. It focuses on the Miller House (Southport, 1964), which extended this experimentation into the 1960s as a mature expression of both the problem and the firm’s response to it, going on to win Queensland’s House of the Year award in 1965. It was an intelligently conceived riverside house with distinctively painted gold front door, exercising the repertoire of architectural elements with which Hayes & Scott secured their reputation. The Miller House is here read as an emblem of the reconciliation of their architecture and this development-driven city.
In the run-up to the Queensland centenary year of 1959, Architecture in Australia dedicated a portion of its January-March 1958 issue to the architecture of Queensland. In his editorial remarks, Edward Weller (signing as EJW) argued for a hitherto unrecognised substance in the work of Queensland's architects: “It could be that by the measure of Sydney or Melbourne, Queensland architecture may seem to progress backward rather than forward … [but] Queensland architects seem bold enough to design for Queensland’s needs. May they succeed in their purpose!”

Three articles follow: Morton Herman surveying the efforts of the Department of Public Works; Neville Lund presenting a first assessment of the life and work of Robin S. Dods; and E. J. (Eddie) Hayes turning the reader’s attention to the Town of South Coast – what would on October 23rd of that year formally become the Town of Gold Coast, and on May 16, 1959 become the City of Gold Coast.

The velocity of change is, ultimately, Hayes’s theme in this brief, one page, un-illustrated reflection on the nature of architectural practice in a town in which much was up for grabs.

“Up to 1945,” writes Hayes, “Surfers remained a relatively quiet place. Most of the roads were unformed, life was informal, and most of the houses were week-enders owned by Brisbane families. With a few exceptions the buildings were crude, badly planned and uncomfortable, wherein people seemed to vie with one another to achieve the ultimate in ugliness and discomfort. Some of these buildings have survived, but most of them have been moved to less expensive areas or have been demolished.”

The town, suggests Hayes, was built on a culture of speculation and risk, for which the shifting sands of its dunes were an apt metaphor. Jim Cavill’s “small hotel drowsing on the sand dunes of the South Queensland coast” sowed the seeds for what could already, in 1958, be described as “a tourist empire of sand, sun and gold.” Cavill began with a pub and added to it various attractions (savoury and otherwise) that traded on an “idyllic scene” for something less appealing, attracting such distasteful appellations (which Hayes cheerfully recalls) as “Surfers Parasite” and “Surfers Palestine.” Surfers refers to Cavill’s hotel in the settlement of Elston, which was already widely known as Surfers Paradise by the 1950s. Alongside Southport, where Hayes had attended The Southport School, and Coolangatta, to the south, alongside the state border, Elston was one of the South Coast’s population hubs.

This, namely, was the question of real estate development and the behaviour of the real estate market and their combined impact on the town’s growth and its evolution into a city in later years. He follows the lines quoted at length above with an observation that some houses “built pre-war at a cost of £300 on land worth £50 have been sold for as much as £15,000.” There is nothing surprising in this. The population had doubled from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s (recorded at 13,888 in 1947, against 6,046 in 1933) and doubled again over the next decade, so that by 1961 the Gold Coast had a population of 31,796: a five-fold increase over two decades that fostered the inflated values of existing housing stock and encouraged speculators to exploit undeveloped land.

Even at this relatively small scale, Hayes could observe: “It is unfortunate that the present development has taken place without the benefit of a proper plan. The town plan which was prepared immediately after the war merely prescribed the areas into which buildings of varying categories were zoned and was superimposed on the existing grid of roads, but in fairness it must be stated that it was quite impossible at that time to foretell the growth which has taken place.” The problem faced by the South Coast architect was one of narrow plots (“nearly all the original subdivisions were in blocks with 33 feet frontages”) and an absence of infrastructure (notably sewerage). “Notwithstanding the difficulties,” he continues, “it is a stimulating experience to practice on the Coast. In the few years since the relaxation of building controls, which effectively stifled nearly all building, Surfers Paradise has changed tremendously.”

Hayes goes on to recount three distinct phases in building on the South Coast up to the time in which he wrote. The first, he noted, was “the period of house-building, with standards improving quickly and the people surprisingly willing to accept contemporary ideas in planning and design.” (His next comment indicates the consequences of the popular extension of this freedom: “Undoubtedly many of the ideas have been adopted with too great enthusiasm and too little
discrimination by the large number of people who plan their own houses. At least they provide plenty of surprises!"
Then followed the “construction of serviced rooms, apartments and flats … which all somehow manage to incorporate
the word ‘Sun’ in their name.” This phase of development he attributes to “southern visitors who came for a holiday
and decided to stay.” A third phase trades, he notes, the interests of the private individual for those of “companies
and syndicates who can finance the larger projects which makes economic use of the extravagantly priced land.” Of
course, what were for Hayes “land costs at an unbelievably high level” would pale in comparison with what followed,
but he names such beneficiaries of the situation as Lennon’s Broadbeach Hotel (completed in 1955), Stanley Korman’s
Chevron Hotel (from 1956) and the high-rise elaboration of the Surfers Paradise Hotel itself. “Similar developments
are announced almost weekly, and it is probable that in the near future Surfers Paradise will be growing upward like
Miami, Florida, USA.”

The question was whether the Gold Coast could sustain this level of development in the long term. In the six decades
since Lennon’s took in its first guests at Broadbeach we have had our answer, but from the perspective of 1958,
Hayes could ask: “What is the future of the booming Gold Coast? Is there any security for the millions which are being
ploughed into estate development in parcels of money ranging as high as two millions, for a fantasy of man-made
integration of home sites and waterways? Apparently,” he concluded, “the … analogy of Miami inspires confidence,
for the money keeps rolling and continues to spread gold on the sand.”

The Miller House

Hayes was one partner in the Queensland firm of Hayes and Scott, founded immediately post-war in 1946 (to become
Hayes Scott and later Hayes, Scott and Partners, and in 1963 Hayes, Scott and Henderson), whose Gold Coast
houses document the adventurous spirit of home builders at the end of what Hayes had characterised, above, as
the first phase of the city’s modern architectural development. Many of their early houses, like the Pfitzenmaier House
(1953), have been widely celebrated by architectural historians of the period. From the perspective of 1958, Hayes
was writing from experience, and within the problem of practicing architecture in that setting. In the 1950s, and into
the 1960s, there were still relatively few architects based on the Gold Coast and building within its boundaries. In 1972
Bill Heather listed merely a dozen in practice, a professional population that already reflected the number of new local
branch offices administering a boom in high-rise construction that had barely begun in 1958. The Gold Coast houses
of Hayes and Scott had offered opportunities for architectural experimentation within the constraints of the town’s
development logic and real estate culture.

Within this body of work, the Miller House in Southport (1964) continued a new line of aesthetic enquiry that Hayes
and Scott had begun with the horizontally composed pale-brick Zlotkowski House in Surfers Paradise (1959), on the
banks of the Nerang River, after a decade of attempts at exploring the integration of structure, colour and building
elements as moments of architectural invention. By 1964, in Queensland, there appeared to be wide acceptance of
the horizontal house as an appropriate domestic form, bundled with a set of strategies, forms, and elements that were
commonly utilised in the planning and construction of new dwellings. The Miller House shows a strong demonstration
of their grasp of the possibilities of considering these factors in concert, but it takes on an added importance, here,
for the recognition it received from the Queensland Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) in
being named the House of the Year in 1965. As such, it offers one of two bookends of sorts, corresponding with
Hayes’s article of 1958, between which Hayes and Scott (and then Hayes, Scott and Henderson) figured out a basis
for building houses on the Gold Coast that responded to the practice conditions in that city as well as to the values
against which Queensland architecture was being judged at that time.

In its composition and resolution, the Miller House was one of a number of significant flat-roofed houses realised in
South East Queensland in these years. The Roe House in Brookfield (1963) and Frost House in Kenmore (1965) were
both designed by Maurice Hurst; Wilson House at Mt Cootha (1964) was a house project with wide eaves designed by
John Dalton and awarded as the Queensland House of the Year in 1964. The Perrins House at Ascot, by Robin Gibson
(1963), featured a courtyard entry and was likewise named House of the Year by the Queensland Chapter of the RAIA,
as was the horizontal Mocatta House at Yeronga (1966), also designed by Gibson. Geoffrey Pie’s Ravenscraig II, at
Surfers Paradise (ca. 1965), was another strong example of this briefly prevalent approach. Although house designs
quickly moved away from flat roofed, horizontal forms towards sharply angled roofs, the elements brought together in
these houses informed and arrangement of domestic life into the 1970s and even translated into the formal language
of all manner of institutions.
Like the Zlotkowski House, the Miller House was located on a site adjacent to the Nerang River, at 20 Korong Street, Southport. It was attributed to George Henderson. The jury that selected the Miller House as Queensland’s House of the Year commented: “The planning, the well controlled use of natural light, the interesting elevational treatment and the meticulous attention to detail had set a high standard in domestic architecture.” While largely overlooked in the professional press, it was reported in Brisbane’s *Telegraph*, and featured in a *Gold Coast Bulletin* lift-out section in September that same year. In her article therein, Anne Knight made special mention of the treatment of the entrance, noting that the “brilliant gold front door is the one note of colour on the outside of the house – which has a charcoal and white trim.” She praised the house for its “comfort and warmth,” combined with a “concealed efficiency.” Her article goes on:

I liked the way that the whole house, inside is tied to one muted colour scheme – bone, white and slight accents of charcoal [...] Most of the walls are white painted brick relieved occasionally with bone painted panels framed by narrow charcoal boards, in the style of a Japanese house.

The carefully composed exterior photograph used to accompany Knight’s article showed the roof as a dark form cantilevering beyond the walls on the southeast elevation. Elements beneath the white framed sliding plate glass doors expressed horizontal roof beams supported by columns highlighted in black, set against cream brick exterior walls together with plate glass panels to shield from prevailing sea breezes, read as an assembly of parts. The other exterior photographs to accompany her article laid bare the expansive vista to the river the location provided, and the tropical plants deployed under the pergola at the entrance, flanked by a lush garden adjacent to the garage. A photograph of the terrace shielded by glass revealed the expression of roof beams and columns as a feature of this outdoor room, reminiscent of the successful Eichler Homes Bay Area tract-housing promotional material that often depicted low-pitched extruded gable forms. Images of the interior show the couple’s furniture positioned into available corners, and a view to the river from the living room.
The Miller House was a three-bedroom house, designed for the family of an employee of a mineral sands company in Southport. The business itself — and hence the Miller’s livelihood — had grown with the development of such canal estates as those planned by Karl Langer and developed by Bruce Small that had thoroughly transformed the Nerang River estuary. Newly formed islands and canal-oriented precincts were promoted as cities, like that of Small’s Paradise City (another Langer design) — known, too, as the Isle of Capri — and the completion of the Little Nerang Dam to manage urban water levels in 1961.19 The street frontage is of a width similar to those of the long, thin land plots of the first wave of development in Surfers Paradise, measuring a little more than the standard ten-metre allocation, but widens out towards the north to describe a right-angled trapezoid — an irregular plot of a kind more common along the riverfront developments than towards the beach, with the curve of the river allowing for greater experimentation in the arrangement of the plan and its relationship with the site and its broader setting.
The roof plan appears to have been generated by a markedly different organisational principle than that of the floor plan, with the resulting misalignment giving rise to a variegated light and shade effect throughout the house. The jagged line of the roof wrapped around a narrow inset entry courtyard “enclosed” by a pergola overhead. The entrance to the house followed the precedent set by Gibson’s Perrins House (Ascot, 1963), which delimited its own entrance by means of a courtyard that faced the street and was framed overhead by a rectilinear opening to the sky.20 Despite the apparent compactness of the plan suggested by the roof at the Miller House, the deployment of two pop-up clerestory roof forms, offset through the middle of the house and perpendicular to the street, brought air and light to both dormitory and living spaces. The bathroom pop-up was positioned alongside the entry courtyard. This doubling was a notable departure from previous houses by Hayes, Scott and Partners (or Hayes, Scott and Henderson) and situated the clerestory pop-up over the living zone or wet areas in the dormitory zone after the precedent offered by the American houses of Hugh Stubbins.21 This had the effect of fragmenting the plan into areas that then displayed a range of direct and indirect light qualities, a fragmentation compounded by landscape incisions.

The plan shows a wall extending from the house into the garden that decisively divides front yard from the back, and suggests a pin-wheel configuration, with a separate wall angled parallel to the boundary to hide the clothes line [Fig. 3]. The integration of the double garage into the house obfuscates the fact that the houseplan was essentially L-shaped. The positioning of a dormitory wing projecting towards the street, and living spaces formed out of the interlocking of two L-figures embedded in this plan, around the kitchen, pushed the dining room, living room, and paved terrace out towards the garden and the river, to the east. This conformed to the idea given its clearest expression California’s popular modernism of the first half of the twentieth century and in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War; building on the ground and dissolving boundaries between indoor and outdoor living spaces. This had a local exponent in the writing and teaching of Karl Langer, most notably in his 1944 tract Subtropical Housing.22 Turning to the interior, Knight noted:

Mrs Miller took some good advice from her architect in getting the right colour blending of curtains, walls, and floors. She chose the curtains and floor coverings first, and then found the wall colours to tone with them. In the sitting room, one wall and part of another is entirely curtains in pale bone nubbly threaded linen. Dining room walls echo the bone shade.” Further, “the colours in the sitting room are all brought together in a beautiful Utrillo street scene in muted green, bone, charcoal, and white which hangs above the fireplace.23

Knight praised the house for its “comfort and warmth” in concert with its “concealed efficiency.” It featured “[clerestory] windows over the kitchen, pantry, dining and bathroom areas … which lighten and warm rooms in the centre of the house.”24 As well as warmth from the sun, Knight reported on an aesthetic warmth fostered through the extensive use of black bean, a local rainforest hardwood, which was complemented by a generally muted colour range throughout the interior. As an example of concealed efficiency, she noted that the “air extractor hood over hot plates [was] covered with a veneer of black bean.”25 To illustrate the level of “efficiency of lighting,” she highlighted the use in the sitting room of a combination of adjustable lights and down lights, and soft light effects from “fluorescent lights set at head height and concealed by a pelmet. They give the room a beautiful soft light.” This contrasted with the light in the sitting room at the river end of the house, which was provided by “a spectacular golden ball of Venetian glass.”26

As a material effect, pale brick on the outside contrasted with bricks finished with a glossy white paint inside. The entrance was described as a “wide white pergola hung with baskets of fern, and below, a paved garden of cement squares paved with pebbles.”27 The perhaps curious choice of the “one note of colour” on the building exterior – its “brilliant gold front door” —is never explained by Knight, and no record exists to indicate if the use of gold in such a prominent element was the idea of the architect or the client. It recurs in the more modest setting of the laundry, which has a floor featuring gold vinyl tiles. The colour combination was not without precedent. Use of black bean was common among the circle of architects described above, and John Dalton’s Masters House in Kenmore (1964) even combined it with a gold toned carpet.28 The effect is a play on contrasts in materials, surfaces and lighting effects in the interior and on the exterior of each building. But the front door is something else entirely.
Gold on the Door

The Miller House speaks to the possibilities that had opened up for architects practicing at a domestic scale on the Gold Coast as the first waves of houses responding to real estate development gently gave way to a phase of sustained apartment construction. It demonstrates an evolution of the relationship between the house, its site and their setting, encompassing both view and amenity, which had arguably reached a mature stage by the 1960s – building upon the architectural gains made across the first two post-war decades of building on (or perhaps toward) the Gold Coast, but also on relying in no small way upon the evolution of strategies to exploit the city's hitherto undeveloped land as real estate. In this, the Miller House is a case that inverts the situation of the builder-designed houses populating Langer’s canal developments around Broadbeach and elsewhere on the Nerang River: in this case a thoroughly resolved, architecturally designed house on an opportunity shaped by real estate logic rather than considered site planning.

It also demonstrates the beginning of a new phase in the relationship between the Gold Coast and Queensland, winning a level of recognition from architects across the state that rewarded the bold designs of this canal-side house. In this, the gold door of the Miller House is a symbol for all that coalesces in this project: a culture of invention and exploration at the domestic scale that inflected the houses of Hayes and Scott (and Hayes, Scott and Henderson) in all their settings; the changing nature of the Gold Coast site, from beach side to its increasingly ‘interior’ nature at the edges of the Nerang River and the canal developments that extended its reach; and the seriousness with which those judging the quality of Queensland architecture could regard a house built in a setting that was in itself mature, even if that maturity had arrived suddenly and been thrown into relief by the incessant development culture that even now shapes reception of the city's architecture. It shows a resolution in the work of Hayes and Scott of the problems given voice in Architecture in Australia by Hayes himself. It is a mature response to the challenge of architectural practice on the Gold Coast, on a site of a kind that would not readily be found elsewhere in Queensland (or, for that matter, Australia).

The gold door signals a moment of percipience and pause in a fast-paced and extrovert culture of construction and development, and hence an endpoint of kind for two decades of reflection – spanning the scale change that saw the South Coast become Gold Coast City – on the problem of practising architecture in that setting.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes


3  Hayes, “Gold on the Sand,” 87. All quotations from this article are from this same page.

Hayes alludes to the South Coast Planning Scheme of 1953, which introduced zoning controls to moderate pockets of densification and the initial phase of high-rise development. This is further discussed in Ayain Dedekorkut-Howes and Severine Mayere, “City with/out a Plan,” in Off the Plan, eds Dedekorkut-Howes, Bosms and Leach, 138-39.

Hayes is not specific on the timing of these events, but it would be reasonable to assume that he referred to the houses built in the time of the first distinct wave of real estate speculation in Southport, which is regularly attributed to the market effects of Queensland’s Governor, Sir Anthony Musgrave, maintaining a summer home there from the end of the 1880s. A number of real estate development opportunities were realized in Burleigh Heads and Coolangatta in the 1910s and 20s, consolidating the development patterns Hayes invokes.


Interview with Malcolm Cummings, May 23, 2012.

“House at Kenmore, Qld,” Cross-Section 142 (August 1, 1964): 1; Elizabeth Musgrave, “Cool the 60s Brisbane House,” Architecture Australia 93, no. 6 (November 2004): 41-2; Eric Wilson, “Queensland’s Best for 1964,” Australian Home Beautiful 44, no. 3 (March 1965): 5-9; “Design Award: Tree Sets Pattern for Winning Plan,” Sunday Mail (Brisbane), October 6, 1963, 2; “House of the Year: Residence of Mr and Mrs G. Mocatta,” Courier Mail (Brisbane), September 9, 1966, 3. At this time Maurice Hurst was working for Lund Hutton Newell Black Pautsen.

These elements can be traced as a strong line of thinking through houses into the 1970s but also in such institutional projects as the School of Architecture at St Lucia (1976) designed by Nutter, Charlton + Partners, and the TAB Building, Albion (1982), designed by Geoffrey Pe.  

Interview with Malcolm Cummings; “Queensland’s House of the Year,” Telegraph (Brisbane), August 18, 1965, 3.

“Queensland’s House of the Year,” Telegraph, August 18, 1965, 3. The jury for the award comprised B. M. Wilson (chair), E. W. N. Crofts, L. H. Hailey, M. Hurst, and C. R. Scott. The jury “had been looking for a house that, above all, provided a pleasant human habitation.”


Knight, “House of the Year,” lift-out.

The expressed charcoal stained roof beam concept can also be found in Hayes, Scott, and Henderson’s entry to the second Brisbane Homes and Building exhibition held in 1965. See “Entry Highlights the Beam Look,” Telegraph, Building Feature, August 4, 1965, 49.


Note George Henderson’s comments on office influences in his interview with Igea Troiani, documented in Troiani, “From Bauhaus to the Queensland House: Legacies of Hayes & Scott,” in Wilson, ed., Hayes & Scott, 94.

See article on Richard Neutra’s Ward House, Hollywood (1939) in Los Angeles, “Indoor-Outdoor Extensible Living Area,” Architectural Record 96, no. 6 (December 1944): 76–77; Karl Langer, Subtropical Housing (St Lucia: University of Queensland, 1944).

Knight, “House of the Year,” lift-out.

Knight, “House of the Year,” lift-out.

Knight, “House of the Year,” lift-out.

Knight, “House of the Year,” lift-out.

Knight, “House of the Year,” lift-out.

Shirley Gott, “Light for All Times; Out of Site Switches and Special Controls,” Courier Mail, For Women, July 2, 1964, 16. Gott noted that the house of “plain brick” featured black bean joinery and gold carpet.