

# Gold Coast The Bulletin

Wednesday, December 7, 2005

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FOCUS

## Building the vision

Geoff Burchill, master planner and development consultant, launches his new book, *Passion, Power & Prejudice* at Q1 today. Michael Jacobson takes a look at the man behind 40 years of this city's growth and expansion

**T**HERE could be few more appropriate settings for Geoff Burchill's book launch than Q1 in Surfers Paradise. Where better than the world's tallest residential building to tell one of Australia's biggest stories?

The story is that of the Gold Coast and the storyteller is a man who, as a master planner and development industry consultant, spent the best part of 40 years involved in the transformation of a string of seaside villages into the flourishing and expanding city of today.

Now retired, Burchill's considerable career credits include civil and structural engineering, architecture, market strategy, project management and resort development and he has led community organisations in media, golf development, tourism and the Multi-function Polis concept for the Gold Coast.

Burchill was at the coalface, or more accurately the beachfront, for what he describes as many of the great highs and despairing lows in the Gold Coast's development, and he recounts them all – the movers and shakers, the visionaries and the booms and busts – in his book *Passion, Power & Prejudice*.

This is no tourist guide, no vacuous salute to glitz, glamour, sun, surf and sex. Rather, it is a comprehensive social document which, after four years of painstaking research, has come in at a doorstop-proportioned 624 pages.

All the big names are assembled – Bruce Small, Arthur Earle, Stanley Korman, Keith Williams, Bernie Eisey, Pat Zarro, Brian Ray, Jim Raptis, Christopher Skase, Peter Laurance, Russ Hinze, Joh Bjelke-Petersen and more – as are all the big developments, from Kinkabool to Sanctuary Cove to Q1.

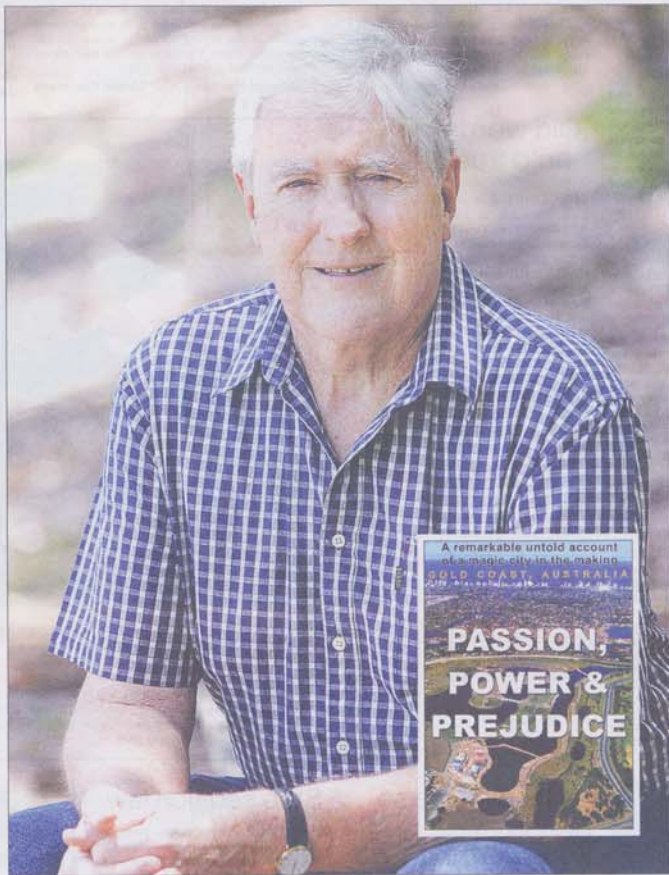
Throughout the book, Burchill's own passions and prejudices are unapologetically aired. He is distinctly pro-development and has little patience for the extreme end of the green lobby or the tendency for 'paralysis by analysis'.

Burchill says he felt compelled to write the book as a gift to the Gold Coast's heritage, providing 'an encyclopedia of information of a kind that could only be written from being in the thick of the city's development for a long time; a personal history offered to help in building a reliable record'.

As for the book's title, Burchill says it conveys the passion that has captured all Gold Coasters at times, but particularly its pioneering entrepreneurs; the power of capital to move ideas into reality, with government creating pathways for growth; and the prejudice from the Gold Coast's never-ending detractors.

Though much of the book is about what has gone before, Burchill is far from wallowing in the past. He has his eyes very much on the city's future, decrying what he sees as the rise of mediocrity in recent and current thinking, planning and leadership, and fearing the passion that helped create one of the world's great tourism, resort and lifestyle cities may be in decline.

According to Burchill, if the price of the Gold Coast's success has been growth overwhelming expectations, the challenge for future development is to optimise the lifestyle qualities of the city as it doubles its population, and perhaps its tourism business, and to plan diligently and sensibly for those other industries that are being



Geoff Burchill's book covers the highs and lows of Gold Coast development

sought to bring a diversity of innovation business here.

"It is essential to be absolutely right on the button in understanding what future growth means in terms of seats for all the necessary components of infrastructure, housing, tourist accommodation, transport and services," says Burchill.

Still, whatever the future, it will be very much guided by the lessons of the past, and the Gold Coast's past is a colourful one.

While Geoff Burchill's career in the private development sector began in Brisbane in 1960, his introduction to the Gold Coast came six years later when – on April Fool's Day – he launched a structural engineering consulting practice and immersed himself in the good times of a building boom.

"My immediate work involved supervising the construction of three beach frontage multi-level unit buildings – Suntower, Sahara Court and Ten The Esplanade. These were big for the time... around 10 storeys," says Burchill.

This initial burst of activity was quickly stymied by the 1966 building credit squeeze, the ensuing slump seeing just five major new buildings constructed in the next four years.

The situation was hardly aided by a series of cyclones in 1967 that wiped out the Gold Coast's beaches and damaged esplanades, property and the city's reputation.

"From this very low point, Gold Coasters got to work to rebuild the city's appeal. Development for the next era of growth started and began to rise to a huge crescendo of visionary ideas and speculative investment," says Burchill.

Just when things were going well, at the height of a national property boom, the Whitlam Government imposed a raft of social reforms that saw inflation, interest rates and unemployment soar and industry and development decline. The flow-on effect proved devastating for land developers, speculative investors and, inevitably, the progress of the Gold Coast.

That the city recovered and prospered after such dire circumstances is one of the more remarkable stories Burchill tells in his book.

"The great growth in Gold Coast city development and the marvels of spectacular tourism business happened against incredible odds," says Burchill, who lauds the kind of 'outside the loop' vision of the time.

"Tourism development defied

factors that should have frustrated progress even in the early years, if the entrepreneurs had taken no for an answer.

"They pushed on, not illegally (at least not very often or for very long), with councils and state government decision-makers and consultants having to make adjustments to conventional planning practices and policies to pass tests of reasonableness under the circumstances of the time for their approvals.

"Accepting these developments in the best interests of the region's economic growth was the ruling factor in many approvals of the 1970s and 1980s, to accommodate pressing tourism and urban growth pressures in the booms or to boost the Gold Coast in the doldrums."

Given the composition of the Gold Coast today, it may surprise some when Burchill says a major urban city should never have happened.

"In the early years of my career, we did not know enough about the real implications of economic, physical, social and environmental factors that today would be critical to development potential across the state.

"The entrepreneurs, who knew

even less than the professionals, would not worry about things that would get in the way of their dreams or ambitions.

"This was an era never to be forgotten for its financial buoyancy and world-class development opportunities. By 1990, the Gold Coast came into the global tourism market with new world-class resort hotels, resort golf courses, integrated tourist resorts on huge land areas, major theme parks and universities."

However, it is the time after 1990 – a time of Paul Keating's recession we had to have' and the bursting of the Japanese property investment bubble – that earns Burchill's harshest criticism and has fired his concerns for what it is to come.

"The hard slog for Gold Coast business through the whole of the 1990s will be a familiar memory for many business people," he says.

"The big-ticket schemes were involved in for the city with other Gold Coast development and tourism industry figures did not only because of the 1990 recession, but from lack of support at council and in local business communities in an emerging era of mediocrity in thinking at the top."

Geoff Burchill yearns for the return of visionary thinking, and because the emergence of projects he says are 'mostly gap-fillers with little of the big-ticket vision needed for the long term'.

"What will come to continue to make the Gold Coast and other Queensland resort towns and cities special?" he asks.

"There are many entrepreneurs at work in the mid-2000s, but few in the development of the city. These are in different kinds of enterprise – finance, education, marketing, medical research, manufacturing for the needs of a beach culture on an international scale, and advanced manufacturing of many other kinds.

"The Gold Coast City Council has many difficulties on its hands that challenge the ability of an elected layman council system to deal with the unique growth and change of the Gold Coast."

While Burchill admits that 40 years ago he knew nothing about the realities of growth, he fears the same can be said of too many administering the city today.

"The Gold Coast cannot rest on its laurels for what it offers in changing times. Entertainment and leisure facilities that were once unique to the Gold Coast can be seen all over Australia," he says.

"Surfers Paradise is, to a large extent, surviving on its image from the past and the sheer mass of its huge home unit building accommodation, but it is struggling under traffic degradation and violent crime. Resort centres along the Coast have looming problems with obsolescence of buildings and tourist facilities.

"If the Gold Coast is to successfully plan ahead, the city's development industry leaders must get involved again. Visions and solutions must be put to council and the state and federal governments in the 'won't take no for an answer' style of the pioneers of the city's development."

In the end, *Passion, Power & Prejudice* is a call for urgent and necessary change not simply to predict and keep pace with the Gold Coast's expansion, but to stay ahead of it. Just as learning from the past does not mean living there, refusing to learn from the past can only imperil the future.

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