

Place Making in the Urban Corridor

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ABSTRACT

Coomera is a major greenfield development area within the Gold Coast to Brisbane Growth Corridor in South-East Queensland. Coomera has a high growth rate and is planned to accommodate in excess of 70,000 people. The Coomera Town Centre has been identified as a Major Activity Centre under the SEQ Regional Plan 2005 - 2026 and proposed to accommodate a range of business, service and retail functions as well as district or branch offices of government, and cultural and entertainment facilities of regional significance.

This presentation will describe the locality, character, planning history, framework for development and objectives/concepts and requirements for 'Place Making'.

The commitment for 'Place Making' and the ability of planning tools to create a sense of place will be outlined. The presentation will outline mechanisms to achieve a sense of place and opportunities for 'Place Making'. The roles of Gold Coast City Council, landholders and consultants in delivering /defining a sense of place for Coomera will be examined through a case study - Coomera Resort.

Coomera Resort is the largest landholder within the Coomera Town Centre area and the land is one of the largest undeveloped holdings in Coomera. The presentation focus's on Coomera Resorts approach to defining their land holdings through open space, landscape and streetscape design features. These design features are based on Coomera's cultural and environmental values.

KEYWORDS: place making, urban corridor, planning framework, public art

1. INTRODUCTION

Spanning from the suburb of Pimpama to the Coomera River, inclusive of both sides of the Pacific Motorway, is the suburb of Coomera located within the Urban Corridor. The Urban Corridor is a major urban release area subject to immense growth and development rates with regard to urban development. Coomera's locality within the Urban Corridor has been identified through successive planning schemes dating back to the initial Albert Shire Strategic Plan in 1973 (Albert Shire Council, 1995). The immense growth experienced within the Urban Corridor is due to its locality between Brisbane and the Gold Coast as well as the lack of developable Greenfield land available in the region (Urbis JHD, 2004).

In recognition of the above, the fast paced growth of the Coomera area in the Urban Corridor has seen numerous development applications lodged and approvals granted prior to the establishment of a correct framework for growth.

Development design principles, whilst in place, are somewhat lax in enforcement. This has contributed to a lack of urban design outcomes within approvals and their resultant built form. Important considerations such as urban design and placemaking are vital in the longevity and success of developments and also in establishing community ownership. The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) Urban Design Chapter explains urban design as follows.

'Urban design is about the way places look, how they work and how they connect to people and the environment. Good urban design aims to unite the needs of nature, the built environment and the community. It recognises the concerns of people and the environment, and the possibilities of planning and architecture to deliver innovative, attractive, functional and sustainable places.'

Further to urban design, placemaking is a key concept interrelated with the success of a development. Whilst there is no singularly accepted definition of placemaking Scheekloth and Shibley (1995) define the concept as "the way all of us as human beings transform the places in which we find ourselves into the places in which we live". In addition, Gold Coast City Council describes the concept as how "people respond to defined spaces. A good place will have well contained and interesting spaces in which people feel comfortable".

It is noted that whilst State and Local Government Strategic and Statutory documents have mentioned such principles to a certain degree, the incorporation of urban design and placemaking principles in both approval documents and resultant built forms is a rarity. The lack of mandatory urban design and placemaking principles puts little requirement on developers to include such principles in the design and construction of developments.

Whilst the norm in Coomera is high density housing estates, with open space and urban design initiatives used at a minimum standard, Coomera Resort Group have gone above-and-beyond Council guidelines to create high quality development and a sense of place by incorporating simple design initiatives. Coomera Resort Group has a vital position in the success or failure of the developing suburb as they are the largest landholder in the Coomera Town Centre Local Area Plan and a significant landholder in the Coomera balance area. Coomera Resort Group will be used as an exemplar case study for the

Coomera area. In doing so, the integration of urban design and place making criteria into enforceable planning requirements will be examined.

2. OVERVIEW OF COOMERA

2.1 Origins of “Coomera”

Whilst the word ‘Coomera’ and its origins are not entirely certain, according to early historian W.E. Hanlon the name of the suburb has origins from the Aboriginal word ‘Kumera-Kumera’ that being a native species of wattle. Rory O’Connor in *The Kombumerri: Aboriginal People of the Gold Coast* states that Coomera means blood or vein and refers to the flowing river – the life source of the surrounding lands (Gold Coast City Council, 2008).

2.2 The ‘Worlds of Coomera’

Coomera is not renowned for its major activity centre status, but is known for the ‘worlds’ that exist within the area. The theme parks of Dreamworld and Whitewater World are located prominently along the Pacific Motorway and provide a backdrop to much of the residential estates in Coomera. In addition, The Lost City is a themed tavern located in a distinctly residential and local retail area. All of these ‘worlds’ have their own distinct theme independent to the surrounding residential areas of Coomera. This attributes to the confusion as to what is Coomera and what is Coomera’s identity.

Such distinctly different landmarks within Coomera necessitate the development of linking design and landscape principles throughout the suburb to ensure a sense of place and locality and to enhance community ownership.

2.3 Planning and Development History

Coomera has been identified as a major Greenfield development area within the Gold Coast to Brisbane Growth Corridor. Coomera therefore experiences high growth rates and must facilitate the accommodation for more than 70,000 people. It is noted that Coomera is the fastest growing suburb of the Gold Coast with growth rates of approximately 14% annually (Matusik 2005).

Throughout the history of planning on the Gold Coast, Coomera has been identified within the Urban Corridor dating back to the original Albert Shire Strategic Plan in 1973. In this regard, the Coomera area has been set aside for growth and development for many years. Development within this corridor has occurred in numerous locations, generally within the broad parameters for future growth established by the 1988 and earlier Albert Shire Strategic Plans (Albert Shire Council, 1995).

To guide the growth and development of Coomera, numerous planning studies and statutory documents have been undertaken. Some of these documents include:

- Albert Shire Strategic Plan 1973;
- Multifunction Polis (proposed site in Coomera) (1987);
- Coomera Charette (1995);
- Albert Corridor Development Control Plan;

- Albert Shire Planning Scheme 1995;
- Gold Coast Planning Scheme 2003;
- South West Coomera Planning Study (2004);
- Coomera Town Centre Precinct Planning Study (2004);
- Town Centre Fringe Study (2004);
- East Coomera Residential Development Issues Paper (2004);
- South East Queensland Regional Plan 2005-2026;
- Gold Coast Planning Scheme Policy 12 Landscape Strategy Part 1 – Landscape Character: Guiding the Image of the City
- Draft Local Growth Management Strategy (2007);
- Coomera Town Centre Structure Plan (2008); and
- South East Queensland Regional Plan 2009-2031.

Many of the documents included sections relating urban design and placemaking; however, these principles are not carried through into enforceable development guidelines such as policies, performance criteria and acceptable solutions within a planning scheme. This has led to the Coomera that is evident today.

The development scale within the Coomera region has increased dramatically over the years. Initial planning scheme densities provided for approximately 16 dwellings per hectare. The Gold Coast Planning Scheme which came into effect in 2003 increased this density to 25 dwellings per hectare across much of the Coomera residential area. More recently, density in key areas has increased significantly to 200 dwellings per hectare. This immense increase in density requires greater development requirements and design principles to govern such growth and ensure good design outcomes are achieved for the community.

The South East Queensland Regional Plan (SEQRP) 2009-2031 identifies Coomera as a Major Regional Activity Centre catering to the largest community on the Gold Coast to be accommodated through Greenfield development. The community will be supported by high density residential, health, entertainment, industry, education, commercial, retail, leisure and tourist related activities which will aid in the creation of a mixed use town centre.

In order to meet demand, numerous development applications have been lodged and approvals granted for residential subdivision estates throughout Coomera. These applications are generally higher density housing east of the Pacific Motorway. A summary of the general development scale in the east Coomera area is provided in the Table below.

Development Summary	Stage
Residential subdivision (1500 lots)	Stage 1 under construction
Residential subdivision (500 lots)	Stage 1 earthworks and tree clearing approved
Residential subdivision (1200 lots)	700 allotments approved
Residential subdivision (900 lots) with commercial, retail component	Stages 1 & 2 constructed
Residential subdivision (440 lots)	Approved
Main Town Centre and subdivision allowing for 9500 dwellings	Approval Pending

Residential subdivision (120 lots)	Commenced construction for initial stages
Residential subdivision (570 lots)	Application Submitted
Residential subdivision (700 lots)	Approved and construction started
Residential subdivision (1371 lots)	Approved and mostly constructed

Table 1: Residential Developments in Coomera

As evidenced above, there are a variety of developments occurring within the Coomera area. Such development has seen constant media attention, especially with regard to the Coomera Town Centre. However, media and public critiques of residential subdivisions in Coomera have also been in focus as such development has proceeded whilst still awaiting a retail and commercial centre.

Developers have been criticized for their ‘minimum standard’ subdivision estates and Council has been criticized for their lack of enforcement of planning goals such as open space, environmental provisions and urban design.

Ultimately, the success or failure of Coomera’s growth and development is attributed to the suburb’s planning. It is arguable that the suburb and its thousands of residential allotments have been approved and developed without the correct planning tools in place.

Furthermore, road and pedestrian linkages between residential estates and an overall design theme for the area has been neglected. This may have been exacerbated by numerous landholders in the Coomera area which has resulted in fragmented development and poor development outcomes.

2.4 Recent Planning Provisions

Whilst planning provisions exist within the Coomera regarding growth and development, the extent and relevance of such controls is questionable due to the vast array of Greenfield land and the extreme development rates of the suburb.

In relation to urban design and placemaking, a basic review of strategic and statutory documents has been undertaken to decipher the intended commitment and vision for the development of Coomera and also the level of enforcement of sense of place and urban design mechanisms. This review will include the *South East Queensland Regional Plan 2009-2031* and various Gold Coast City Council documents and studies.

2.4.1 South East Queensland Regional Plan 2009-2031

The *South East Queensland (SEQ) Regional Plan 2009-2031* designates Coomera as a future growth area to aid in the accommodation of the 57,500 dwellings required for the Gold Coast via Greenfield development. The SEQ Regional Plan aims to ‘...manage regional growth and change in the most sustainable way to protect and enhance the quality of life in the region’ to 2031.

The SEQ Regional Plan includes a Desired Regional Outcome (DRO) relating to Smart Growth. This DRO includes specific requirements for urban development to include ‘urban character and design’ principles so development is responsive to SEQs climate, to reinforce local character and achieve design innovation. Four

policies are provided to address this principle including provision of, *‘an accessible and high-quality public domain in all new development areas by allocating or revitalizing open space and creating well-designed public places.’* (Policy 8.3.4).

Reference to the Urban Design Alliance of Queensland’s urban design qualities is made. This states that cities must be sustainable, liveable, viable, responsible and memorable.

2.4.2 Draft Local Growth Management Strategy – Gold Coast City

The Draft Local Growth Management Strategy (LGMS) for Gold Coast City Council was produced to give guidance on the nature and timing of development within the Urban Footprint, in turn informing amendments to the SEQ Regional Plan and the Gold Coast Planning Scheme. The Draft LGMS places emphasis on ensuring high quality developments are established especially in greenfield areas with priority given to urban form, character and urban open space.

This is further supported by Residential Development Strategy (s4.2) within the Draft LGMS which states, *‘The livability of the city will be reflected with an increased focus on urban design and environmentally sustainable development principles, to achieve an attractive built form, community safety, equitable access, and social interaction to create sustainable communities’; and focuses on, ‘promoting residential development which expresses desirable character, climatic responsiveness and sense of place recognizing the character of the city’s discrete communities.’*

A key strategy to achieve this is detailed in s4.2.7 which aims to ensure that residential development will strengthen the character, image and legibility of the city by fostering a definitive sense of place based on their physical setting, role and function and established character and identity.

In addition, an Urban Open Space Strategy seeks to plan and design new and changing urban areas to maximise liveability, pedestrian connectivity and reinforce the landscape character of the city image while being underpinned by equity of access and safety through principles of good urban design.

2.4.3 Coomera Town Centre Structure Plan

The structure plan for the Coomera Town Centre aims to provide an, *‘integrated land use plan setting out the broad environmental considerations, land use, State and Local Government infrastructure requirements, and development intent to guide detailed site planning’* for the Coomera Town Centre area.

This structure plan provides for a number of key urban design principles to be incorporated into developments within the Coomera Town Centre including:

- Sub-precincts provide a particular focus or theme to specific areas to ensure coordinated growth of the Coomera Activity Centre Precinct, integration with adjoining precincts and a sense of place within individual sub-precincts;

- Post construction landscaping will assist in creating an attractive visual backdrop to the Coomera Activity Centre Precinct.
- The sub-precinct is characterised by open and formalised landscape treatments and amenities.

The document also provides for the creation of an Urban Design Strategy which will inform the urban design vision and detail the principles to be incorporated in to development within the structure plan area.

2.4.4 Coomera Town Centre Structure Plan – Draft Urban Design Guidelines

The Coomera Town Centre Residential Precinct Draft Urban Design Guidelines form part of the Structure Plan Planning Report. This document has been prepared for development proposals in the residential areas of the Structure Plan and seeks to provide a holistic urban design strategy for the town centre.

The guidelines aim to ensure good urban design outcomes in future residential areas are achieved through the provision of attractive streetscapes which reinforce the function of a street, enhance the amenity of adjacent development, address local topography and contribute to a sense of place.

The design guidelines contain four major design elements including a set of supporting design criteria and solutions. This includes a street layout pattern, streetscape design, building design and green open space. It is noted that creating a strong sense of place is a common design theme throughout the document.

2.4.5 Planning Scheme Policy 12 ‘Landscape Strategy Part 1 – Landscape Character: Guiding the Image of the City

This document details the overarching design and character vision for the city. Included in the document are specific character analysis and specifications relating to the design intent for development across the city.

Part 2: ‘The Big Picture: A City-wide Image Strategy’ provides a detailed explanation of city image and placemaking based on Kevin Lynch’s five (5) physical elements of design (urban design principles) as detailed in his book *The Image of the City*. A statement included in the policy relating to city image is detailed as follows, ‘*The image of the city can be described as ‘sense of place’ which attributes to ‘the extent to which a person can recall or recognise a landscape or place as distinct from other ones’* (section 2.3).

2.4.6 Fifteen Qualities of Good Urban Places

Council’s Urban Design web page includes a set of urban design qualities of good urban places. Design principles include variety, public and private sides, adaptability and versatility, human scale and richness, qualities of edges, connectivity, sustainability, urban greenscape, safety, space and space making, access, community enhancement, comprehensibility, environmental sensitivity, and human needs.

These design principles set the scene as to urban design qualities which when incorporated into the design of a development, will attribute to achieve a good development outcome.

2.4.7 Planning Studies

As mentioned previously, a variety of studies have been undertaken within the Coomera locality in response to the high level of growth and development occurring within the Greenfield area. Such studies have been undertaken by Gold Coast City Council and various consultants on behalf of Council. Such studies include the Coomera Town Centre Precinct Planning Study (2004), Town Centre Fringe Study (2004), East Coomera Residential Development Issues Paper (2004), and South West Coomera Planning Study (2004) to name a few.

These studies are generally for the purpose of studying growth and development and designing forms of growth control and providing an urban framework. It is noted that whilst numerous studies and reports have been produced, such information is yet to be incorporated into an enforceable mechanism such as planning scheme codes. In this regard, the studies undertaken have not yet been incorporated into enforceable strategic or statutory documents leaving Council with very little power to ensure good design outcomes are achieved. This also puts the onus on developers to go above and beyond the requirements of the planning scheme in incorporating urban design and placemaking principles in their developments. With the increasing costs associated with development on the Gold Coast, particularly in regard to infrastructure charges, developers opt to create developments which only adhere to the bare minimum planning scheme requirements for development.

As evidenced through the review of the above State government and Gold Coast City Council strategic and statutory documents (and studies), emphasis is placed on the concept of good urban design outcomes. However, the Gold Coast Planning Scheme, in particular development codes in which new development is assessed against, do not incorporate the fundamental urban design and placemaking principles as outlined in the above visioning documents. In doing so, concepts of urban design and placemaking are not enforced within the Urban Corridor and throughout the city. This therefore has numerous implications on place making in the Coomera area.

2.5 Enforcing Urban Design and Placemaking Criteria in Planning Schemes

Whilst numerous planning studies have occurred for the suburb, the integration of urban design and place making criteria into enforceable documents (e.g. planning scheme codes) can be achieved with relative simplicity.

As per the provisions of the *Integrated Planning Act 1997* (IPA), planning schemes are prepared and implemented by Local Governments to manage change and growth within the Local Government Area. Planning schemes must organize and integrate the issues that they deal with, alongside the corresponding State and regional dimensions of such issues. Further, planning schemes determine the level of assessment for development, or whether developments require Council approval.

The operation of planning schemes over time has allowed opportunities in identifying areas where legislation and associated administrative systems can be improved (Queensland Government, 2007). In this regard, Council should identify urban design and placemaking as areas in which legislation and regulatory mechanisms are required, to ensure such principles are sufficiently included in new development.

Local Governments can implement urban design and placemaking criteria via statutory initiatives including objectives, policies, rules and assessment criteria into Planning Schemes as per the IPA. The advantage of statutory initiatives is that they give urban design and placemaking criteria statutory importance and give local government legal bearing to impose appropriate conditions to ensure such principles are incorporated into new development.

The adoption of urban design and placemaking criteria as a council policy and implementing such policy via the planning scheme is one way in which local councils can meet its responsibilities under relevant legislation to make cities and its suburbs better places to visit and live. This is achieved via assessment criteria incorporated into the planning scheme to enforce urban design and placemaking objectives and policies (Queensland Government, 2007).

Implementation of urban design and placemaking principles throughout planning scheme mechanisms is summarized in the Figure below.

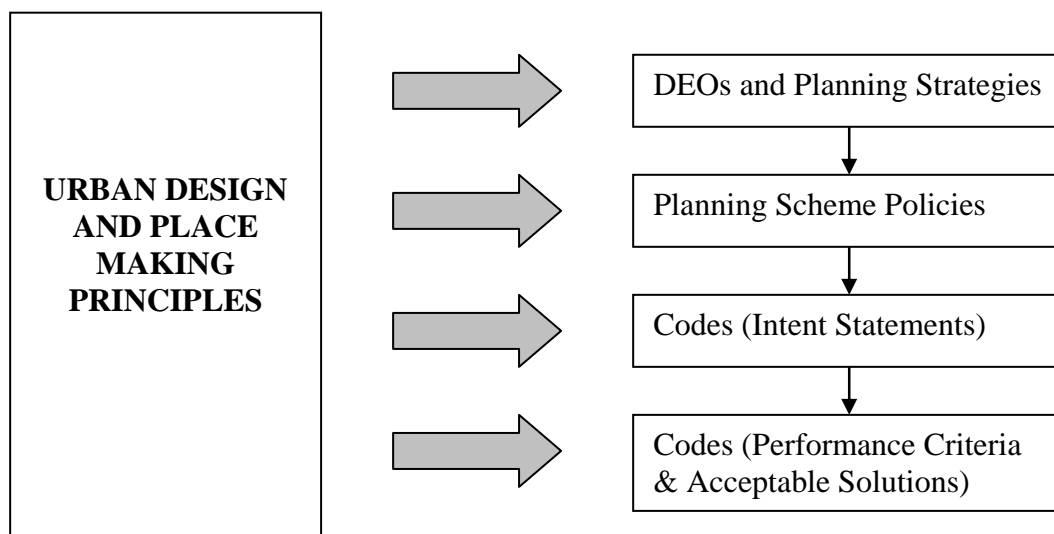


Figure 1: Incorporating Urban Design & Placemaking Principles in Planning Schemes

3. COOMERA TODAY

3.1 General Perceptions of Coomera

Growth and development in Coomera has been an issue of media attention. Opinions vary between developers, City Councilors, residents and members of the public. The general consensus focuses on the flaws of the suburb such as the creation and development of the suburb without the correct planning tools in place (Gold Coast Bulletin, 31 July 2009).

Coomera residential development has proceeded whilst still awaiting a retail and commercial centre. This not only creates transportation and accessibility issues but has seen developments being ‘inverted’ and ‘stand-alone’ with little sense of the broader community feel.

Coomera is further critiqued as large undeveloped acreage blocks fragment subdivision development complicating the development process for the suburb. This reduces the achievement of transit oriented development and the creation of aesthetic parks and walkways.

As previously mentioned, developers have been criticized for their ‘minimum standard’ subdivision estates and Council has been criticized for their lack of enforcement of planning goals such as public open space, environmental provisions and urban design (Gold Coast Bulletin, 29 July 2009).

Western Coomera development has seen the most criticism, where limited urban design principles within subdivision developments contribute to the lost opportunities in creating a high quality new community. The area lacks placemaking and quality urban design elements. As a result, this portion of Coomera is a very standard urban suburb undifferentiated by placemaking elements which identify the area historically and geographically, thereby contributing to a lack of local character and identity. Basic placemaking and urban design principles such as locality themed public art, street furniture and landscape design could have addressed this problem.

3.2 Exemplar Coomera Case Study

Coomera Resort Pty Ltd has various land holdings within the Coomera area inclusive of land east of the Pacific Motorway to be developed as part of the Coomera Town Centre Structure Plan. This portion of Coomera is largely undeveloped offering developers a ‘clean slate’ in terms of achieving good development outcomes via usage of urban design and ‘sense of place’ principles.

The surrounding area is characterized by development which demonstrates the need to incorporate good design elements such as landscaping, public art and design themes into new development to ensure a strong sense of place. Further, this should reflect the local character of the area to achieve suburb identity, differentiating the area from other suburbs in the city. As evidenced by much development in Coomera, failure to take action will lead to urban sprawl and create an area with limited community cohesion, ownership or sense of place with little connection to Coomera’s local character.

As Coomera Resort Pty Ltd holds a sizable portion of holdings in Coomera, their current developments and pending developable land have incorporated and will incorporate various urban design principles which can ultimately heighten Coomera’s sense of place and local identity. Design and landscape themes, including public art and themed street furniture, are incorporated in the development design of these sites. Such themes complement the local identity and character of the Coomera area.

It is noted that such provisions exceed the embellishment and streetscape provisions of the Gold Coast ‘*Our Living City*’ Planning Scheme 2003 and enables the development of a distinct and strong local identity for both residents and visitors to the Coomera area. In this

regard, visions of the abovementioned strategic planning documents can be met. Incorporating such features allows prolonged public benefit into the future and aids in the creation of a sense of place facilitating community cohesion.

Sites owned by Coomera Resort Pty Ltd have also incorporated themed public art and embellishments in the design phase that benefit community in terms of placemaking and good urban design outcomes. Specifically, Coomera Resort developments have undertaken extensive research of the site and surrounding Coomera area in order to facilitate complementary design outcomes based on the history of Coomera. This led to the creation of the Urban Design Guidelines document prepared by the developer's town/environmental planning and landscape architect consultants to guide the development of Coomera Resort's landholdings within the area.

Coomera Resort sites incorporate nature elements such as vegetation and flowing water which dominate the design character of the site. In combination, character from indigenous history has been incorporated into the design such as wattle leaf shaped street furniture, signage, paving detail, sculptures and totem poles. This wattle leaf design incorporates both environmental significance and indigenous significance as Coomera was derived from the Aboriginal word 'kumera-kumera' meaning wattle. These wattle embellishments can be inbuilt into future Coomera development with the involvement of council, local artists and the community. Through this, a continuous design theme across the greater Coomera area can be achieved creating a sense of place and identity for this rapidly developing suburb.

3.2.1 Urban Design Guidelines

The Coomera Resort Group has put together Urban Design Guidelines to aid in the facilitation of urban design and placemaking principles throughout development of their landholdings which dominate the Coomera locality. This document examines site and locality context with reference to the Coomera Town Centre Structure Plan and its role as a pedestrian linkage providing embellished, functional public open space. Further, the document outlines the broader design principles required to achieve a design outcome that satisfies the widely accepted performance criteria required for successful transit-oriented developments and public open spaces in general terms. In doing so, potential and conceptual design outcomes are identified and concept plans provided (Planit Consulting, 2009).

This document was prepared by town and environmental planners alongside landscape designers, who were engaged by Coomera Resort Group. The Urban Design Guidelines fill the gaps of the Gold Coast City Council's statutory and strategic documents with regard to urban design and placemaking criteria. It is evident that although such Council documents and studies pay what can be described as 'lip service' to such issues, guidelines and criteria for incorporating urban design and placemaking outcomes in developments do not exist. In this way, Coomera Resort Group are seeking endorsement by Council for the Urban Design Guidelines document, to ultimately establish integration into Gold Coast City Council planning mechanisms.

A general flow through of urban design and placemaking issues from DEOs and planning strategies, to planning scheme policies, intent statements, performance criteria and acceptable solutions is the ultimate goal. The achievement of such

integration in strategic planning documents is vital especially in such a high growth area of the Urban Corridor. This would secure minimum urban design and placemaking standards within development, thus facilitating the creation of a quality suburb in one of the few remaining Greenfield areas in Queensland.

4. CONCLUSION

Coomera has been identified as a prominent growth area within the Urban Corridor since the Albert Shire Strategic Plan in 1973 (Albert Shire Council, 1995). Despite the identification of the Urban Corridor locality as a hub for urban development for over 30 years, requirements and criteria for the development of the prominently Greenfield area are still insufficient.

Placemaking and urban design criteria, whilst mentioned in numerous studies and planning documents, are not enforced through development criteria within planning schemes. This leaves Council with very little power to ensure good design outcomes are achieved. Furthermore, onus is placed on developers to go above and beyond the requirements of the planning scheme in incorporating such principles in their developments. With lacking mandatory requirements to achieve placemaking and urban design outcomes and the high cost of development, developers opt to create developments which adhere only to the bare minimum planning scheme requirements for development.

This has had immense implications on the development of Coomera as numerous residential subdivision applications comprising thousands of residential allotments are being approved and constructed without urban design and placemaking considerations.

As a result of Council's minimum standards regarding urban design and placemaking, Coomera Resort Group, a major developer of the Coomera area, has paid particular attention to good urban design outcomes with particular regard to placemaking, public open space design and pedestrian access. Such principles have been upheld in their development applications and have been furthered through the establishment of an Urban Design Guidelines document. This document outlines the locality and its environment and gives potential and conceptual design outcomes and concept plans provided to guide their developments. Ultimately Coomera Resort Group is seeking endorsement of the document by Council to ultimately establish integration into the Gold Coast City Council's planning mechanisms.

Endorsement of the Urban Design Guidelines and integration with Gold Coast strategic planning documents will secure minimum urban design and placemaking standards within development. This is vital in the creation of Coomera as a quality suburb encapsulating a distinct identity, sense of place and public ownership.

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