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# REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

BY STEPHEN SMITH, DEICKE RICHARDS

There has been a bit of discussion around the topic of regional cities in Australia – their role, future and function. Having worked in a number of centres I thought it timely to at least pen my thoughts about three particularly lovely places that are well established regional centres.

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These centres are Mackay, Toowoomba and Bendigo. Mackay is the first tropical city one encounters on the trip north along the Queensland coast. A sugar and timber town originally, it is undergoing massive change due to the influence of the abundant coal reserves west of the town in the Bowen and Galilee Basins. This is bringing an influx of people and money to the town with its concomitant impact on items like wages and house prices. There is housing pressure being felt throughout the Mackay region in terms of affordability and physical expansion of urban areas.

Planning for these pressures falls largely on the shoulders of the local authority. Mackay Regional Council was formed from the amalgamation of three previous local authorities—Mackay City Council, Sarina Shire Council, and Marian Shire Council. This is a lot to bite off for any local government. It has had to deal with both the administrative and technical issues surrounding amalgamation as well as taking on the broader planning agenda for increased growth. To their credit, they are doing a good job. They are a long way from finished but they will have their draft planning scheme, created under the new planning legislation, on display in June this year. Mackay was in fact one of the first cities in Australia to have a Town Plan, and engaged luminaries such as Karl Langer to assist with the layout of the city. The city itself lies on the southern bank of the Pioneer River on a traditional orthogonal grid with a range of art deco buildings which form the core of the city centre. It is indeed a pleasantly walkable city particularly given its relative flatness and its climate.

Toowoomba – the ‘Garden City’ – was built on the back of its rich agricultural land, which forms the broader Darling Downs region. Sitting atop the Great Dividing Range Toowoomba is about two hours drive west of Brisbane. It is still the regional capital of southern Queensland and northern New South Wales and Australia’s 15th largest city, bigger in fact than Darwin. Its history is reflected in the rich diversity and character of its built form.

It has some very impressive city streetscapes and a wealth of older housing stock which give the city a great sense of scale, character and flavour. The city also contains some impressive parklands. Queens Park on the eastern side of the city is a wonderful space. There has been considerable effort by the citizens of Toowoomba to restore and renovate these old timber and tin character houses. Not the most climatically responsive building forms given Toowoomba’s chilly winters, but handsome nonetheless. Like Mackay, Toowoomba has undergone a series of amalgamations too. Toowoomba’s planning scheme is due for release and will be one of the first under the new legislation.

Bendigo was built on gold, and lots of it. The alluvial deposits around Bendigo were so valuable the rail line was built on the ridgeline above the town. Laid out on an orthogonal grid like its other regional counterparts, its heritage displayed in its built form, reflects its mineral wealth. Grand civic buildings line Pall Mall, Bendigo’s main street. Some of these buildings are incredibly impressive.



It has a very compact and walkable city centre. Students of architecture and urban design would need to go a long way to find a better place to study, or for a coffee. Like Toowoomba, the compact urban core is complimented by a sizeable piece of open space, Rosalind Park, which is a large city park literally adjoining the city centre.

Like most regional towns each of these places is characterised by a compact city core surrounded almost exclusively by single detached housing. There is an absence of housing diversity and density when you step outside the city core. There is also a relative absence of a permanent residential population within the city core. Mackay and Bendigo are looking to remedy that as a way of ensuring a strong and vital city centre.

The lack of density around the town centres makes retrofitting for densities problematic. There is community sensitivity around redevelopment in character areas of Bendigo and Toowoomba. It has resulted in pressure to push out residential growth boundaries. In the case of Mackay, it has put pressure on small rural towns to more than double their size in very short time frames, to meet growth on shoe string budgets.

Bendigo is only a two hour drive from Melbourne. It has courted a number of tertiary institutions such as Latrobe University and has a diverse education offering from secondary schools, technical and TAFE colleges and of course universities. The amount of energy young people bring to the town is a blessing not to be underestimated particularly for regional towns where younger population cohorts are sometimes absent altogether.

Good transport connections to regional centres are vital. This is not just road connections. Recent improvements to the rail network has seen the commuter line from Melbourne extend to Bendigo providing a frequent and efficient service. The rail connection between Melbourne and Bendigo has been invaluable, enabling people to commute to Melbourne and live in Bendigo. However, it's not all one-way traffic as the city is now attracting workers and students from surrounding centres such as Castlemaine. It also allows tourists to access the town as a comfortable day trip from Melbourne to catch many of the national and international art exhibitions the city hosts.





The rail connection, among other factors discussed below, allows Bendigo to punch well above its weight. Unlike Bendigo, Toowoomba does not have a good rail connection to Brisbane. Toowoomba has only its road connection, which winds its way slowly down a precipitous section of the Great Dividing Range.

Toowoomba is a major regional city with no practical rail connection. Everything gets to Toowoomba by road. A recent study noted with respect to a rail connection to Toowoomba that 'while important to freight movements of mining and agriculture to the Port of Brisbane, its public transport benefits are fairly minimal'.

Considering that the population is forecast to increase from 160,000 to 230,000 by 2031 this is perhaps one of the most shortsighted statements in transport planning and regional planning history.

A rail connection to Toowoomba from Brisbane not only brings growth to Toowoomba but also increases the viability of the entire corridor. In terms of regional development it is an essential missing piece in the puzzle with respect to growth management. This is especially so with increasing interest from the resources sector affecting housing prices in the city.

Mackay has recently rebuilt its airport. Like other resource towns such as Gladstone and Roma where there are large fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) workforces, airports are relatively new and are bustling hubs of activity. This does not necessarily translate into

activity for the town however, with workers heading straight for the mining camps from the airport, bypassing towns and other centres.

Whilst both Bendigo and Toowoomba have airports, neither have the same pressure to expand like other Queensland resource towns. Skytrans is however about to commence daily flights from Toowoomba to Sydney from the middle of this year and with the Surat Basin close by there will be a need to upgrade the existing facility. Flights from Brisbane may be impractical given the short distance (even more reason for a fast rail connection) but it would consolidate its role as a regional hub.

Similarly, Bendigo is looking to upgrade its airport to take advantage of its growing reputation for a livable well connected regional centre.

Community aspiration is an interesting element of regional development, and I suspect reflects the length of time spent in a region and how much emotional attachment residents have to it. Toowoomba and Bendigo in comparison to Mackay have relatively stable and older population bases. There is considerable community pride and attachment to the city centre. So much so in Bendigo that substantial community donations enabled the City to purchase the old Masonic Hall – a neo classical sandstone building of considerable proportions, and convert it to the Capital Theatre, part of the growing arts precinct.

Mackay on the other hand has a relatively newer population that has come to the city on the back



of the resources boom. Their relationship with the city centre is somewhat different and the emotional attachment and pride in the city centre as civic space seems to be much less. Growth in Mackay has been in outlying suburbs of Mt Pleasant, Blacks Beach, Ooralea etc where there are larger lots, 900m<sup>2</sup> and above, that are relatively cheap.

The city centre is somewhat depopulated and contains a number of hotels that cater for the resource and other service sector employees. A recent public realm strategy in Mackay, to improve streetscapes, pedestrian areas and public spaces, received substantial criticism from some sections of the public wanting money invested instead in other items such as roads, rather than the city centre.

This is where civic leadership and governance is vitally important. Mackay has a strong vision for its future and is pursuing this vision vigorously. It has a long history of innovation, perhaps given its relative isolation, and continues to look beyond the resource boom to the creation of a sustainable region economy. Bendigo and Toowoomba similarly are pursuing strong public realm and character agendas in an attempt to define their cultural legacy and retain their strong identities reflected in the history



of their built form. Strong civic leadership and vision in these cities is critical if these cities are to establish a role that looks beyond their region to a broader national role and identity. The Bendigo Bank for instance has its national headquarters in Bendigo. This is a major coup for the city and represents its aspirations as a regional city with a national focus.

Diversity is king. The best asset of any regional city is the diversity of its economy. Mackay is in the midst of a raging resources boom but has the presence of mind to not put all of its eggs in one basket. The resources boom, however, does little if anything to fund or financially assist with even the most basic of infrastructure needs for a growing region. Mining royalties inevitably fill state and federal coffers but that money is not ploughed back into the regions.

Local government in Queensland is seemingly fighting a lone hand on this front. Watch this space as there will be much debate in the future around this topic. Mackay is encouraging diversity in its economic base through its continued association with its agriculture industries in particular the sugar industry, which is highly protective of its cropping land. It also courts education, arts and tourism as part of a suite of economic initiatives. Bendigo's resource days are over and its regional economy is bolstered by its education offerings, tourism and lifestyle options. Again these offerings are inextricably linked to its good rail connections.

Education it would seem is a staple of a sustainable regional city. Toowoomba is a city that services an enormous catchment through southern and western Queensland and into northern New South Wales. For many people in these rural areas their preference for both education and specialist medical services is Toowoomba rather than Brisbane, whether you are in Inverell, Goondiwindi or Roma. It still services an agricultural industry base but much of this is financial rather than physical, with many rural service industries located in smaller rural towns closer to their customer base.

In this respect Toowoomba acts perhaps more like a capital city rather than just a regional centre and is the focus for many business, commercial, retail and community services. For those who live in south east Queensland, Brisbane may be the major centre but once you get over the 'range' Toowoomba is the capital. It seems the Great Dividing Range is as much a spiritual divide as a physical one.

Legacy is an important issue for places like Mackay. Toowoomba and Bendigo has a range of impressive character and heritage buildings and public spaces as a legacy of previous waves of prosperity. What sort of legacy the current resources boom leaves is an important question. It can't just be a brand new airport.

Wealth generated in these regional towns – Ballarat, Bendigo etc was spent in the towns. Transport and technology at the time of these resource booms meant money was spent locally. Admittedly a good proportion of the wealth generated in Bendigo was spent in Melbourne. Nonetheless a great deal was still spent locally and its effects are felt today in the streets and spaces left behind.

With changes in technology and workforce mobility Mackay, Moranbah, Gladstone etc face a situation where the wealth generated in the region is not creating any sort of legacy for the benefit of the people who live there. Is this acceptable? Where should the money be spent, by whom and how? I am not here to debate this issue, I'm just planting a seed for further discussion. But it's a real issue for many regional towns and cities and it's a discussion we need to have.

#### IMAGES

- p.1* Toowoomba City Hall
- p.2* Shamrock Hotel and GPO, Bendigo
- p.3* New residential development, Mackay
- p.4* Rosalind Park, Bendigo
- p.5 (left)* Centre of Mackay, corner of Wood and Victoria streets
- (right)* City Family Hotel, Bendigo

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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#### DEICKE RICHARDS

Deicke Richards is a multi-disciplinary design practice, providing architecture, urban design, interior design and landscape architecture services.