

Cultural sustainability in an Australian regional centre: the case of Swan Hill

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Space for a portrait of
the co-author.

Wrap the picture in
front of the text. Then it
is easy to place to this
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Introduction

Swan Hill, a small regional city in the north-west of the state of Victoria, Australia, has a range of cultural sustainability issues to face in the 21st century as smaller Australian cities engage with issues of population drift, availability of amenities, economic change affecting both primary and secondary industries and the attitudes both within and outside regional centres towards regional life.

Drawing on a major funded study of cultural sustainability in regional towns, this paper will examine Swan Hill's future resilience in both a historical context and that of other, comparable towns in Australia. Attempts by city fathers past and present to increase and reorient the town's design and networks are canvassed. Issues of both race and place also factor into Swan Hill's community and social stability and growth. The establishment of a true sense of uniqueness for Swan Hill may well be, it is contended, the saving of the area; as is continued recognition of its frontier and more recent history. The study takes place in a political environment wherein a minority federal government, supported by rural independent members, is ostensibly renewing a commitment to reinvigoration of regional areas and creation of both new towns and heavily funded infrastructure to increase the size of existing regional towns.

Some of the study's findings are essentially applicable around the world; others are arguably unique only to the city itself. In both strands a snapshot is readily available to outline the problems faced in the interrelated environmental, social and political fields, to prepare small regional cities for an uncertain future.

Swan Hill is a city of approximately 20 000 people four hours' travel (by road or rail; train services operate twice daily) from the capital of Victoria, Melbourne, the nation's second largest city with a population of 4 million.

Drift from country towns and regional centres towards large capital cities has been perceived as problematic in Australia for well over a century. This phenomenon – mirrored in many western nations - is due in large part to the increase in secondary industry in the nation after World War II: an era of large-scale manufacturing which is now passing. At a time when larger Australian cities are seen to be oversized and unsustainable – a key 'push' factor for government bodies in particular - numerous methods are in play to create 'pull factors' and induce people to either stay in, or move to, smaller centres. This paper takes the case of Swan Hill as an area many see as suffering cultural, social and population decline. In examining past and present remedies, the authors note ways in which Swan Hill is addressing its current problems, and suggest some elements to the town which, despite the validity of its detractors'

complaints, may ultimately see it retain and gain population and resilience.

The Rural City of Swan Hill is a local government area incorporating some minor outlying towns. The settlement began as a communications and service town, and prospered for much of the 20th century on irrigation technology – and water from the nation's largest river, the Murray – which allowed for fruit and wheat production. Like many Australian regional cities and towns, Swan Hill has observed a low growth rate over the 20th century as certain functions once germane to regional centres devolve to the centre and as key developments in the national economy bypass rural towns altogether. This has been the case despite numerous attempts to establish or re-establish Swan Hill in culturally and agriculturally productive ways (for instance, as a wine region specialising in Chardonnay); to define its points of difference and its unique attractions as part of the Mallee region; and to express its importance as both a centre and as part of a network of rural cities within Australia's habitable area.

This paper is an examination of the past and present of Swan Hill, with a view to its viability and cultural sustainability – as well as its more broadly establishable sustainability – as a 21st century community. It discusses Swan Hill as a discrete component of a multicultural nation, and as a small regional centre proactively seeking to forge an identity and a range of new functions within its locale, region and nation.

The meaning of community in Swan Hill

In March, 2011 the citizens of Swan Hill held their second 'Harmony Day', a small festival on the banks of the River Murray calculated to acknowledge the presence and contribution of Swan Hill residents of diverse backgrounds (one-tenth of the city's population was born outside Australia; Swan Hill has a long-established Italian community, a small indigenous community of under a thousand, and a more recently founded Somali community of similar size, amongst others). Organiser Ross Polglase observed on this occasion that while Swan Hill represented 'a very diverse society, with many cultural backgrounds' this was not generally commented upon 'beyond seeing people may look different' – much less celebrated [1]. Since its inauguration in 2000, Harmony Day had traditionally been held on Australia Day, a national holiday commemorating (controversially for some) the anniversary of the arrival of British settlers on the continent on 26 January 1788. However, the eleventh Harmony Day was postponed for two months due to an extraordinary near-disaster that for many emphasised the value of co-operation within a small community far more effectively than folk dancing displays.

In the second week of January 2011 the Swan Hill region experienced three times the average rainfall for January in the space of 24 hours [2]. Following many years of declared drought through much of Australia's pastoral lands, severe flooding inundated much of the eastern landmass of Australia. The Murray, which is the *raison d'être* for Swan Hill threatened on a number of occasions over a period of weeks to burst its banks at certain points.

In a congratulatory column in the local newspaper, the *Gazette*, Mayor Greg Cruickshank discussed a 'whole-of-community response' to the flood threat [3]. Between 70 and 90 000 sandbags were filled by residents [4], and volunteers reinforced or built levees at important locations in the area – such as the historical theme park, the Pioneer Settlement [5]. Cruickshank relayed his enthusiasm for the Swan Hill population's organised and selfless contributions towards the preservation effort; such as the Country Women's Association's assistance in providing sustenance for workers, and those community members who provided a 'wealth of local knowledge' aiding in strategies and activities to protect the area from the rising river [6]. Robert Putnam's notion of social capital within community groups and clubs was actively in play here, and the CWA was not the only local group to organise in defense of a local town. Further examples include,

for instance, the Football Club of the nearby town of Nyah Nyah West, 28 km to Swan Hill's north, which also took the responsibility for constructing sandbag levees [7].

The nation's (and the state's) attention was largely focused on much more spectacular and disastrous water devastation in the north of the continent; the state of Queensland experienced unprecedented flood damage at this time and Swan Hill stayed on 'high alert' till the danger passed. This may have complicated the feelings of Swan Hill locals over their own experience. It did not, however, change the fact that they had come together as a community to face, and avert, disaster.

That the Harmony Day eventually held in March took place on the banks of the Murray was, then, itself important and the mere site was a reminder of the value of community within this small town. Riverside Park – which lies between the town and the river – is similarly a valuable component of the town's layout, providing a space acknowledging the importance of the Murray River (Australia's largest) to the town. Created in the 1930s by unemployed men working for sustenance payments, Riverside Park's creation initiated a change in the way Swan Hill responded to the river. Whereas, for much of the 19th century, the Murray was the principle source of communication and trade between the town and the rest of the world, it had been largely superseded in this role by a railway line, built in 1890. The construction and dedication of Riverside Park created a focus for Swan Hill activities as the town managed and constructed a cultural identity. It – and the nearby Swan Hill Town Hall, constructed in the same decade – were to become the location of a number of important and significant attempts to create new cultural expression and spaces thereafter.

Sculpting cultural spaces in Swan Hill

A brief historical survey of the pursuit of cultural spaces in Swan Hill since the 1930s is illustrative of the ways in which small communities define themselves as cultural producers and consumers. Though some major changes have taken place in the flavour of the cultural expression in the last 70-80 years, the Swan Hill case reinforces the value of recent models of sustainable communities as discussed by Manzi, Lucas, Lloyd-Jones and Allen in their overview of 'social sustainability'; whether it be within the 'Russian doll' explanation of sustainable development (in which 'society' joins 'economic development' to 'environmental limits') or the 'strong local culture and other shared community activities' element to the 'Egan Wheel' of eight elements constituting a sustainable community [8]. Expectations of cultural and social sustainability – under different names and within different structures of social assumption – have long been a core part of social and urban planning in Australia.

In 1932, the novelist John Truran described the landscape of the Mallee region as a desolate land of disappointment – not without its beauty, but with many elements of tragedy – thus:

The country flattened out; bare, brown wheat-land and pasture, clumps of feathery, grey box-trees, deep river-channels in the yellow clay, and occasional heaps of white quartz marking the abandoned diggings... Isolated granite hills, scrub-covered, and trees that gradually dwindled to the everlasting mallee and native oak of the inland plains [9].

This was what the traveller might see for much of the second half of a journey from Melbourne to Swan Hill in the 1930s, and to an extent the same is true today. However, another reading of the same region fourteen years later by Peter Hurley, focussed not on a landscape of despair but on the possibilities and potential of the Murray River, provides extraordinary contrast. Hurley felt that the Mallee region told:

the story of Australia's own progress from primitive hunting-grounds to highly-specialised industries, irrigation, water, electric light and power, community hotels, splendid recreation grounds, town-planning, and latterly a university college [...] it holds our interest as a real-life romance [10].

A rearrangement of local governance in the region late in the 1930s spelt a change for Swan Hill, as the small urban core at the administrative and, for many, social heart of the town split from the shire of the same name which surrounded it. The Borough of Swan Hill was created in May 1939 following a poll the previous year and in light of what was described as 'amazing growth' during that decade [11]. The new council sat on the second floor of an impressive, and recently constructed (to incorporate an earlier, smaller building) Town Hall designed along modernist lines by the Melbourne architect A. C. Leith. The Hall had been built for both administration and entertainment, and the loan made to cover its construction cost was expected to be paid for by local people's entrance fees to plays, films and shows.

The establishment of the Borough of Swan Hill came a mere three months before Australia followed Britain into the Second World War, an experience which, far from limiting the desire for expansion and change in small towns like Swan Hill, in fact made such change seem more immediately important. The councillors of the newly created borough were quick to engage the noted Victorian architect and town planner, Frank Heath, to prepare for them a plan for the expansion of Swan Hill as a regional centre. Heath, like many advocates for urban and regional planning in Australia, had consistently emphasised the security risk of concentrating so much of Australia's population on the continent's coasts. This was an issue not only for the safety of the population but also a situation in which industries – including vital military industries, such as munitions manufacture – were vulnerable to air attack. His plan for Swan Hill was finished in 1941, and could be described as a best-practice town planned settlement with reference to 'garden city' planning of the era; the replanned town, now expanded five times its size with the extant settlement one of five 'neighbourhood units', was arranged around a large administrative and entertainment 'social centre' set in extensive green space.

Heath had recently returned from Europe, on a study tour of the type common to many architects, planners and other professionals viewing not only classic forms of building but also new planning developments. During this time, he visited the USSR and wrote extensively on what he saw as 'one of the greatest social experiments in the world.' Praising Russian planning, Heath directly equates his own plans for Swan Hill with the Russian 'block' and 'rayon' system, though more typically he was prone to discuss these as conforming to the American, Clarence Perry's, Neighbourhood Unit [12]. Few, if any, of his recommendations were adopted. However, the value of the Heath contribution to Swan Hill should not be discounted, and in fact the town has grown in size to the rough outline of his plan, if not the detailed fabric.

While it is from, and for many reasons belongs to, an era long past the Swan Hill Shakespeare Festival is an unusual and valid means for examining the pursuit of a distinct cultural interest in Swan Hill itself. This annual event can be seen as illustrative of a way in which broader changes within Australian society were explored and embraced at a very local level. Additionally it is indicative of a desire to recognise and celebrate the spirit of a progressive nationhood within the context of a modern – postwar – reconception of the meaning and value of citizenship and community belonging.

In 1947 the playwright Marjorie McLeod, a formidable woman recently decamped from Melbourne, in tandem with Mayor Duncan Douglas, initiated the formation of the Swan

Hill National Theatre to make productions of Shakespeare its speciality, and to launch an annual Shakespeare festival through a procession of thematically decked floats through Swan Hill's main street. Local businesses promoted the Festival through window displays; the town council provided financial and other support. Capacity audiences witnessed theatrical productions held in local halls as well as in the open air in Riverside Park.

The success of Swan Hill's Shakespeare Festival – the only major annual festival ever to be devoted to Shakespeare in Australia – is extraordinary on many levels. In the postwar decades, for Australia — as for Canada and elsewhere in the wider British world — the study and performance of Shakespeare was seen as desirable cultural capital and core to the development of an informed and culturally aware citizenship. Reporting on the Swan Hill Shakespeare Festival in April 1952, the *Australian Women's Weekly* quoted Mayor Douglas no doubt echoing the feelings of many when he declared at the festival's inauguration:

With wealth pouring into our township from its wheat, wool, dried fruits, and dairying industries, we are keen for our cultural progress to keep abreast of the district's material riches [13].

The Festival contributed to localised community bonding and was noted particularly for the inclusivity extended to young people: McLeod was highly commended by the *Argus* newspaper for having 'got the youngsters... genuinely interested in theatre' and encouraging them 'to take on work which they would never get an opportunity to do... in the city[14].'

In the early 1960s, another festival was established in Swan Hill which, in hindsight, countered the Anglocentric sentimentality of the Shakespeare celebration. This was the Italian community of Swan Hill's Festa. Though Victoria was a focus for postwar Italian migration, many of the Italian community in Swan Hill were not postwar migrants, but came to the region in the 1920s and 30s to work in farming and crop picking[15]. Many reputedly came from the town of Varapodio in southern Italy, and a core aspect of the Festa was the carrying of a statue of Maria SS del Carmine between churches. The statue had been a gift from the original village, and the ceremony replicated one held there.

In 1967, Swan Hill was awarded a score of 97% in the cultural activities section of the Victoria's Premier Town competition. But by this time, the town's cultural focus had moved away from Shakespeare to its own history of settler exploration and settlement, and the 'romance' of its former river port. In the early 1960s, at the instigation of the local historical society, local and state government had raised money to create the Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement, a historically-themed, river-focused tourist attraction which opened in 1963. Accordingly, the Shakespeare Festival was superseded by the Swan Hill Pioneer Festival. The centrepiece of the Settlement was the Paddle Steamer *Gem*; in 1966, the second floor of this craft was given over to the Swan Hill Art Gallery. In the mid-1980s, the gallery obtained its own purpose-built premises and is well-regarded as one of the state's regional galleries.

In their *Small Town Sustainability*, Knox and Mayer discuss the success stories of smaller urban and village settlements and their 'Acute awareness' of 'the importance of retaining... heritage, identity and distinctive sense of place [16].' Swan Hill's Shakespeare Festival may have come, during a rise in self-aware nationalism in the 1970s, to seem arcane. A comparable oddity might be seen to be the extraordinarily successful Elvis Presley Festival held annually in the town of Parkes, 600 km north-east of Swan Hill, over the last two decades and where more recently a museum has been

established combining Presley memorabilia with local history artefacts and displays. Places such as Swan Hill in the 1940s-60s, and Parkes today, necessarily eschewed the notion of becoming a 'clone town.' [17] That said, in Swan Hill's case the national profile could, on balance, be said to have fallen, as the success of the Pioneer Settlement encouraged other regional towns – closer to Victoria's capital and on more attractive routes – to adopt similar strategies.

The last part of this paper examines the cultural experience of daily life for residents of Swan Hill, examining the extent to which this might be a 'pull' – or a 'push' – factor in the city's sustainability.

Opportunities for cultural expression in Swan Hill today

The Italian-born community of Swan Hill comprises less than 2% of its population, though the length of this community's presence in the region – almost a century – undoubtedly bestows on many locals the option of identifying as 'Italian' through heritage, rather than direct origin.

The Festa, mentioned above, has been a local phenomenon for half a century, and other Italian-themed events such as a Market staged by the Swan Hill Italian Club continue to reinforce this ethnic presence[18]. The Festa itself continues; recently, Carmel Muscatello, a longstanding resident with over two decades' involvement in the event, told the Swan Hill Guardian that while the Festa had experimented with different formats in recent years 'everyone wanted to make sure that traditions were continued...'[19]

Knox and Mayer's outline of identifiably sustainable 'small towns' in the northern hemisphere concentrate heavily on each settlement's history and origins. Events such as the Festa and the Harmony Day, and institutions such as the Pioneer Settlement, keep Swan Hill people mindful of their city's origins and its multicultural past and present. Yet an emphasis on the distinctiveness of a small town's social environment may not be sufficient to keep it resilient.

As a country of distances and putatively 'empty' spaces, Australia has experienced unique problems amongst developed nations as its people have strived to remain connected and engaged with both each other and the wider world. Perhaps because of this fact, Australians since the mid-20th century have notoriously become early adopters of new communications and entertainment technology. One question that might come from this in discussion of cultural sustainability for regional towns in the early 21st century is whether the impact of the internet on regional Australians has been to accentuate the unique nature of the locality in which they live their daily lives; or whether it serves to reinforce the limitations of non-urban culture with little corresponding value attended to the advantages or the potential for advantage. Knox and Meyer suggest that the 'faster the information highway takes' those who live in such places 'into cyberspace, the more they feel the need for a subjective setting – a specific place or community – they can call their own.' [20] This however jars with the testimony of one teenage Swan Hill informant to researcher Elanna Nolan that the internet was 'my best friend.'

Facebook gives the social researcher invaluable insight into the temper of a society: its use as a tool to broadcast from local to global is unprecedented. In many cases, it might be what is not said which tells us the most, thus the question asked by Neesh Killjoy Bell on the Facebook page 'Swan Hill = Depression': if you could do one thing and one thing only to change swan hill what would you do? – received no responses. Elsewhere in the sphere of Swan Hill-related Facebook comments, we find polarized responses:

Most boring place on earth... left 10 years ago after being there all my schooling life. Been back maybe 10 times max and always find myself

wanting to leave a few hours after my arrival [21].

moved here in 1996 when I was two have lived here ever since went to St Mary's and now the Swan Hill College love this town lol[22]

The Swan Hill Guardian recently profiled a Sudanese migrant to the town, Rebecca Wuor, who opined that Swan Hill was 'good for living and it's good for the kids to go to school -- not like the city.' [23] Similarly, a Melanesian migrant, Joelle Whiting, told the paper she and her family 'enjoy the slower pace. We don't drive, but it's still so easy to get around. There is easy access to the parks...' [24] These are very pertinent to a notion of sustainability and resilience for those who might wish to raise children – and of course those who can find employment – in a regional centre. However, the sustainability of any town is likely to topple if its young people leave, and if its cultural dynamic – in terms of the creation and consumption of unique local culture – declines.

A recent state government-commissioned study of the relocation made by young regional Victorians for the purposes of tertiary education uncovered some unusual trends. Though there are regional campuses of Melbourne-based universities, and the late teenage relocation is usually ostensibly made for the purposes of education or employment, social reasons are of course often also underlying the decision to move [25]. Within the late-teenage rural cohort researcher Fiona McKenzie also found that there was some apprehension amongst those who 'perhaps felt a bit too young, or still attached to their parents, or maybe just lacking maturity or a sense of "worldliness"' [26], as well as those for whom the big city was 'perceived to be "busy", "fast-paced", and "stressful", and its people "cold" and "impersonal."' [27].

That said, research conducted by Elanna Nolan in 2010 amongst Swan Hill teenagers revealed a social scene in which a 4-hour drive to the nearest city with a cinema – a larger regional centre, Bendigo – was de rigeur. Films were occasionally shown in Riverside Park, and were briefly a part of a Friday night youth event at the Town Hall in 2009 but these are generally regarded as 'old' and out of date. Swan Hill youth are undoubtedly engaged with the wider world, and continually made aware of what they are missing by living away from a larger city.

Regional cities in Victoria such as Castlemaine have established themselves as an artistic town. Perhaps it is with this in mind that a former resident of Swan Hill casually asked this question:

It's been a while so I don't know what's going on but I was just wondering if there is an art scene in Swan Hill [sic], whether anyone is exhibiting, making art or performing, and whether anyone under 60 is as well. I'm interested to hear of anyone. [28]

Came an answer:

I live in Melbourne and study art and design. As well as doing photography and illustration. There are many others who are the same as me, but moved away. There are no opportunities in Swan Hill so everyone leaves. [29]

While this testimony is valuable, it is notable that it is not from an actual Swan Hill resident but a former resident.

Conclusion: Swan Hill's future, probable and possible.

Knox and Mayer write of the essential component of livability in any sustainable small

town: 'how easy a place is to use and how safe it feels.' [30] We would posit that, alongside community confirmations through celebration and cultural expression, there are two additional, iconic elements essential to Swan Hill which not only present it back to its people, but also to the outside world.

One, figuratively, though not literally as per Heath's 'community centre' conception of 1941 at the heart of the settlement, is the Swan Hill Town Hall. This impressive modernist building, two blocks from Riverside Park, with direct street frontage and incorporating a smaller, older civic building as one wing, has long played a part in Swan Hill's cultural life. Rebranded at present as the Swan Hill Town Hall Performing Arts & Conference Centre, its website trumpets its location in 'the CBD' (i.e., the central business district of a small town-city) 'and just a short stroll from major restaurants, accommodation houses, clubs, cafes and the mighty Murray River', the complex 'is the place for your next performance or function.' [31]

The second 'heart', less immediately evident but far more ubiquitous if only because it is far older (119 years) is the Swan Hill *Guardian*. This newspaper, though now owned by a nationally-based media enterprise, nonetheless retains the strong role as advocate and opinion-maker for the community it has had for much of its existence. The *Guardian* in 2011, for instance, regularly strives to build inclusive community with features on the life stories of new, non-English speaking background migrants. Mayor Cruickshank has a column in the thrice-weekly paper, which is designed to augment state or nationwide papers. Recently, Graeme Griffin has written of the value of newspapers 'uniquely attuned to and actively involved in the often tumultuous issues, campaigns and battles' affecting small local communities 'in a seemingly constant state of flux and under recurring threat.' [32] Griffin's example is of a community newspaper rather than an established, advertising-funded one, but the essential truth runs parallel between the two forms: media which advocates for a community within a defined boundary is crucial to the understanding, and resilience, of that community.

There is little doubt that Swan Hill faces a number of challenges into the century, some of which are ongoing and some of which are, if not new in themselves, at least a heightening of pre-existing scenarios. In part, the largest 'push' factor is the economic reality of the difficulty in branding a town as an cultural-artistic centre with unique properties; such branding, even if it is effective, might only last a few years and then rely overly heavily on either wider fashion and/or the efforts of one or a few charismatic individuals. The broader sustainability and resilience of Swan Hill is, however, arguably reinforced by certain long-standing cultural pillars which strengthen each other: government, cultural expression, a strong local press and frequent locally-based representations of the town's culture and the community to itself and the outside world.

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