

# What about Australia's Small Cities: Do they have their own Planning and Development Agenda?

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**Abstract:** Australia's urban hierarchy of large metropolitan areas and a second level of centres with over 200,000 people create one of the world's most urbanized countries. Australia's urban planning agenda has understandably focussed on the major urban areas. Third level cities, those with a regional service centre function and a population of around 80 - 130,000 each, now have a total population of nearly a million Australians and represent a significant element of Australia's urban scene. Yet at the national level at least, little attention has been given to these places as part of Australia's urban hierarchy. In their recent edited publication *Small Cities: Urban Experience Beyond the Metropolis* (2006) Bell and Jayne ask, is the planning and development agenda of third level cities merely a scaled down version of that applicable to metropolitan areas or can they 'find a meaningful and valuable use of ... their localness, their smallness ... [given that they are] caught between bulking up and staying small?' This paper examines Australia's third level cities, their role in an urban hierarchy and what their urban planning agenda is in a global world and national scene where size appears to matter.

## Introduction

Australia is highly urbanized in an international context. Discussion of densities, functional urban regions, the realities of counter-urbanization and large city dominance are widely evident in academic research and popular media both in Australia and around the world (Brotchie et.al.,1995, Sassen,1991). However the trends in population change suggest that smaller cities ('third tier' cities) are also viable and growing centres. The drivers of this growth have changed, along with broader structural shifts throughout the economy. We contend that the planning response to these changes has led to an identifiable mode of planning action and activity in these cities. At least since the 1960s the number of urban centres in Australia with populations between 20,000 and 100,000 has increased; almost doubling in number, while the share of the national population living in these cities has also grown, see Table 1 below. During this period the national population share of the largest metropolitan cities remained generally stable and importantly, the population share of smaller towns (below 20,000) has declined over the period.

**Table 1 Number and Population Share of Urban Centres**

Population	Number of Centres			% of Population		
	1966	1996	2001	1966	1996	2001
<b>500,000+</b>	5	5	5	56	53.1	54
<b>100,000-</b>	4	8	9	5.4	9.2	10.8
<b>20,000-99,999</b>	22	50	43	6.8	9.8	8.8
<b>2,000-19,999</b>	250	366	364	12.4	11.3	10.4
<b>1,000-1,999</b>	178	312	285	2.2	2.5	2.1
<b>Urban</b>	459	741	706	82.9	86	86.3
<b>Population</b>				11.5m	17.8m	18.9m

Source: Cocklin & Dibden (2005)

Bell and Jayne (2006) suggest that these third tier cities possess a *dual* planning agenda. On one hand they aspire to take on a similar agenda to that of larger cities but in reality often become mired in the mundane. They contend that third tier cities have been seen to ape the agenda of larger cities, in what they suggest is a vain attempt to promote their own self importance, as much because this is what they assess the 'planning agenda' to actually be. Bell and Jayne suggest that if third tier cities are true to themselves they will identify a distinct identity with its own nuances and characteristics. This will be related to their size, the role they play and the specific issues such cities face. However, the problem for many third tier cities is that in their own terms, this agenda is often seen as too mundane and is viewed as dragging down the scope, level and scale of issues to the point where it is seen as epitomizing the very smallness of these cities.

### Defining Third Tier Cities

In investigating the status and prospects of 'third tier' cities it is evident that the literature associated with small cities is not only very limited but that there is no accepted definition of what constitutes such cities. Literature on settlement structure and the relative influence of urban centres has a focus on issues such as 'world cities' (Sassen, 1994), and competitive advantage through poly centric 'network cities' (Batten 1996). Just as these understandings of city systems are confounded by fuzziness in definition, so too are notions of *smallness* and consequent difference resulting from this. In general, the defining concepts of *third tier* cities are internalized within each economy and are specific to their own history and hierarchy of urban places. Effectively, third tier cities can differ in population size depending upon the range of city size found in each country.

While population size can vary, the *concept* of a third tier city can be generally applied. We consider that city size, coupled with an economy structure that is neither wholly dependent on a larger centre, nor lacking complexity in its isolation, are the critical elements. We consider that about a dozen Australian cities potentially fit into a 'third-tier city' category, places such as; Albury-Wodonga, Ballarat, Bendigo, Cairns, Darwin, Launceston, Mackay, Rockhampton, Toowoomba, Townsville and Wagga Wagga. This is a dynamic definition, with some growing regional centres - cities such as Bunbury and Bundaberg reasonably meeting some criteria, while Darwin has a distinct role as a 'capital city' and places such as Ballarat, Bendigo and Toowoomba are being brought into extended metropolitan spheres. It's a factor noted by City of Greater Bendigo CEO John McLean in seeking to explain sustained population growth (Financial Review: pp. 26) 'one simple proposition: proximity to Melbourne'. 'Cashed-up sea- and tree-changers looking for a different retirement lifestyle, and generation Y-ers aged in their late 20s and 30s needing affordable housing for their families, are expanding the rural hotspots, particularly in the main growth corridor north of Melbourne.'

It is evident that the cities we have potentially identified as third tier have undergone substantial change over the last generation or so. These third tier cities fall generally into one of two types; they either were always a reasonably sized city which in terms of a population hierarchy could have been classified as third tier (Ballarat, Bendigo, Launceston, Toowoomba, Townsville) or because of a range of factors they have dramatically lifted their ranking in terms of size (Albury-Wodonga, Cairns, Darwin and Mackay). Significantly the relatively rapid rise of a number of cities, based on population growth has been accompanied by the decline in relative ranking for a number of cities that because of a range of factors simply did not grow. O'Connor Stimson and Daly (2001, p. 127) compared the population and rank of Australia's fifty largest urban places between 1961 and 1996. Extracting third tier cities from their list illustrates how the current cities fall into either a grouping of cities that have had slow but steady population growth; enough at least to generally maintain their ranking, to those that have leapfrogged their way up the ladder. The relative ranking in third tier cities in the top fifty cities across Australia between 1961 and 1996 is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Population Rank in Selected Cities Australian Hierarchy 1961-1996 and 2001**

City	Rank 1961	Rank 1996	Rank 2001
Launceston	10	17↓	21↓
Ballarat	12	19↓	17↑
Townsville	13	13↓	14↓
Toowoomba	14	15↓	16↓
Bendigo	17	20↓	20
Cairns	23	14↑	15↓
Albury-Wodonga	32	18↑	19↓
Mackay	35	24↑	24
Rockhampton	16	21↓	24↓
Darwin	50	16↑	18↓

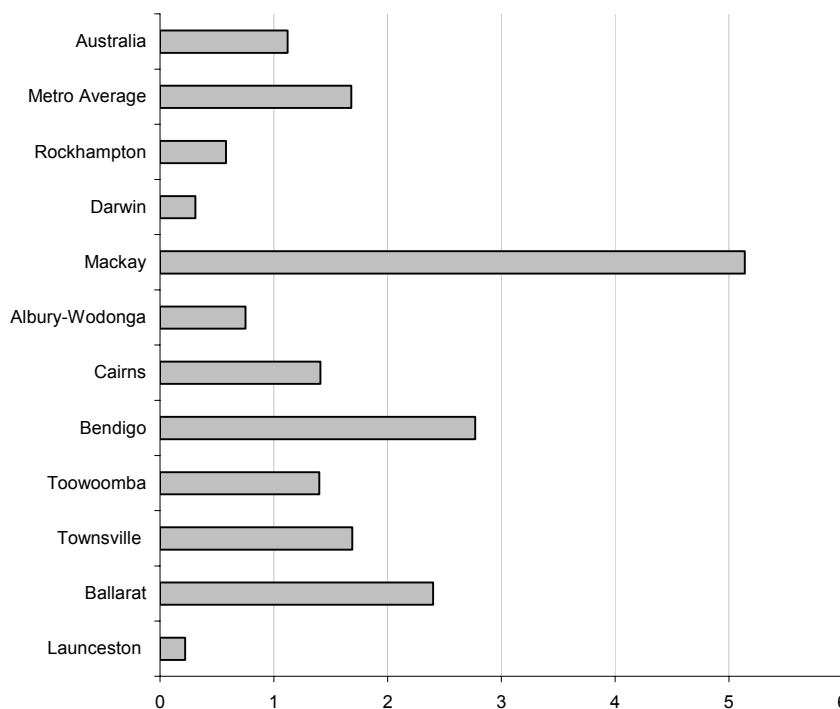
Source; O'Connor, Stimson and Daly 2001 with update

Interestingly some of the 'old economy' cities that dropped out of the top fifty since 1961 includes places such as Mt Isa, Whyalla, Port Pirie, Burnie, Lithgow, Morwell, Moe, Broken Hill, Cessnock. In respect to the third tier cities notably the four smaller centres in 1961 have been the high growth areas and have improved their ranking. However, conflicting with a simple rustbelt-sunbelt dichotomy, the larger centres in 1961 have largely held their position or only lost ground slightly.

Siegel and Waxman (2001, p.26) in a study of economic adjustment, in what they defined as third tier cities in the US, found that local amenities, education, engaging in regional collaboration, creating an effective civic infrastructure and promoting diversity as strength were major drivers in population growth. The fact that third tier cities have a strong capacity to maximize existing assets is often the key in making third tier cities more attractive places to live and work through initiatives such as making telecommunications better and integrating new residents (Siegel and Waxman, 2001, pp. 29-30). Siegel and Waxman (2001, p. 5) in seeking to define third tier cities in the USA, utilize three criteria: a size range of 15,000 to 110,000; that the centre is primary to the region's economy and that the city has not tripled in size since the mid-twentieth century. This process seeks to filter those cities that act as satellites to larger centres and those that are in a rapid growth phase that makes clear and present definitions difficult. While a binary definition of 'third tier cities' may not be necessary to explore planning policy approaches, an approach to definition that seeks to consider city size, coupled with relative economic independence and a long term 'third tier' identity is useful.

The cities we have identified have all grown in population size. In a number the population growth rate, particularly in recent years, compares well with or exceeds metropolitan and national rates of population growth. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Selected Australian Cities Average Annual Growth Rate (%) 1996-2001**



Source: ABS

The roles and prospects of each of these cities differ significantly and the drivers of population change are diverse; including tourist growth, industrial restructure and decline in reliance on the agricultural hinterland. Consequently, the economic 'burden' on these centres created by broader process of national and international restructure is not consistent. A number of the centres have a legacy in the 'old' economy; others are emerging and growing

to suit new economic drivers and international links. In an Australian setting, low population densities and long distances reveal a weakness in many of the notions of urban regions and polycentric networks providing a means to operate at a simultaneous global-local scale. Consequently, many smaller Australian 'third tier' cities have an uncomfortable relationship with processes of globalization, establishing city identity and addressing contemporary trends in urban planning.

The problem of structural shifts and starkly divided prospects is most identifiable not between metropolitan centres and large (second tier) cities, but in fact between and within the roles of smaller regional cities and large towns. Third tier centres appear to have neither the historic status and function, nor the population capacity to easily respond to structural change, to promote their own capacity to act within a global economy and to signal a city-brand either culturally or physically. Of course notable exceptions, such as Cairns do exist, but in general the linkages between cities of this size and innovation and associated investment would appear to be weaker. Regardless of this a metropolitan – regional city dichotomy exists in most policy, particularly in physical and economic planning policy. The reality in fact reflects a spectrum of roles and functions that relate to size, proximity to other centres, historical status and perceived prospects. In this light the nature of planning becomes one in which there is a clear consideration of the trends that are seeing third-tier cities as increasingly pre-eminent in their regions while smaller centres decline. As well third-tier cities are forced to address a new agenda of growth and change.

### **Third Tier Cities and Regional Development**

In an Australian policy context, government attention to third tier cities has generally been as part of policy and initiatives about *regional development* (Beer, Maude and Pritchard 2003, Haslam-McKenzie and Tonts 2005). There has been little specific focus on third tier cities as urban spaces. At federal and state government level, regional policy has been about *economic development, population growth and service delivery* (Collitts, 2002, Spiller and Budge, 2000). Economic development and population growth have generally been promoted as good things in their own right and the more and higher level therefore the better and the more successful the policy and initiative is considered. But such approaches have rarely been locationally specific, with the notable exception of federally funded initiatives in the early 1970s. Maude (2004) reviewed research on Australia's regional development policies between 1990 and 2002 and found little real evidence of regional development given the overwhelming market forces of agglomeration and centralization. He also found that such an approach by government was probably realistic given that on a world scale disparities between regions are not great and that in all likelihood such policies would be likely to have limited impact. The role and success of regional policy in an Australian setting is most readily researched in those regions focussed on smaller cities. The broad experience of Australian regional policy processes, whether in earlier models or a latter-day resurgence, has primarily served to address the needs of 'lagging' regions and their urban centres. In effect, this has created a primacy of a 'development' agenda in the broader process of local policy making and local perceptions of the role of local governance.

There has been an apparent reluctance by governments at the federal and state level, of whatever political persuasion, to nominate 'winners' and 'losers' by targeting regions in the way in which European regional development policies have frequently done – within a *spatial planning* context. This is despite what numerous researchers and commentators have identified as a growing economic and social divide resulting from globalization, market forces and neo liberal government policies effecting vastly different outcomes in metropolitan and much of regional and rural Australia, and between different regions across Australia. Third tier cities in the Australian context are often referred to as regional centres, although that term is applied to a much wider range of places and sizes. Reference to regional centres conjures a reflection on regional development policies. The agenda of Australia's regional cities has been influenced by policies and initiatives at the federal and state level although some would argue that Australia has never really embraced the concept of a full scale resourced regional development policy that sought to grow the population and economy of regions.

An important factor in shaping the agenda of the third tier cities has been their realization that the old economy is no longer where future growth will be found. For some of the third tier cities such as Cairns it is self evident that growth around the service sector, particularly associated with tourism, is driving much of the economy. However growth based on the service sector has been a harder realization particularly for those third tier cities that traditionally relied heavily on manufacturing and a long established regional service centre role linked to agricultural production in their hinterland. While tourism and recreation have become high profile employment and investment sectors for most if not all the third tier cities it is the carving out a role in delivering higher order services, both public and private, that has been responsible for much of the growth of these cities. Some would say at the expenses of places in their hinterland, the so-called 'sponge city' effect (Budge, 2006, Alexander and Mercer, 2007).

Various researchers have studied the changing functions and roles of Australia's regional cities examining employment structure as a basis for a typological classification. For instance Beer and Clower (2006) have reviewed these changing classification over the period 1961 to 2001. It is significant just how much many regional cities have been transformed over the last four decades in their role and economic structure. In the case of a number of our third tier cities it is not simply a matter of changing from one type of city to another there has been a changing role and function, which has seen a number of different elements, represented. Use of a cluster analysis technique to define the dominant economic characteristics by Beer and Clower illustrates this change. Extracting some key dates based on census years these changes can be represented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Cluster Analysis Role and Function Selected Cities**

Year	Cities	Cluster Analysis Role and Function
1961	Ballarat, Bendigo, Launceston, Toowoomba, Townsville	More manufacturing
	Albury-Wodonga, Cairns	More trade
	Mackay	High construction and high transport
1976	Launceston	High finance
	Albury-Wodonga, Ballarat, Bendigo, Cairns, Mackay, Toowoomba, Townsville	Average all round
2001	Bendigo, Launceston, Mackay, Toowoomba	Regional centres with tourism
	Townsville	Community services, high government, administrative services
	Cairns	Remote tourism
	Albury-Wodonga, Ballarat	High services and defence

Source: Beer and Clower (2006)

Beer and Clower (2006) particularly note that regional cities have become more specialized in their functions and providing that those specializations were not in such components as manufacturing and mining then specialization led to increased growth.

Bell and Jayne (2006, p.13) report on the work of Erickcek and McKinney (2004, pp. 20-21) who established a typology of small US cities based largely on their economic development and characterized them as one of eight types

1. Old economy places in small decline
2. Private sector-dependent places
3. Sprawling places
4. Company towns left behind
5. College places leaking graduates
6. Company towns left behind but socially viable
7. Growing new economy places
8. Growing university/government/business complexes were dominated

They found that growing new economy places were characterized by higher labour participation rates by young women, higher educational attainment and high incomes.

While clearly a number of urban centres in this size range are within the cultural and economic influence of larger metropolitan centres (within a growing metropolitan functional urban area), many others have an independent social and economic life and prospects. In both cases the concern of public policy at the local level is often strongly influenced by the sense of local competition and a development driven policy ethos. Nonetheless, these centres are growing. Many have achieved this through a more general hollowing out of rural service centres in their hinterland in preference to these larger regional cities. Others have developed strong links to growing industries or larger and metropolitan city-regions. Critically, in third-tier cities, the sense of economic and community identity is identifiably parochial, even as a transition is occurring to “big-city concerns”. Modes of differentiation based simply on population size, settlements densities or access to services in them do not adequately confer a sense of difference or dilemma for third tier cities. In fact the key issues are identity, expectation and potential (as expressed through policy, culture and a seemingly simple populist parochialism) with each seeming to differentiate these cities from smaller and larger centres and urban networks.

Third tier cities outside the immediate sphere of metropolitan areas experience similar problems of lack of knowledge and poor perception as that experienced by any place outside the major metropolitan areas (McManus and Pritchard 2000). In a research study conducted for the Department of Transport and Regional Services in Australia Woolcott Research (2003) found that the metropolitan public ‘had little contact with regional Australia [and] relied heavily on the media as a source of information regarding what life is like in these areas’ and that this led to stereotypical views of droughts and battlers with few prospects for economic and social but that values like community, peace and quiet were strong. In perhaps their most significant finding on perception relative to this paper was that metropolitan images of rural Australia were predominantly of small towns rather than large regional cities.

There are few writers and researchers who have studied small cities in depth, suggesting that not only do such places lack any identity in a world dominated by large metropolitan areas but that the sheer scale of issues apparent in the world’s large global centres has focused the attention of governments and policy makers. Ironically, as Bell and Jayne (2006) note, at a world scale even though the global population is now fifty per cent urbanized, the reality is that most of the world’s urban dwellers live in small cities rather than the larger global cities that claim much of the attention.

### **An Emerging Planning Agenda**

Bell and Jayne (2006) identify that third tier cities often spend considerable time and effort adapting policies from bigger cities into the local context in the belief that these policies are relevant and it is only a matter of scale. They observe that frequently these adaptations, which Bell labels as ‘mundanizations’, usually do not work, primarily because of the narrowness and parochialism of the local perspectives. They suggest that a weakness of third tier cities is that they often experience a failure to identify a meaningful role and position as a city because they function in a world where size and growth are seen as a critical measure of success. Using a case study of the English Midland’s city of Stoke-on-Trent, Bell and Jayne explore the ‘agenda confusion’ that they suggest third tier cities face. They identify that the typical and realistic agenda of a third tier city is based around two core elements; urban regeneration and economic development. This agenda needs to be shaped within a framework of finding ways to capitalize on, and to market, the qualities and attractions associated with smallness. They note for instance that many elements of new urbanism are associated with values more likely to be found in small cities.

How does this planning agenda in its scope and scale translate to what we have defined as Australia’s third tier cities? There are a number of particular characteristics of Australia’s third tier cities that need to be recognized, these include;

1. They are each their own local government – with a couple of exceptions the relevant local government encompasses the whole urban area and often a considerable surrounding rural hinterland. This means that the planning agenda encompasses everything from inner city redevelopment to managing the urban rural interface. This considerably widens their potential planning agenda.

2. Most third tier cities are experiencing and attempting to manage strong population, housing and investment growth pressures, in some cases this is at unprecedented levels and is often following relatively long periods of modest growth.
3. Most third tier cities are characterized by an old central business district developed to support a regional agricultural service role and are dominated by a housing stock constructed for traditional nuclear families in suburban settings,
4. Third tier cities have a separate local entity at a regional scale. Their Council is required to take on roles such as advocacy, promotion, marketing and economic development well beyond the scale and resource base of these places. For example when a business folds or lays off workers the response is that it is the Council that should be doing something about it, in contrast to a metropolitan area where the community will look to the State government for a response. The community expectation is often that the Council will operate above its weight.

A review of the apparent planning agenda in Australia's third tier cities generally confirms the findings of Bell and Jayne; that urban regeneration and economic development are major planning agenda items. An examination in terms of what planning strategies these cities have prepared or are in the course of preparation, what planning items are dominating their day to day planning agenda and how these cities are positioning themselves as a regional, national and global player reveals strong commonalities and some differences. The current strategic planning work in Australia's third tier cities indicates a strong focus on attempting to regenerate their Central Business Districts with a series of retail, urban design and economic initiatives. Similar findings emerge overseas (Seasons, 2007). Many of the third tier cities seem to have discovered shop top housing, heritage preservation, outdoor eating, laneways and tourist information and signage in a virtual replication of central city metropolitan planning and development. When economic development is examined though it appears that many third tier cities are seeking to replicate roles more usually performed by government agencies. Every aspect of economic development from tourism, industrial sites and incentives, telecommunications, education, health and international links are on display.

Third tier cities find that they are managing sprawling residential growth without an overarching state run and resourced metropolitan strategy, controlling rural residential and rural living development on their fringe. They are grappling with medium density housing in communities not wanting such forms of development while encouraging urban consolidation and a housing mix more relevant to an ageing population. In short the residential planning agenda is one found from inner to outer metropolitan areas. On top of this agenda most third tier cities are seeking to attract tourist and recreational facility investment, improve transport and telecommunications links and champion more sustainable development and incorporate response to climate change. It is not so much that all these agendas cannot be found in local governments around the country it is just that at the scale of a third tier city in a regional setting the expectation by community and business is so much higher. The large geographical area with its diversity is generally only found across an entire metropolitan area not within parts of it.

A review of the strategies and plans produced by these cities and the agenda they cover generally confirms the work of Robertson (2001:9) who identifies that considerable work is being devoted by small cities to identifying what he terms their 'unique selling place'. In studying US cities, he identifies the city centre or 'downtown' as where such places find their unique selling place as a point of comparison with larger cities. Robertson identifies eight factors in the city centre;

1. A more human scale less busy and more walkable
2. Not exhibiting the problems of larger cities congestion and crime
3. Not dominated by a corporate presence
4. Lacking in large scale flagship projects
5. Retailing distinguished by independents
6. Not subdivided into mono functional districts
7. Closely linked to nearby residential neighbourhoods
8. Possess higher numbers of intact historic buildings

While not totally transferable to an Australian scale these factors generally do characterize most of Australia's third tier city centres, much of the urban regeneration and economic

development in these cities is seeking in one way or another to build on these factors and the promotional literature from these cities is increasingly emphasizing these points.

Increasingly regional centres are being seen against whether they can offer particular lifestyle attributes. Cities within what are perceived as high amenity regional areas are often experiencing high rates of growth (Burnley and Murphy, 2004). In part the growth of these places is being fuelled by perceptions of what they can offer as lifestyle. In the case of Victoria the 'Making it Happen' marketing program has been built around this element.

A number of writers observing third tier cities in North America have also studied this phenomenon. They have particularly looked at this against the work of Richard Florida, 2002 and his thesis that population growth and economic development can be correlated against the growth of persons classified as belonging to what he terms the 'creative classes' (Nelson, 2005). The influence of this work has been such that cities aspiring to growth are seeking to reposition themselves by seeking out growth and investment based on attracting particular occupations, events and investment (Garrett-Petts, 2005, Nelson, 2005). It is now very much on the agenda for third tier cities to invest in the arts, cultural events, museums, live entertainment, up-market accommodation, food and wine (Krahn, Derwing and Abu-Laban, 2003 and Montgomery, 2005). Their traditional focus on building their role in terms of creative classes is important as is factors more traditionally associated with regional development (McGranahan and Wojan, 2007), such as higher education, higher order medical and health facilities and the pursuit of IT investment.

What is the future planning agenda of Australia's third tier cities other than just gaining recognition and profile in an increasingly competitive environment where size commands attention? Traditionally in Australia regional development has been used to promote investment migration and population growth designed to address lagging regions but these third tier urban centres display characteristics which indicate that they may have reached a critical mass and range of functions and roles. Arguably the government does not need to support them in the traditional way in which regions were traditionally supported. Alternatively if such cities can attract growth away from congested metropolitan areas perhaps they can play an enhanced and wider role in Australia's urban hierarchy. Bell and Jayne identify that third tier cities have an agenda, which in one sense seeks to copy the agenda of larger centres and ask a series of questions such as whether this agenda is really just 'boosterism' or behaving in an aspirational manner, but in fact is just not realistic. They also ask does it perhaps represent a practical and pragmatic response to their position in the hierarchy?

We have found that the planning agenda of third tier cities in metropolitan areas has distinct elements, but similar to the findings of Bell and Jayne, it is often confounded by parochialism and scale. Certainly a cursory reading of the local papers indicates that there is an obsessive preoccupation with items that are often found in the newspapers in much smaller local governments. It is not just a case of the large city agenda scaled down in some cases it is the town agenda scaled up. It still appears that despite their growth and emergence in Australia's urban hierarchy, given the current policy climate, these third tier cities are likely to be overlooked because of their dispersion and relative individual size. Each is marginalized within the relevant state hierarchy of urban centres, despite the fact that third tier cities like Cairns, Darwin, Mackay and Townsville are emerging as important elements in Australia's global links in terms of trade and tourism. There is a need to further research what is happening with these third tier cities and understand more fully why they are growing so rapidly, in particular those centres where the reasons for that growth is not so obvious. At both state and national level increasing attention should be paid to their emerging role in the urban hierarchy and the study of their planning agenda given that an increasing proportion of people are choosing to live in these places.

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