

“It’s Easier to be Yourself in the City”

The regional city, the metropolis, and youth experience

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Residents of the regional city of Swan Hill, Victoria have long held an ambivalent attitude to their state capital, Melbourne. Reviewing present-day Swan Hill and particularly the cultural life of its youth — the demographic section of the population which primarily is seen to constitute the town's “future” — this paper examines young people’s responses to Melbourne, their access to it, their use of it, as well as their lives in their regional home town.

This analysis of the links between the experiences of youth and regional and metropolitan places is positioned in the context of successive urban and social planning schemes for Swan Hill since the Second World War. These aimed to create a unique local culture and to emphasise the attractions of a regional city to all residents — with a focus on community identity and “rural values” — in preference to the a large scale, cosmopolitan conurbation like Melbourne.

Introduction

The issues surrounding country town population retention in Australia are well-known. People, and particularly young people, are drawn to cities not merely for excitement (as some more scathing critics might suggest) but also for employment stability and access to education, health, cultural and other services. With just over thirty per cent of the Australian population now living in regional areas, the depopulation of the countryside has been the source of angst for Australian reformers,

commentators, politicians and laypeople for over a century. Graeme Davison and Marc Brody (2005) write of the importance of the “economic and social vitality of rural life” as it existed in colonial Australia, although even then the Australian colonies were distinguished from Britain by the high proportion of urban-dwellers within the population. However, historically the necessity of creating an attractive and rewarding rural society has been undeniable for a nation whose economy has been driven by primary industries such as agriculture, pastoralism and mining.

This paper discusses the interrelated issues of population decrease and cultural decline in Australian country towns. It begins with a discussion of the concept of such decline, including policy and less formal measures to mitigate against it. The paper then examines these issues as they have an impact on one place – the regional city of Swan Hill. Contextualising Swan Hill historically in its engagement during the postwar years with the decentralization movement and the contribution of a local theatre group to its cultural sustainability, we then move to a discussion of how young people experience the culture of Swan Hill in the 21st century. A recent fieldwork study has interviewed young people in Swan Hill to gather data on how they view their own town in regard to its leisure and cultural opportunities and how this compares with their experience of the city of Melbourne. We argue that the need for proactive measures to foster and provide cultural activities as well as for provision of leisure facilities in regional Australian towns like Swan Hill lies with both local government and local residents.

In today’s Australia it might be assumed that rural and regional towns are fighting a losing battle with the attractions – social and cultural and economic – of the greater conurbations of Australia, most particularly the state capital cities. Between 2007-12 for instance, areas with the largest population growth include perimeter suburbs of major cities such as Wyndham and Whittlesea (Melbourne) and Wanneroo and Stirling (Perth), while areas registering largest *and* fastest declines over the same period include Broken Hill and the West Coast of Tasmania, with the Swan Hill region registering second highest in both categories (-3.4%). (ABS 2012)

The drift to the city might be expected to be most pertinent of all for rural youth, particularly those who wish to undertake post-secondary education and training at universities and technical colleges (the presence of tertiary campuses, especially from the Technical and Further Education sector, in many larger regional towns notwithstanding) or participate in a wide range of employment opportunities.

The Rural City (previously, Borough) of Swan Hill (Figure 1), an urban centre officially distinct from a surrounding shire of the same name since 1939 (Scholes, 1989 p.xi; Anon 1942a) has attempted in various ways since the end of the Second World War to reposition and remake itself as a regional service centre and as a tourist destination for those coming from further afield, particularly from Melbourne.

Established in the 1830s and originally a river port for the bustling trade along the Murray River (a function quickly lost after the opening of the railway line in 1890), colonial Swan Hill was a town of regional importance in the 19th century, and until the creation of Mildura in the 1890s was the only regional centre of substance in northwestern Victoria. The 1920s and 1930s saw the fostering of soldier-settler development and irrigation projects in the region which altered the environment and economic nature of Swan Hill’s hinterland.

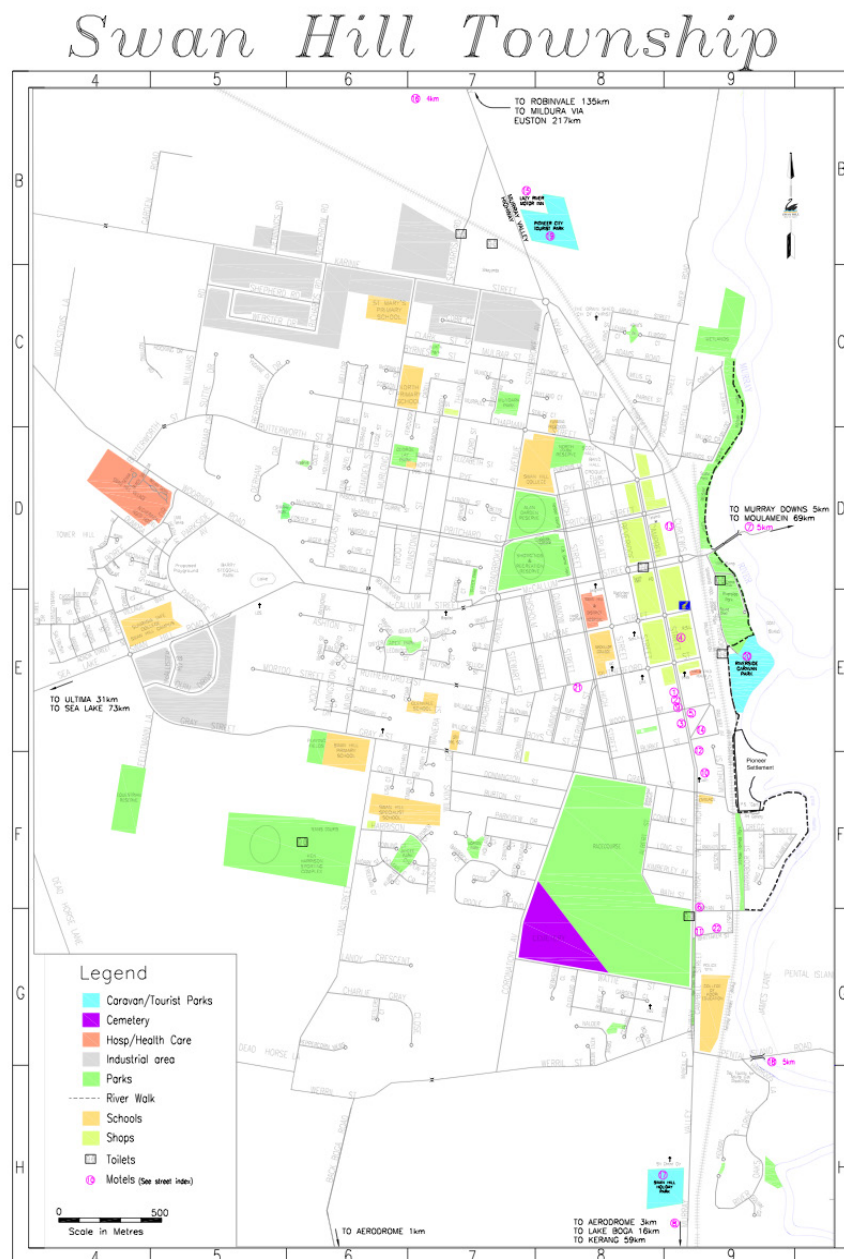


Figure 1 Swan Hill township. Swan Hill Rural City 2013

Mildura, 200 km to Swan Hill's north west and also on the Murray, now has three times the population of Swan Hill – approximately 30 000 compared to Swan Hill's population of just under 10 000. Swan Hill has never come close to the size of the town of Bendigo, which is more than eight times larger at 82 000 people, and which is located slightly closer than Mildura to Swan Hill. It is approximately twice again as far from Swan Hill to Melbourne, a journey that is achieved today with a four-hour drive or a four-and-a-half hour rail or coach trip. Swan Hill does not have an airport. Unlike some Murray River towns, it does not have a cross-border "partner" settlement in New South Wales. Swan Hill also does not have a major state highway running through it, although there is controversy within the town over a new cross-river roadway.

Small towns lacking in social or spatial “connectedness” are not inherently poor or drab towns. Indeed, Swan Hill – as will be seen below – provides a number of opportunities for community and specifically youth involvement, entertainment, and activity. Yet in August 2012, an ABC-TV current affairs report on the state government’s failure to provide mental health resources to Swan Hill found that the town youth were experiencing low secondary school completion, high teen pregnancy and youth self-harm seven times the state average (Caldwell). Swan Hill has become, according to this report, a place of despair for many, particularly its young people.

Tolstoy’s observation about every unhappy family might perhaps be expanded to describe every unhappy *town*. Certain elements to Swan Hill – its riverside park, its frequent markets and festivals, its art gallery and pioneer village (of which more below) do indeed make it unique in its own way. However, many of the more unusual elements of the town, rather than contributing to its unhappiness, are potential contributors to its own solutions. In this paper, we investigate, firstly, some of the aspects of Swan Hill’s cultural progress in the postwar era which was a particularly important moment in development as plans for the town drew upon the contemporary economic ideas about decentralisation. The discussion then shifts to Swan Hill in the present day, notably the experience of the area’s youth both of social and cultural life in Swan Hill and their attitudes to and experience of the “big smoke” of Melbourne.

Cultural life in Swan Hill since the Second World War

Many progressive and imaginative Australian thinkers of the mid-twentieth century imagined an Australia with redrawn state boundaries and redistributed population. Such reworkings often took the form of expanded regional centres, remade state boundaries, the relocation of industry and the creation of systematized nodes of delivery for government services, community activity and other facets of what was at that time seen by many politicians particularly within the labour movement as core to a practical manifestation of democracy.

Key planner and planning advocate Frank Heath’s preparation of a plan for an eightfold-expanded Swan Hill in 1941, sponsored by the newly configured Borough’s municipal council, marks the first step in a reimagining of Swan Hill as a metropolitan entity (Nichols and Darian Smith 2010). Though little came of this plan, suggestions for facilities and what might now be called decentralized “nodes” made by the Victorian Decentralisation League (Anon 1942b) were aligned to the policies of the state government. These included the establishment of offices in towns throughout Victoria “as another step towards decentralisation” just prior to the end of the Second World War (Anon 1945). These measures were evidence of an interest in breaking the hold of the metropolis of Melbourne on the state and enhancing quality of life for those in the country. The cry was taken up by commentators such as the real estate agent L. H. Luscombe, writing as Veritas, who championed the “decentralisation” of power and authority across Australia as expressing “the very essence of true democracy” (1945, p. 133).

A few years later, a related “decentralisation” plan for regional Australia was flagged by commentators. “Decentralisation of Australian culture – such as it is – lies very near and dear to the hearts of art and education enthusiasts these days,” wrote John Hurd in the Melbourne newspaper the *Argus* in September, 1950. Hurd was discussing the National Theatre Movement’s Annual Branch Festival at which the Swan Hill Branch was to perform Joan Temple’s play *Charles and Mary*, in a

competition for the best dramatic performance held against two suburban and one other regional branches. A dramatization of the life of Charles and Mary Lamb, authors of the children's *Tales from Shakespeare*, the play flagged the strong interest of the Swan Hill drama group in Shakespeare's works. Though the drama group's existence and success is in large part due to one charismatic founder and convenor – the playwright and director Marjorie Mcleod – the active sponsorship and support of local government was also clearly a factor in the rise of this amateur theatre organization, which formed a major social and cultural component of Swan Hill life into the 1960s. An organization such as this provided a range of important elements to the town: it enhanced social life, allowed Swan Hill to define itself as a hub of cultured activity that was to be celebrated within Victoria, the nation and within the British Commonwealth. For close to two decades, the Swan Hill drama group put the town "on the map" as the location of a particularly popular and enthusiastic Shakespeare festival.

The decline of Swan Hill's annual Shakespeare festival (which was seen in participants' minds to follow the arrival of television in Australia in 1956, then the departure of Mcleod in 1966) coincided with the rise of two other cultural gatherings. The Italian community of Swan Hill has held a (largely food-oriented) Festa since the 1950s, as a celebration of the impact on non-British migration on the region. By the 1960s, the erection of the Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement was also an important aspect of the reconfiguring of the town and recognition of its settler history. The centrepiece of the Pioneer Settlement was the Paddle Steamer *Gem*; in 1966, the second floor of this craft was given over to the Swan Hill Art Gallery, which later obtained its own purpose-built premises nearby. These sites now form the Swan Hill "culture precinct" which, in the narrative presented by the Swan Hill Region tourist "Discovery Drive," segues into a gourmand's delight whereby "Swan Hill prides itself with offering visitors and locals an extensive and culturally diverse dining experience" (Swan Hill Discovery Drive c. 2012)

There are at least two ways a place such as Swan Hill can define itself as cultural: in the culture it enjoys amongst its own people and the culture it displays to the outside world; both help to define the town and are calculated to attract visitors.

One might see these intersected, and redefined, by the divide between "high" and "low" culture. The Shakespeare festival, and the Swan Hill National Theatre generally, gained Swan Hill some prominence as a cultural "place" in mid-century, though participants interviewed were quick to assert that involvement in the Shakespeare festival was open to all comers. Similarly, and originally intended as a second string to Swan Hill's cultural bow, the Pioneer Settlement is an important early example of 20th century Australia's revisiting of its early European heritage. Both institutions have encouraged (indeed, depended on) the involvement of the local citizens in voluntary capacity.

In addition, Swan Hill retains a strong theatre culture which might surprise visitors and which is primarily focused on reflecting Swan Hill's experience back to its residents. Events such as the Fairfax Festival and productions staged by SHYTE (Swan Hill Youth Theatre Ensemble; the acronym is a self-denigrating one chosen by teenagers who formed the group "to provide an alternative to the sports culture which pervades this region and provide an alternative form of recreation and skill development to the young people of Swan Hill" (Swan Hill Performing Arts 2013) are key to an ongoing youth and local theatre culture in Swan Hill. Additionally, of course, there are sporting and other cultural events in the area on a frequent basis. However, as will be seen below, access made

available particularly through social media gives rural Australian youth some pause to reflect on the failings of their everyday social experience as much as it connects them to the wider world.

Culture and entertainment in the 21st century: what does Swan Hill offer youth?

In their study of transport options for rural Australian youth, Currie et al (2005) outline this issue for late-teens youth succinctly:

As young people grow they seek a greater level of personal participation in the activities of life. As young people get older their needs become more wide ranging and the activities they take part in become more diverse and cover a wider geographical area (6).

Such activities may include “serious partying, clubbing, dating” over 16 and “pubbing... more dating and marriage” as well as a “whole range of activities/interests/entertainments” over 18 (6).

In 2010, a focus group survey was undertaken on a small sample of Swan Hill Secondary College students aged 15-17. Part of a larger survey of teenagers in regional and peri-urban locations and their attitudes to city use, the findings excerpted here demonstrate issues specific to Swan Hill. Students were asked to discuss their experience in semi-structured interviews.

Of the 18 teenagers interviewed in our survey, the general opinion was that while pre-teen childhood experiences are enhanced in a country town, teenagers and young adults had little incentive to stay. They expressed frustration at the lack of opportunities available to them as well as diminished or peripheral access to contemporary popular culture such as current films, theatre, and concerts and the like.

Participants explained that country towns were good places to “settle” while being a young adult in a city would be ideal (for all participants but one). Generally, most spoke of moving to places like Mildura or Bendigo rather than Melbourne with all but one participant wanting to leave Swan Hill, thus:

Female: I would always wanna settle down in a country town, I wouldn't want to live in the city with kids or anything, but for uni would be good

F: Just not Swan Hill

Just not Swan Hill?

[laughter]

F: Yeah [laughter] I'm not coming back here...Mildura or something, Mildura would be okay

Why not here would you say?

F: 'Cause it's too boring

Male: 'Cause it's a s***hole

F: There's no opportunities here

F: There's nothing to do here, you can't even go to the movies

Staying in Swan Hill was described by some students as being the outcome of a lack of other options, as the result of laziness, or as a boring and safe option. Others described it as a decision based on employment opportunities, calling Swan Hill a “tradie's town”, suggesting that if that was not the future young people desired then they would have no choice but to go elsewhere. For a couple of

participants this was seen to be a “sheep-like” path that reinforced the lack of diversity (and thus opportunities available) in Swan Hill.

M: I think half of those people who stay around only stay around because Swan Hill’s really a tradies town, most of the people that live here are builders or handymen or stuff like that...

F: Or hairdressers...

M: ...yeah, any trade...

F: That’s just comfortable

F: They just leave school, do a trade or become a hairdresser

When contrasting their home town with the metropolis, participants described spatial claustrophobia in Melbourne (crowds, lots of people) and social claustrophobia in Swan Hill. They valued the physical space in Swan Hill...waving their arms around to indicate space to move. However, it is plain that their preference was for the social possibilities of the conurbation: “You go to a party in Swan Hill and you already know everyone,” says one informant. “But if you go to a movie in Melbourne you could end up talking to someone and meeting and stuff like that.”

F: It’s easier to be yourself in the city

M: You can walk down the street and not see someone you know...

F: Yeah, it’s good

M: ...like, I walk down the street of Swan Hill and you’ll say hi to about 50 people...it’s ridiculous.

Does Swan Hill need a cinema?

Social spaces for young people were, indeed, a consistent issue for the youth of the town. Council’s “young people’s areas” – there are many, as outlined in Swan Hill Rural City’s cultural planning policy – were the subject of derision.

A “folk memory” exists among the local youth of Swan Hill’s Oasis Twin (formerly the Regent) cinema, which closed in 2006 and has since been demolished (Burnside 2013). The site, in Campbell Street, is now an Aldi supermarket:

F: The Council knocked down our cinema, now there’s an Aldi

M: Yeah, they knocked down our cinema

F: Now there’s like nothing to do

F: Now we have Aldi...

M: And a Bottle shop

M: ...We have about 8 bottle shops in Swan Hill now

F: Cause that’s all we do – drink – cause we’ve got nothing else to do

[laughter]

M: We’ve got bottle-os on every corner and we’ve got hairdressers on every corner

M: So you get your haircut and then you go out and get drunk

So is there a cinema around here anymore?

F: No, Bendigo’s the closest

F: They show like...

F: Yeah, they put movies on at the park

F: And they've done a few drive-ins at Swan Hill, and stuff like that

M: But no one goes.



Figures 2 and 3: Images from the Facebook page *Swan Hill Memes*, 2012.

The dichotomy of the cinema as a meeting place for Swan Hill youth is an ongoing issue (the lack of a cinema, according to one commentator on “Swan Hill Memes” (figures 2 & 3), renders it a “fukn sad pathetic s***hole”). The complaint is recognized by the city’s burghers who also believe that the central issue is not so much the presence or absence of a cinema per se but the role a cinema could play as a place for young people to meet *new* people away from parental supervision or the eyes of other Swan Hill locals. Of course, there is genuinely little expectation of meeting “new people” in a town where almost all people are familiar; the attraction, therefore, of Bendigo and Melbourne is apparent. It should also be noted that the blaming of the city council for the demolition of the cinema is barely justified (the sale of the land was a commercial decision between private parties); the Swan Hill town hall can be used as a cinema, and periodically serves as one, although it is not part of a cinema circuit. In late 2013, Twilight Cinemas announced its intention to open a three-screen “boutique” cinema in an existing retail building in central Swan Hill (Anon 2013; Burnside 2013).

For the teenage Swan Hill informants, the most valid option for group entertainment within the town is to “Walk around and drink” or “Go to parties, that’s all we have.” For many rural youth the internet – and its capacity to expose all users instantly to the latest news on global cultural developments – actually reaffirms their isolation, rather than assuaging it. For one informant, the internet is “my best friend, sadly”. For others, Facebook (in particular) is a way to assert oneself ostensibly in a global forum, though primarily to one’s own local friends. Unusually, perhaps, and counterintuitively, most of the various Facebook groups that derided towns like Swan Hill (“I survived Swan Hill”) late in the last decade are no longer in evidence. Instead, Facebook groups include proactive organisations partially funded by council and other bodies; the Swan Hill “Youth Inc.” group; the Swan Hill Yesfest; and the Swan Hill Youth Theatre Ensemble, mentioned above.

Swan Hill youths' experience of the city in the 20th and 21st centuries

“For many young people, public space is a stage for performance and contest,” Ward Thompson and Travlou posit in their study of Edinburgh youth, “where a developing sense of self-identity plays out in relation to their peers and other members of society” (2007 p. 71) More directly related to their urban experience though are the implications of adolescents spending “less time in the familiar, supervised, and narrow world of family and more time in the unpredictable, less controlled, and less secure world of peers” (Larson and Sheeber 2009, p. 12) Larson and Sheeber suggest that a broadening of adolescents’ “social worlds” is the defining point at which teenagers begin to assert themselves, as independent from their parents, in decision-making, relationships and importantly, in their socio-spatial domains (p. 4).

Youth participation in city life means that young people can be present, take part, and share in decision-making and in the implementation of policies and practices that will affect their lives (Holdsworth, 2006 p. 14). The importance of participation has been attributed to “improved outcomes for young people” (Kirby and Bryson 2002). The capacity for youth participation to develop a sense of ownership or belonging, respect for themselves and others as well as contributing to an “enabling culture” that lets the individual feel like an asset rather than a problem are some of the justifications for youth participation in planning. Fincher and Iveson’s (2008, p. 13) view of the “right to the city” refers specifically to the “right to encounter.” A “right to encounter” attributes individuals their “own spatiality – a life path peculiarly circumscribed for them by the spaces, places and governance structures of the city.” They argue that young people should be able to access the opportunities available in the city for social engagement and development of different kinds of social capital.

An analysis of Swan Hill school students’ writings in the 1970s and 80s suggests an ongoing ambivalence to cities only matched by a joking antipathy to Swan Hill itself; this is echoed in the work of those contributing creative writing and journalism to the Swan Hill College annual publication *Cygnets*. Here, students clearly position themselves as wry, sardonic viewers of the city experience; yet their discomfort with the anonymity, and fast pace, of the city is tangible.

The city is typically portrayed by students of thirty years ago as dazzlingly, frustratingly and perhaps exhilaratingly bustling. A city trip will involve “doing fifty yard dashes in the trams for the only spare seat” or “being pushed, pinched, punched (and) tripped” by “the savage animals around me who were pretending to be normal rational people” (Rodgers 1976). It might also involve confusion amongst students “refusing to take a taxi... thinking our hotel was closer than it was” (Anon 1977) or the experience of “hyper active” Swan Hill youth enervated by the “city smog” in their lungs (Campbell 1984).

It would seem that little has changed in contemporary teenagers’ view of a city such as Melbourne. The Swan Hill students polled in our recent study undertook city visits divided mainly between entertainment, shopping and school visits (all 21%), followed by general tourism (13%), which students described as “something to do” or “something different”. Half of the participants visit Melbourne city once every two months, the remainder visit once every three to six months (39%) or once a year (11%). Two participants from Swan Hill explained the city was a place one could “be themselves”.

Almost all of the Swan Hill participants observed that there existed a greater number of opportunities for diversion compared to their home town. Just over a quarter of Swan Hill students reported that, when they visited Melbourne, there was nowhere in the city they avoided (26%). Other participants from Swan Hill used general negative descriptions of non-specific places (16%), alleyways, places defined by people (ie. gangs), and used functional descriptions such as places with busy traffic as places they avoid (all 11%).

Almost all participants described city visits that had been supervised by parents or other adults. Participants in the Swan Hill focus group had a sense of the city as a place imagined in stark opposition to their local area. It is instead a site for tourism, where they are visitors. Participants were more likely to make a two hour commute to Bendigo, to see a film or go out with friends than they were to travel to Melbourne.

Swan Hill participants were the most unconcerned by stories that incited moral panic, “stranger-danger” or “invasion”. On the whole, they reported feeling safer in the city than they would in the Swan Hill town centre at night.

P1: In Melbourne you feel more safe at night ... cause there's lots of people around

P2: Yeah, but they get stabbed though

P1: You get stabbed here too

P3: There's people around so you might not feel like they're going to do something, whereas here there's no one else there but you and the person so you...

P4: So you just turn at the next corner

Their perceptions of danger were moderated by their local experiences of safety, or lack thereof. Participants in Swan Hill were grounded and unintimidated by the city. Although they described a sense of spatial claustrophobia they also described a liberating anonymity they could not access in Swan Hill.

The distance and length of the journey saw Melbourne city depicted as more imagined than real. Despite the apparent division of socio-spatial concentrations that appeared in mapping participants' recent city visits, there was an overwhelming optimism amongst a number of students in the Swan Hill group about the opportunities the city offered their social worlds.

Conclusion: the future of local youth culture in the regional city

“We are proud of who we are”, Swan Hill's council's 2009-13 Council Plan declares, adding that:

Council will seek to recognize, preserve, promote and celebrate our identity, our history and our future, embracing our diversity while building a cohesive community, by providing a wide range of cultural and artistic experiences.

A recent success story in which Swan Hill youth found both agency and expression was the redesign and reimagining of George Lay Park, an open space in the east of the city which had become derelict and was revived in large part through local high school students' design and effort. While council will justifiably and appropriately champion such activities as important both as a community bonding exercise and as a way for young people to claim ownership of their town, there is only so much such

works can achieve. The dichotomy between the agency and cultural experiences of country-based youth and those in the cities is often commented on, not least by the youth themselves. The question is, then, what young people find in a city that they cannot locate in a medium-sized town, and what might be replicable in a city of 10 000 people from a city of 4 million. The internet and its potential for social networking, for instance, seems to confirm the basic and repetitive nature of life in a small city (or “country town”) as much as, or more than, it provides opportunities to broaden horizons.

It would be simple to rail merely against a culture which preferences the urban experience over all others, and which confirms rural youths’ suspicion that their own lives are lacking because of the limited parameters of their geographical, and social, sphere. Certainly studies produced by Currie and others in recent years have found transport issues directly connected to social exclusion (Currie et al 2005, p. 7) and, in the case of a regional town a similar distance from Melbourne as Swan Hill a (generally positive) “pattern of relationships between social inclusion, well-being and mobility” (Stanley et al, 2010). At the same time, it must be acknowledged that there is a certain amount of apprehension felt by Swan Hill youth regarding the urban experience.

The proactivity required amongst rural youth in a town like Swan Hill to build a fulfilling social life is clearly daunting for many and overwhelming, or indeed impossible, for some. This is an ongoing issue for communities such as Swan Hill and one in which some measure of information, dialogue and of course state and federal government recognition can address; but also, and perhaps more importantly, it is a scenario which surely requires a cultural shift in expectations, aspirations and experience before any meaningful change can be made in the long-term. The establishment of a new cinema may prove to be the “game changer” that Swan Hill youth require.

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