Murray Living: an argument for the future of creative industries in regional communities.

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ABSTRACT: This paper looks at the potential role of creative industries for regional communities, by presenting preliminary research conducted in the Murray Darling Basin in a project we have called Murray Living. The current focus of the crisis in the Murray-Darling Basin is on regional economics and bio-diversity, as detailed in the MDBA project The Living Murray. Our project Murray Living, is premised on the corresponding need to investigate the socio-diversity of the Basin by looking at experience of regional living. The communities located in the villages, towns and cities of the Murray-Darling Basin have been derived from the agricultural landscape. The relationship between this landscape and townscape is clearly defined by the historic boundaries between agriculture and urban culture creating rural islands of population clusters. The concept of regional development, once imagined to be unlimited, is now on a collision course with new kinds of limits – limits to biodiversity and flows of energy and water – in contrast to increasingly unlimited flows of digital streams, leaving regions to compete for population and productivity, and stretching the boundaries of regional identity. The research revisited the historic agri/urban boundaries to determine how people experience this condition based on the necessity to propose new forms for regional living and landscape. Murray Living asked people in the Murray-Darling Basin to illustrate their experience of living in this contested region of Australia, by using a research methodology previously developed for the city of Glasgow.

Keywords: Creative industries, regional development, creative regions

INTRODUCTION

Scattered across the vast footprint of the Murray Darling Basin (MDB), agriculturally dependent townscape have historically been clearly defined by the boundaries of agricultural and urban culture. These villages, towns and cities of the MDB create urban clusters of population within rural landscapes, which we refer to as ‘rural islands’. This paper discusses projects which aim to understand the contemporary social experience of people living in the MDB. By revisiting the agri/urban boundaries that have historically delineated rural islands within agricultural regions, and better understanding contemporary experience we propose this research can lead to new possibilities and forms for regional living. 

This paper presents research conducted by the Creative Regions Lab (CRL) at Charles Sturt University, which as the name indicates, focuses on creative activity in regional Australia. Several Creative Regions Lab projects investigate the problem of shifting away from agriculturally dependent rural islands towards multifunctional regional communities. These projects propose new possibilities for building creative and sustainable regions that are less reliant on farming and agriculture, while at the same time ‘harvesting’ the creative and innovative potential that is inherent in rural communities. Firstly the paper will develop the concept of ‘rural islands’ urban clusters of populations within an agriculturally landscape such as the Murray Darling Basin. In presenting research from the Creative Regions Lab we
question whether the rural island itself can reveal a new platform for regional living. Then through reporting on a project we have called *Murray Living*, which investigates social perspectives in ‘rural islands’, present a view of regional life that reveals the diversity and multifunctionality of contemporary regional living.

**LIVING ISLANDS**

Agricultural communities are custodians of more than 80 per cent of Australia’s fresh water supplies and 52 per cent of Australia’s landmass, making agricultural communities central actors in national economic, environmental and social sustainability. More than a third of Australians live in rural and regional communities, with over 15 per cent of those in rural and remote regions employed directly in agriculture. As in most developed countries, Australian agriculture has experienced significant change over the last 30-40 years which has been driven by a range of factors including climate change and variability, changes in government policy, reductions in arable land, shifts in consumer demand, increased global competition and technological advances and innovation. These changes have had substantial impacts on the social and economic viability of rural and regional communities. To meet these challenges, agricultural communities have needed to innovate to improve productive output per hectare, while delivering improved environmental and social outcomes. Through innovation, adoption of new technologies, and restructuring of the industry, agricultural output in Australia more than doubled over the last 50 years and agricultural exports almost tripled in value since the 1970s. However, agricultural productivity improvement has slowed in the last 5-10 years representing an ongoing challenge for the sustainability of the sector and the communities they support. The discussion paper *Trends in Manufacturing to 2020 by the Industry Innovation Council* illustrates that agriculture has remained fairly consistent between 1986 to 2011, compared to the dramatic rise in value adding in the service industry, of which the creative industries is one growth sector.

Geographically the focus of this research is in the Murray Darling Basin (MDB) within which Charles Sturt University is located. The Murray-Darling Basin is the largest river basin in Australia, covering more than one million square kilometres, comprises 14 per cent of Australia’s land mass and stretches across five states or territories including Queensland.

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New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. According to the Murray Darling Basin Authority website ‘The Murray–Darling Basin is one of the most productive food and fibre regions in Australia, producing one-third of the national food supply and exporting produce to many other countries. In total, the Basin contains 40% of Australia's farms and 65% of Australia's irrigated land area.’\(^2\) The regional communities located in the villages, towns and cities of the MDB have been derived from the agricultural landscape and represent 17 per cent of the Australian total population. Historically the boundaries between agriculture and urban culture have been clearly defined creating created small concentrations of population, scattered across four States (not including the A.C.T). These rural ‘islands’ of population clusters are demarcated by the historical agri-urban boundaries of town and country, and have become a defining feature of Australian agricultural and social landscapes since European settlement. Agricultural dependency is significantly geographic, since the evolution of rural islands, is partly social and cultural, developed through the habits of two centuries of farming and partly political due to conflicting local, state and federal government policies on market-driven versus multi-functional agriculture. This research seeks to provide an effective way for agriculturally-dependent communities to improve local control over their livelihoods and build more creative and sustainable regions, loosening the isolation of geographic islands released through the sociability of communication and digital flows that characterize the impulses of creative, connective activities and societal shifts as populations drift between coastal cities and rural islands.

**CREATIVE REGIONS AND CREATIVE REGIONS LAB**

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) projects that the population of the Basin will grow by over 14 per cent by 2021, which leads us to question what critical challenges are we facing in the social landscape of the MDB. Research underway in the Creative Regions Lab (http://www.csu.edu.au/creativeregionslab) is seeking to understand what the experience of living in these communities is like, including the experience of those seeking a tree change in regional areas, the relationship between multi-functionality and public policy, life in third tier cities, how gerentotechnologies aid the elderly in isolated communities and Agri-tivity – the nexus of creative and agricultural activity\(^3\).

The CRL has been constituted to look at regional development, and specifically the

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intersections of the becoming industry of creativity and the becoming creative of regional industries. The merger of creativity and industry is taking place in the countryside well away from the urban hype of innovation hubs and creative precincts. In addition to this blurring of Fordist production logic, the CRL is also investigating what has become of the city-country imaginary, and how the digital landscape is shaping the countryside? This volatile landscape of country and rural-urban, first shaped by conflicting television values – urban modernity projected into every regional home then rural clichés idealised for urban reassurance – is increasingly being re-defined by digital flows connecting everywhere with anywhere. Against this backdrop the Murray Living research project sought to interrogate living in the region to see what values are driving the rural-urban population exchange – where the tide of rural to urban has turned slightly back to rural. Where once people disappeared from the countryside heading to cities in search of urban opportunity, now that nature has disappeared due to highly mechanised and now digitised production methods, people are returning to transform the countryside into gourmet tourism, tele-craft, boutique manufacturing, and immersive experiences. As farmers resemble business people connected digitally to global markets and computerized production management, city dwellers are dressing as if they are farmers and finding new communities through urban farms. And as the dream of tele-commuting becomes a reality via the roll out of digital infrastructure a completely new type of worker is being attracted to regional living – as increasingly populous cities make people more unconnected digital technologies are reconnecting them with rural and regional opportunities. While this reversal of traffic is taking place the regions have largely been ignored by planners who focused their attention on the development of the suburban and now the urban.

MULTIFUNCTIONALITY

The concept of multifunctionality is a term that been used in recent policy debates in farming, and is directly linked to this research. Multifunctionality refers broadly to the multiple functions coproduced by agriculture beyond simply supplying food and fibre (Dibden and Cocklin 2009a, 163). In Europe farming and other functions – including the viability of rural communities and environmental protection – are seen by governments as being jointly produced and are deeply rooted in what has been termed the ‘European Model of Agriculture’ (Potter, 2006). This is underpinned by a ‘living countryside’ narrative in which state support is argued to be justified in ensuring that the cultural and amenity value of the countryside is sustained. In contrast, Australian agriculture is underpinned by ‘competitive productivism’ – an unsubsidised and highly productive agriculture, which is
oriented primarily towards expanding export markets (Dibden et al. 2009b). Despite this, Australian examples of multifunctional policies include the provision of funding for environmental stewardship schemes (Higgins et al. 2012) and government support for farmers’ markets (Andree et al. 2010). Research into the development of creative activities in supporting multifunctionality is yet to be explored in depth, however the potential for creative industries to re envisage agriculturally dependent rural islands towards regionally multifunctional communities, is abundant.

The cultural landscapes of a region, while shaped by the activities of agriculture are very much linked to the regional identity. Ray refers how the cultural economy in rural areas allow places to ‘localize economic control – to (re)valorise place through its cultural identity’(1998: 3). Applied specifically to regions traditionally dependent on agriculture, a cultural economy can include attempts to promote regionally distinctive food, cuisine and drink products (Ilbery and Maye 2005, Micoo and Vinodrai 2010) through to the resurrection of traditional craft industries (Siebert et al. 2008, Luckman 2012). Cultural and creative assets, including knowledge, services and products can be harnessed to add value across different rural activities and industries. The wine industry is an excellent example of how a primary agricultural activity such as grape growing, is value added to when wine production intersects with other creative activities includes branding, packaging and labeling, cellar door hospitality, vineyard concerts and festivals, wine clubs and websites.

We have argued elsewhere that creative activity is an important yet less visible part of regional economy, vital for the social health of communities (Woodward et al 2012). Enabling communication technologies, coupled with the flow of urban dwellers to regional places seeking lifestyle and tree changes are among the complexity of factors that are transforming regional and rural cultural landscapes (Gibson and Kong 2005) ensuring ‘creativity is everywhere possible’ (Gibson and Connell 2004). This body of research also confirms that many regional Australia centres are sites of creative industries and creative activity (Luckman 2012, Gibson 2012, Gibson and Klocker 2005, Gibson and Kong 2005). Mapping creative occupations in the Murray Darling Basin, activities that are frequently invisible in agriculturally derived landscapes, demonstrates there are concentrations of creative industries occupations in many NSW regional centres including Albury, Wagga Wagga, Bathurst, Orange, Armidale, Griffith, Tamworth, Broken Hill and the Northern Rivers area (Woodward and Bremner 2014). In Victoria the rural centres of, Ballarat, Bendigo, Sheparton, Wodonga, Mildura the Yarra Ranges and Mt Macedon all register
higher proportions of creative workers and occupations and are known for their industries that promote local food and wine, tourism, cultural events, festivals and craft. Toowomba in Queensland and the LGAs of South Burnett and Southern Downs (Qld) and the Barossa and Mt Barker area South Australia are also noted as creative hot spots which are closely linked with the agricultural and tourism activities. The challenge for agricultural regions is to recognise how ‘location’ positively impacts rural identity, how creativity can be linked to add value across different activities and industries, and how a unique ‘rural’ creativity can be deployed as a national and global innovation asset. The Murray Living research project is provides a critical contribution to our knowledge on multifunctionality by investigating the relationship between creativity and regional living.

THE LIVING MURRAY AND MURRAY LIVING

Understanding social and ecological relationships within regional Australia is critical to being able to re-imagine regional living, to counteract the blurring of regional identity. The Murray Living project developed through the Creative Regions Lab at CSU uses an approach that inverts the title of the Murray Darling Basin Authority’s project The Living Murray which focuses on the crisis in the Murray-Darling Basin of water, agriculture and bio-diversity. Our project is premised on the corresponding need to investigate the socio-diversity of the basin by looking at experience of regional living and provides an inventive and qualitative balance to the quantitative economics of the Living Murray research. The Murray Living research project confronts a vital 21st Century real-world necessity of imagining new ways of being together, by using research strategies and processes using approaches from design and creative practice.

Figure 2: Slide from Celsius Research report on Murray Living Project prepared for Charles Sturt University 2012.

In commencing the complex project of re-envisioning regional living, the research asked the people of the Murray-Darling Basin to illustrate their experience of living in this region of Australia. Using a research methodology previously developed for the city of Glasgow, the researchers invited residents to respond by utilizing a suite of survey methods using cameras and questionnaires, and this is described in more detail below. The technique was developed to help people document the richness of their living experience in a manner helpful to
designers and planners. Using this method *Murray Living* aimed to identify and map the patterns of cultural, environmental, social and economic activities of people. Given the scale of the region the scope of the initial results might be useful to provide input into social, cultural, urban, and natural resource management negotiations and planning. Research such as *Murray Living* will help people living in the Murray-Darling Basin to provide input and monitor the impacts of Living Murray programs. The *Murray Living* research aimed to depict the experience of living in the Murray Darling Basin, to see if it were possible to identify the critical elements from which rural islands sustain living in the agricultural landscape, and to explore the relationship between landscape and townscape.

This research explored the actual experiences and attitudinal profile of people living within the Murray Darling Basin. To do this we determined the extent to which people in communities agree with a set of “experiential” statements covering their lives. This data was then subjected to Cluster Analysis in order to determine the manner in which these people segment in attitudinal terms. The research was conducted by Celsius Research, whose Director was instrumental in the Glasgow research project precedent. The study was undertaken online amongst a representative cross-section of n=201 respondents aged 20+ living in the Murray-Darling Basin. Because the population size of Canberra dwarfs the rest of the MDB, Canberra was excluded, and respondents were drawn from a database of pre-screened on-line respondents. All data was collected using the Confirmit suite of data collection and reporting software. The survey asked to describe and photograph:

- The best thing about living in your home.
- The worst thing about living in your home.
- Which of the following activities do you regularly do?
- What do you like best about living in your area?
- What do you dislike the most about living in your area?

Last, respondents were asked to photograph something they like about living in the Murray-Darling Basin. And following the method trialed in Glasgow they were asked something that would make living in the Murray-Darling Basin even better.

**RESEARCH FRONTIERS**

*Murray Living* asked people in the Murray-Darling Basin to illustrate their experience of living in this contested region of Australia, by using a research methodology previously developed for the city of Glasgow (Bremner 2004). That research, conducted in two projects,
investigated the experiences of both ‘city’ and ‘home’ in Glasgow. The research surveyed a random sample of people living in Glasgow to ascertain whether a depiction of patterns of living could be captured, and analysed to illustrate the effect of design on behaviour. The first project traced the living patterns of ‘home’ and its immediate surroundings. The second project traced the experience of living in the City. The results of both projects were exhibited publicly in Glasgow in 1999 and 2001. The first project was commissioned for the UK festival Glasgow 1999, UK City of Architecture & Design as part of the exhibition ‘Homes for the Future’; and the second was commissioned by Glasgow City Council and exhibited in ‘The Lighthouse’ – Scotland’s Centre for Architecture Design & the City.

Commencing with the hypothesis that design is more often than not guided by information derived from outside of our geography, our socio-economic systems and our specific reality, the research examined the influence of people living in the already-designed-world on design practice. It asked a simple question – having built a world, how does it feel? And it asked that of people’s feelings about home, street, neighbourhood, suburb, and city, in one city – Glasgow. The research focused on tracing experiences of the world-as-found, in order to determine whether this information could inform the design of homes and cities. It questioned how we live out our relationship with objects and the environments we fashion for ourselves – our living models. By contrast the traditional forms of information utilised by planners, architects and designers have been derived from models conceived of in essentially binary terms. Generally it has been characterised as either an artistic (subjective) or technical / scientific (objective) activity (Davis 1987: ix; Dilnot 1989: 249; Rowe 1987: 1). Beyond binary, in the middle of the nineteenth century planning was terminally effected by the conditioning influence of utopia (Solinís, 2006). Thus conceived, all forms of design activity are concerned with the identification of a problem and the development of an appropriate solution for a universal aesthetic, and/or a technique for all solutions (See Rowe 1987: 39 & 49; Whiteley 1993: 9-10). The purpose of the research was to produce information that permitted architects, designers and planners to respond with more knowledge of living patterns as they have been shaped by the experiences of living in the already-designed-world.

The first survey in Glasgow set out to measure the differential between two perceptions of home. Respondents were asked what they like about their home and what would make that better. They completed a survey based on taking photographs of what makes them feel that their house is a home. Using the same method the second survey added to the information of
perceptions of home by gathering information on their street, neighborhood, suburb, and city. Whereas market research normally conducts its inquiries within pre-determined sets of parameters, which relate to a known product or service type and then weights this information with reference to known value systems, this survey presented the broadest possible picture of how it feels to live in Glasgow. While planners have been managing this process of change, from the findings it could be argued that the sum of constant changes produces the same experience. However it also reveals room for constant change of the same elements which is reassuring given it is very difficult to insert completely new elements into urban conditions. The research was designed to produce an identifiable differential between what people use most (and produces the best experience), and what they would like to change to produce a better experience. This differential about how it feels to live with the world-as-found produced comparative indices for the description of the mental space or experience of home and city.

The information gathered in these research projects was designed to supplement the standard urban planning model. By illustrating how the public feel about and experience their city, and incorporating this depiction in the planning process it was possible to guide design decisions and highlight new priorities for Glasgow. The research revealed that images taken by people could be used not only to indicate what they saw, but also to juxtapose why they saw aspects of their home and city as important to their experience of living in Glasgow. By definition any attempt at a description of a community must be composed of the long list of needs, desires, hopes, dreams, fears, and so on. This subjective pool is managed adequately by sociological research. By asking people to use a camera to complete a questionnaire, the pictures they take describe the actuality of their experience of the designed world. Asking them to do this again, to use a camera to complete a questionnaire to depict how this might become a better experience, produces a ‘differential’ that points to design possibilities. The combined effect of the camera in the survey is to trace the patterns of usage of the respondents’ experiences of their context. The research demonstrated that what people say and show is more interesting than previously thought.

The Murray Living research was modeled on the Glasgow method, but there were significant differences. The Glasgow research was conducted via a mail-out questionnaire with a disposable camera, and the questionnaire and camera were manually tabulated and processed. Murray Living was conducted online and respondents submitted digital images.
Glasgow is a city whose boundaries are determined by its surrounding countryside while the Murray Darling basin defines 20% of Australia with small concentrations of population – rural islands – (if you don’t factor in Canberra) scattered across four States. Despite the technological differences the two research projects – Glasgow and Murray Living – sought the same the evidence of how it feels to live in a ‘place’. It is not the purpose of this paper to give detailed analysis of the findings of either project, but the method used in Murray Living asked respondents to respond to a forty statements people have made about their lives, and living in the Murray-Darling and indicate how strongly they agree or disagree that it describes themselves. These were framed to ascertain attitudes to Australia, work, personal outlook, household, family, socialising and activities, recreation and activities producing an attribute performance summary. Examples of the forty attitude statements include:

- Living in the country is better than living in a city.
- Australia produces the best agricultural products in the world.
- We need more health resources around here.
- Canberra is not dealing with the problems of the Murray-Darling
- The internet has allowed me to feel more in touch with others.
- I sometimes feel isolated where I live.
- I have faith the water problems of the MDB will be solved in next 10 yrs

These attitudes were subjected to cluster analysis producing three major groupings which we currently characterise as – anxious and isolated, proud entrenched and opinionated, and optimists – and these can be interrogated by age, gender, location, household type, education, work status and occupation, home ownership, length of time at current address, internet connectivity, social and recreational activities, and given the MDB is defined by river systems – respondents proximity to a river.

Figure 3: Cluster analysis map of Celsius Research data on Murray Living Project prepared for Charles Sturt University 2012
From this survey of a random sample of representative people living in very different locations of the vast MDB ‘eco-system’ we were able to map perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of living in the Basin. The purpose of this paper is not go into detailed findings but to show that the nation’s project to address Living Murray has a countervailing project which we have called Murray Living that is of equal importance and as we have demonstrated can be studied and whose results show the value of multiple individual perspectives. This paper argues that a research project, based on an innovative method, and aimed at ascertaining the scope of individual perception of living in the large scale MDB, can demonstrate the value of creative research methods and creativity when framing a region’s future. As a project of the Creative Regions Lab, the data from the Murray Living project will inform interdisciplinary research which aims to position regional Australia as a place for ideas with cultural capabilities and entrepreneurial skills.

This research was conducted by the Creative Regions Lab (CRL) at Charles Sturt University. The CRL aims to produce interdisciplinary research to understand and harness as the enablers of regional creativity nationally and internationally. The CRL aligns government, business and academic interest in regional areas to advance the creative industries in all aspects of regional life. For more information visit the Creative Regions Lab website http://www.csu.edu.au/creativeregionslab.
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