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The limits of spatial design in delivering inland decentralisation in Western Australia’s SuperTowns

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ABSTRACT

Since 2011, the Western Australian State Government has spent $85 million on its SuperTowns project that aimed to boost the population and viability of subregional centres or ‘SuperTowns.’ Using the Wheatbelt SuperTowns of Northam, Morawa, Katanning and Boddington this paper explores how local governments have employed spatial design interventions to shift the image of these inland towns in a bid to attract population from Western Australia’s major urban centres. Despite six years having elapsed since the government inaugurated the SuperTown policy, demographic data shows declining populations in these subregional centres. This paper highlights the limits of spatial design interventions in relation to delivering population decentralisation to inland towns.

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Introduction

Australia has a distinctive form of development with the large majority of its population concentrated in the capital cities (Potts 2003, 136; Hugo 2012, 17). In the following background section, I set out how this pattern has emerged and provide a brief history of attempts to counter this situation. This information is important because the Western Australian SuperTowns program – which is the focus of this paper – aims to siphon people from Perth and other major urban centres to subregional centres.

Background

Capital city primacy in Australia

Australia has for many years been one of the most urbanised countries in the world (Potts 2003, 136; Hugo 2012, 17). This is due to the pattern of administration, which developed from the top downwards in comparison to elsewhere where it developed from local government upwards. Moreover in the earlier days of Australia’s settlement, ‘it was assumed that no good thing could come out of Australia [and] the leading settlers, professional and commercial men looked to the day when they could return to their homeland’ (Potts 2003, 140). Climatic conditions also help to explain the uneven distribution of population – large sections of central and western Australia are arid and suitable only for extensive forms of grazing (Lonsdale 1972, 322). Over time powerful commercial interests and the metropolitan press have compounded this centralising tendency (Potts 2003, 140). As a result of these factors by the late colonial era, a pattern of metropolitan dominance had solidified, which Weber described as ‘a remarkable concentration’ (In Freestone 2013, 236).

In Australia since the 1980s this concentration has further increased. Population flows from the inland agricultural regions to the expanding coastal urban centres, have created what Bernard Salt terms the ‘empty-island syndrome’ (In Kullmann 2013, 243). While the extremely arid conditions of Australia’s interior have always curtailed inhabitation inland, in the latter part of the twentieth century the population differential between urbanised coastal areas and inland rural areas widened significantly (Kullmann 2013, 243). Increasingly, many Australians don’t depend on or live in the Australian interior: they live instead in the five mainland capital cities, which are connected more ‘to the outside world rather than to the Australian landscape’ (Diamond 2011, 388).

Combating ‘territorial imbalance’ through decentralisation

In response to Australia’s perceived ‘territorial imbalance,’ in which population and economic opportunity is highly concentrated in major cities, there have been numerous attempts at population decentralisation into rural districts (Lonsdale 1972, 323). These programs drew inspiration from examples internationally. In Britain, the post-World War Two new towns program saw substantial populations decanted from the major cities to new towns such as Milton Keynes, in what commentators at the time regarded as a ‘triumph of British planning’ (Berkley 1973, 479).1

In Australia decentralisation programs were driven by a variety of beliefs (Bolleter 2018), including the fear that an ‘empty’ land on Asia’s doorstep would invite

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plunder (Dale et al. 2014, 9), the belief that ‘a people evenly distributed in small or medium sized towns tend to be stronger, morally and mentally as well as physically, than one concentrated in a few big cities’ (C.E.W. Bean in Freestone 2013, 237). Moreover, commentators felt that a decentralised population was safer from aerial bombardment in war time (Davison 2016a, 97), and finally that building ‘beautiful’ new towns closer to our food supply was a more balanced urban and agricultural outcome (In Freestone 2013, 237).

Some of the numerous attempts at inland decentralisation are set out below. In the 1890s depression, with high unemployment in the big cities, there were moves to create new cooperative village settlements in rural areas. They were ‘mere specks but they captured a rising tide of anti-metropolitanism critical of the parasitical ways of the coastal capitals’ (Freestone 2013, 236). Post-World War One there was a wave of pro-development literature, which argued that the agricultural potential of inland Australia had been previously underestimated. Foremost of these writings was Edwin Brady’s Australia Unlimited (Frost 2004, 286). While Brady’s image of millions of people living and farming the interior were never realised post World War One there were soldier-settler and irrigation schemes which yielded a new ‘sprinkle’ of small urban settlements in rural areas (Freestone 2013, 237).

At the time of World War Two, the official organ of the National Catholic Rural Movement claimed that ‘the bombing plane with its awful powers of destruction shows so clearly the fallacy of concentrating our resources in big cities’ (Kilmartin 1973, 37). Soon after the war ended, with Australia’s capitals still intact, Sir Patrick Abercrombie toured Australia, preaching the virtues of his 1944 London Plan. ‘Decentralisation’, ‘satellite cities’ and ‘greenbelts’ quickly became part of Australian public discourse (Davison 2016a, 97) although such thinking was to yield little in terms of population decentralisation.

Building on such planning ideology, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam addressed a university audience on ‘Making New Cities’ in 1970 with the expectation that by the year 2000 there could be ‘many more than five new Canberras distributed across our great continent’ (In Freestone 2013, 240). The Whitlam government established the Department of Urban and Regional Development, in part, to oversee such massive population decentralisation from the big cities to the regions however the incoming Fraser government dismantled the ‘Growth Centres’ program in 1975, without it achieving any noteworthy progress. Subsequent to this, anything akin to bolder national settlement ideas have ‘remained on hold’ (Freestone 2013, 241). Moreover, where decentralisation away from the five main capital cities has occurred, it has been typically to mushrooming coastal centres not inland rural towns (Kullmann 2013, 243).

### Outflow of population from Western Australia’s Wheatbelt

Like Australia, the urbanisation of population in Western Australia is extreme, and the continuing loss of population from rural and regional areas to larger regional centres and major urban centres along the temperate coast has been evident for decades (Alan Burns and Willis 2011, 23). Much of this population loss has occurred from Western Australia’s vast Wheatbelt, the state’s most important agricultural area, which lies to the east of Perth – an area that is the geographic focus of this paper (Figure 1). This population loss has been caused by a combination of factors including increasing global competition and market liberalisation (Plummer, Tonts, and Argent 2017, 1). In particular, the ‘cost-price squeeze facing farmers’ has contributed to farm amalgamation and expansion, the substitution of capital for labour, farmer outmigration, and the subsequent reduction of local service economies (Plummer, Tonts, and Argent 2017, 1). This situation has been compounded through salinisation, soil erosion, water shortages and droughts, which have all ravaged the Wheatbelt (Diamond 2011, 379) (Figure 2). One consequence of this, is reduced populations in rural towns which results in fewer services, which in turn makes living in a small town increasingly less appealing, so more people out-migrate which compounds the situation (Malan and Wright 2015, 62).

### Royalties for regions

In response to this situation in rural Western Australia, and the Wheatbelt in particular, a concerted effort was made by the 2008–2017 Liberal/National Western Australian state government to invest 25% of the state’s mining royalties into regional infrastructure and services, a policy known as Royalties for Regions. In essence, the still-operational Royalties for Regions policy is about counter balancing the concentration of capital generated by resource industries in Perth, through spatial redistribution to the regions (Chapman, Tonts, and Plummer 2014, 82). As of 2017, the Royalties for Regions program had delivered $10.9 billion to help Western Australia’s regional areas grow into ‘thriving and sustainable communities’ through approximately 3500 projects aligned with the State’s Planning and Development Framework (Western Australian Planning Commission 2012, 25).

The Royalties for Regions program is broadly aligned with Western Australia’s ‘State Planning Strategy 2050’ which is the Government’s strategic planning response to the challenges of managing population and economic growth into the future (Western Australian Planning Commission 2012, 5). Policy makers have based the Royalties for regions program on projections that the population of Western Australia will increase from 2.5 million currently, to 5.6 million by 2056,
Figure 1. SuperTowns location map.
Note: This map shows Western Australia’s designated Regional Centres and the nine Sub-Regional Centres, or SuperTowns. The SuperTowns being reviewed in this paper are Northam, Katanning, Boddington and Morawa all of which are located in the Wheatbelt.

Figure 2. Salinisation in the Wheatbelt.
Note: Much of the population loss from rural to urban areas has occurred in Western Australia’s vast Wheatbelt which lies to the East of Perth. This population loss has been caused by significant adjustments to both the structure and functioning of rural economies and has been compounded through salinisation, soil erosion, water shortages, and man-made droughts (photo courtesy of Jean and Fred wheatbeltscience.org.au/project/yenyenning-lakes/ https://www.flickr.com/photos/jean_hort/40209134835/in/photostream/).
equivalent to an additional 3.1 million people. In a bid to deliver sustainable settlement patterns and population compositions within and between the greater Perth metropolitan area and regional Western Australia the plan looks to regional expansion in 11 regional centres nine Sub-Regional Centres, or SuperTowns (Western Australian Planning Commission 2012, 17).

The SuperTowns Development Plan

The SuperTowns are Boddington, Collie, Esperance, Jurien Bay, Katanning, Manjimup, Margaret River, Morawa and Northam (Department of Regional Development 2016b, 31) (Figure 1). These sub-regional centres typically contain services and facilities such as a high school, district hospital, commercial centre with multiple retail outlets, supermarkets, specialty and convenience stores and community entertainment facilities including district sporting centres (Department of Regional Development 2016a, 6).

Policy makers have tasked the SuperTowns program as delivering a network of dynamic and growing regional centres which are enormously vibrant and attractive places to do business, work and live (Department of Regional Development 2011, 3). Moreover, as with the Regional Centres, policymakers have portrayed them, as a solution to a rapidly growing population in the capital city of Perth. As Brendan Grylls (then state Regional Development minister) explained in 2011:

There is a lot of discussion about the growth of our population, the strong Western Australian economy and where are people going to go. There is an argument about infill and urban sprawl, and it would just seem to be a natural progression to look at where the infrastructure is located outside of Perth and look to build on that. To attract more people to live where the jobs are and where the economic growth is coming from. They want to know about the schools, know if you can buy a nice coffee in the main street, and they’re the types of things we’re looking to address under the policy we’re proposing (Australian Associated Press).

In short, the SuperTowns Development Plan aimed to give these sub regional centres the capacity, vibrancy, and economic opportunities that would provide an attractive choice for people wanting to live in regional towns (Department of Regional Development 2011, 4).4

To date the Royalties for Regions program has invested $85.5 million to establish the SuperTowns (Department of Regional Development 2017). Through local government Growth Plans, policymakers identified 17 priority projects across the nine towns and the Department of Regional Development provided them with related Royalties for Regions funds. Of this funding approximately 82% has been spent on spatial design related town centre, tourist precinct and waterfront redevelopment projects, 8% on agricultural expansion, 6% on health, 2% on economic development and 2% on water and energy infrastructure (Department of Regional Development 2017).5

Typical projects included Collie’s Central Business District Revitalisation, Northam’s Avon River Revitalisation and Riverfront Development and Avon Health and Emergency Services Precinct, and Boddington’s Economic Development Implementation. Despite important economic or health related projects – such as I have just listed – the overwhelming focus of the Growth Plans was on spatial design initiatives, particularly main street upgrades.

Also outlined in these Growth Plans is the estimated population growth over the decades. These projections are extreme with SuperTowns such as Morawa expecting a 280% population increase by 2041 (Shire of Morawa 2012, 59), Northam a 300% increase (Shire of Northam 2011, 13) and Katanning a 360% increase (Shire of Katanning 2012, 13).

Research methodology

Given the substantial amount of public money that state and local governments have invested in the SuperTowns since 2011, and the degree to which policymakers have spent this money on spatial design interventions, this research paper asks the two questions:

How have local governments employed spatial design to increase the attractiveness of the Wheatbelt SuperTowns for people dwelling in larger urban centres?

Secondly:

Have these spatial design interventions been responsible for significant population decentralisation to the Wheatbelt SuperTowns?

The research method that this paper adopts to answer this former question is an interpretive critique (Swaffield and Deming 2010, 43) which I employ to reveal new understandings and perspectives upon spatial design practice in the SuperTowns. Through the analysis of spatial design propositions, I seek to understand the messages these interventions communicate – and how these may attract residents of larger urban centres. I explore the latter research question using an evaluative methodology (Swaffield and Deming 2011, 40) in which recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) demographic data is used to measure the success or failure of public investment in the SuperTowns from the perspective of population growth through decentralisation.

To address these questions, I have structured this paper in two parts. The first of these provides a description of the current urban form of the SuperTowns and explores the principle spatial design gestures involved in the upgrading of the SuperTowns, and how these gestures seek to overcome psychological barriers to
decentralisation. The second discusses the limits of spatial design with respect to delivering population decentralisation from major urban centres (especially Perth). I conduct this discussion with reference to recent demographic data for the SuperTowns. Finally, given the limits of spatial design exercises, I consider what alternative strategies the Western Australian state government, and in some cases local governments, could implement to yield some inland decentralisation.

Because of the necessary brevity of this research paper, I focus primarily on the inland Wheatbelt SuperTowns of Morawa, Northam, Boddington and Katanning. This is because these SuperTowns occur in one geographic unit (i.e., the Wheatbelt) and because they are inland towns. The other, coastal, SuperTowns typically have organically growing populations (Alan Burns and Willis 2011, 23), and which are expanding for reasons other than those established through SuperTown planning (Kullmann 2013, 243).

While there has been some cursory analysis of the SuperTowns Plan in terms of the public money spent, and the population decentralisation which has so far occurred (Walker et al. 2017), there has been no comprehensive analysis of how spatial design has been employed to this end and indeed whether it has been successful. This paper brings scholarly attention to spatial design practice, which has otherwise evaded scrutiny.

**Part one: the deployment of spatial design to overcome psychological barriers to inland decentralisation**

The following section describes the urban morphology of the case study SuperTowns. Subsequently, it explains how local governments have deployed spatial design to shift the image of such towns to increase their attractiveness for residents of larger urban centres.7

**Existing SuperTown morphology**

The case study SuperTowns Northam (founded in 1833), Katanning (1898), Boddington (1912) and Morawa (1913) are small towns, which have populations of 6580, 4325, 1107, and 655 respectively. The towns are structured by gridded street systems and the urban fabric consists of low density free standing houses with historic one to three storey architecture containing commercial and civic functions concentrated on a central main street (Hames Sharley 2012, 74) (Figures 3–7). While the town centres and main streets provides a place for residents to gather and shop (Hames Sharley 2012, 10) much of the public life of the SuperTowns occurs at the golf and lawn bowls clubs which are a particular focus for community interaction (Shire of Morawa 2012, 46). This, in conjunction with generally dwindling populations, means that vacant and underutilised lots and buildings are typical of many of the streets in the SuperTowns (Shire of Katanning 2012, 23; Shire of Morawa 2012, 36).

Several of the towns have a river or creek system, which runs through the town, in Northam the Avon River, in Boddington the Hotham River, and in Katanning an unnamed creek. Often the towns back on to these assets and as such there is not a clear relationship between these hydrological systems and the respective town sites (Hames Sharley 2012, 74). Moreover in some cases these systems are in poor environmental condition (Shire of Katanning 2012, 23). Public open space abounds in the SuperTowns, however much of it is underutilised.

The following section explores spatial design interventions – namely rejuvenating main streets, introducing civic plazas, and repairing and connecting to environmental assets – that local governments have deployed in a bid to overcome the psychological barriers to population decentralisation to such towns. In Australia, many people regard inland rural towns as suffering from an image problem. Dwellers in larger urban centres tend to view country towns as boring, short of attractions, having less educational opportunities, and providing a limited social scene (Lonsdale 1972, 327). As one city writer put it, ‘there’s nothing to do in the country town once the pubs shut.’ Such attitudes are obviously biased, but they highlight an important psychological component to the problem of achieving decentralisation (Lonsdale 1972, 327).

**Main street revitalisation**

Local governments have principally deployed main street upgrades to increase the attractiveness of the SuperTowns for residents and visitors (Figures 8–12). As Hames Sharley, planners for the Boddington SuperTown explain:

The activation of Main Street project should rely on principles of Place-Making including the transformation of public spaces into vibrant, welcoming places which are able to support sustain and inspire present and future communities of residents, workers and visitors (Hames Sharley 2012, 127).

To this end SuperTown main street upgrades typically included entry statements, feature paving, coordinated street furniture, ordered tree planting, the retention of heritage buildings and the plugging of ‘gaps’ between buildings through urban consolidation. In Morawa’s SuperTown planning, designers intended to improve built form along the main street, Winfield Street, through incentives for local business owners to upgrade the building facades as well as through...
streetscape improvements. As a result, it was believed that new businesses, investors, tourists and visitors would be attracted to the centre, thereby ‘creating additional pressure to redevelop or upgrade existing tenancies’ (Shire of Morawa 2012, 96). In this respect the Winfield Street revitalisation project was regarded...
as a ‘transformative project, in that it will enable many other new projects’ (Shire of Morawa 2012, 73). In Boddington, planners regarded the main street, Bannister Road, as lacking in vibrancy or a clearly recognisable focal point. Variable building setbacks and streetscape treatments, in combination with

Figure 5. Katanning (background image courtesy of ArcMap).
Note: Public Open Space abounds in the SuperTowns (background image courtesy of ArcMap).

Figure 6. Boddington.
Note: A number of the towns have a river or smaller natural drainage system which runs through the town. Often the towns back on to these assets and as such there is not a clear relationship between these hydrological systems and the respective town sites (background image courtesy of ArcMap).
Figure 7. A map of the Morawa SuperTown.
Note: much of the public life of the SuperTowns occurs at the golf and lawn bowls clubs which are a particular focus for community interaction (background image courtesy of ArcMap).

Figure 8. Katanning streetscape upgrades plan.
Note: Planners have principally used main street upgrades to increase the attractiveness of the SuperTowns for residents and visitors. This figure from the Katanning SuperTown Growth and Implementation Plan shows streetscapes to be upgraded and the proposed town square on the main street, Clive Street (drawing courtesy of Ecoscape).
demolished and vacant buildings were regarded as curtailing the formation of any cohesive sense of place (Hames Sharley 2012, 75). In response, planners regarded that urban consolidation should be used to plug these ‘gaps’ (Hames Sharley 2012, 75; Shire of Katanning 2012, 83) and as such engender a strong sense of place.

**Discussion**

In essence main street upgrades sought, in part, to assure prospective migrants that rural towns can offer potential migrants all the benefits of civilisation (Mirams 2012, 278) and urbanity that larger urban centres offer, benefits which are often neatly surmised as alfresco dining opportunities (Shire of Katanning 2012, 93). As Brendan Grylls explained, migrants from the cities ‘want to know if you can buy a nice coffee in the main street … ’ (In Australian Associated Press 2011), such as you can in larger urban centres. Indeed Katanning’s SuperTown planning made direct connections between Katanning’s Clive Street, with well-known activated high streets in Perth such as Rokeby Road, in Subiaco, and Bay View Terrace, in Claremont (Shire of Katanning 2012, 90).

This focus on main street upgrades is understandable. The prosperity, and ultimately viability, of Australian country towns can be measured in a number of ways – including census data, surveys, interview research and focus groups – however one consistent benchmark is the appearance and vibrancy of the main street (Alan Burns and Willis 2011, 29). To this end researchers have even proposed a simple ‘Empty Shops Index’ to measure rural town wellbeing (Alan Burns and Willis 2011, 21). As such, the deterioration of civic and commercial space in the main streets of Wheatbelt towns can represent the most ‘vivid face’ of rural decline (Kullmann 2013, 252) – particularly in combination with prolonged drought in the surrounding farming districts (Diamond 2011, 388).

To ward off this perceived decline, and project an enticing urbane image, SuperTown planning of Wheatbelt towns have all involved main street upgrades. The

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**Figure 9. Katanning streetscape upgrades section.**

Note: This figure from the Katanning SuperTown Growth and Implementation Plan shows proposed upgrades to Katanning’s main street, Clive St. In general the SuperTown main street upgrades typically included entry statements, feature paving, coordinated street furniture, ordered tree planting, the retention of heritage buildings and the plugging of ‘gaps’ between buildings through urban consolidation (drawing courtesy of Ecoscape).
The orthodoxy of SuperTown main street rejuvenation assumes that ‘permanence and solidity’ are key criteria for reversing decline (Kullmann 2013, 255). Thus, readers can consider such upgrades both spatial and symbolic in character. A significant component of the promotion of ‘permanence and solidity’ (Kullmann 2013, 255) is the plugging of ‘gaps’ in main streets, as discussed. Interestingly all of the SuperTown plans...
propose urban consolidation (i.e., gap-filling), over further suburban expansion, as being the preferred manner in which to accommodate future growth (Shire of Northam 2011, 13; Shire of Katanning 2012, 75). This is despite the fact that these towns sit within the vast expanse of the Wheatbelt and have spatially little restriction to sprawl – this points to urban consolidation, particularly in main streets, being proposed in part as symbolic bid to promote an image of ‘permanence and solidity’ rather than purely pragmatic constraints. That said increased urban density can generate urban life, walkability and reduce car dependency (Farr 2008, 44).

While improving the amenity of the main street logically increases civic pride (Kullmann 2013, 253) and potentially improves the image of a town for prospective migrants, it doesn’t necessarily lead to greater investment in the town centre, or activation of main streets. Indeed, many of the SuperTowns had, at the time of planning, an excess of retail and commercial floor space meaning that there was certainly an existing container for economic development to occur in – and as such the problems were not spatial at root. In the case of Morawa, in 2012, it was predicted that even the inflated SuperTown population growth projections, the total retail floor space demand in the town centre would not be expected to increase greatly (Shire of Morawa 2012, 61). Moreover, in Katanning it was regarded that of the 20% of commercial floor space within the town centre was vacant (Shire of Katanning 2012, 75). In short, the problem of poorly activated SuperTown main streets is not principally a spatial issue – there is already enough floor space for economic development that could lead to greater vibrancy. Rather, the root causes which lead to main street decline in rural areas – farm amalgamation and expansion, the substitution of capital for labour, farmer and farm worker outmigration (Plummer, Tonts, and Argent 2017, 1) are the major underlying issues.

SuperTown street upgrades also potentially risk, in the short term, the economic function of the main street. Indeed the problem of street upgrades, in towns which are often already struggling economically, is that the traders themselves can’t actually withstand the disruption to their businesses that is inevitably caused by streetscape works outside their shops (Malan and Wright 2015, 62). In other words, the construction of the new streetscape plan that was commissioned to ‘revitalize’ the town centre can be the end of the very businesses that the plan was designed to support (Malan and Wright 2015, 62). Certainly shop owners in the Katanning were angry the main street...
revisiting main street upgrades in terms of civic pride (Kullmann 2013, 253), they are unlikely to – in themselves – entice urban dwellers to migrate to rural towns. This is in part because many of the main street upgrades aspire to replicating successful high streets in larger urban centres such as Perth, and as such are replicating what urban dwellers already have.

Introducing urban plazas

The SuperTown planning for ‘Future Morawa’ depicted a vibrant town centre coalescing around a new urban plaza, as the Shire of Morawa portrayed:

… Morawa’s Main Street is alive with activity on this Saturday afternoon. Friendly locals gather around the shaded plaza as it provides a welcoming meeting place to gather and discuss the up and coming harvest. Across the street, a local miner enjoys a coffee with his young family at the nearby café. He overhears the joy expressed by some passing tourists, commenting on the vibrant and attractive character of the town and how they intend to stay a couple of nights on their way back through (Shire of Morawa 2012, vii).

In the case of Katanning, Morawa and Boddington, the respective local governments deployed small civic plazas or squares, adjacent to main streets, in part, to reshape the image of rural towns for local residents, visitors and potential migrants from larger urban centres (Figures 13–16). SuperTown planning for Katanning and Morawa advocated the plazas should function as a flexible, activated (on as many sides as possible), public meeting place for the community to meet and interact and attend ‘regular’ events (Shire of Morawa 2012, 74), dine alfresco and ‘sit and enjoy the town’ (Shire of Katanning 2012, 62, 90).

Spatial design consultants for the Morawa plaza, borrowing from the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) in New York, applied to the plaza offering at least ten things to do or ten reasons to be there. It was explained these should include a ‘place to sit, playgrounds to enjoy, art to touch, music to hear, food to eat, history to experience, and people to meet’ (Shire of Morawa 2012, 67). Beyond delivering on such ambitious aspirations for public space planners considered that the plazas should provide ‘an important role in contributing to the character and appeal of the town’ and ‘would have the potential to invite tourists to stay longer in town and will appeal to and attract people who are considering Morawa as a place to live’ (Shire of Morawa 2012, 74). Significantly the deployment of urban plazas in this rural context is out of step with the social life of rural towns which tends to be concentrated on a recreation precinct which provides for a range of sporting activities (such as golf or lawn bowls) and is a focus for community interaction within the town (Shire of Morawa 2012, 46).

Discussion

The deployment of urban plazas in the Morawa, Boddington and Katanning SuperTowns has an economic narrative that goes beyond facilitating conviviality. This narrative is that SuperTown main street, mixed use precincts – focussed on central urban plazas – through a ‘diversity of co-located land uses stimulate knowledge diffusion and thus economic growth and diversification’ (OECD 2012, 20). The attractiveness of this narrative to rural local governments is that in contrast to the days when Australia’s economy relied on primary production, the contemporary economy is extremely concentrated and focussed on knowledge intensive, creative jobs (Kelly and Donegan 2015, 23). For many people urban, activated plazas suggest creative environments which generate creativity and the commercial innovations and wealth that flow from it (Florida 2002, 22; Lang 2016, 37). As Brendon Grylls exhorted in relation to Regional Centre redevelopments in the Pilbara: ‘We are looking to set up town squares with a bit of culture and lifestyle not currently associated with those places’ (Mills 2010).

Certainly the combination of factors that make a ‘creative’ area according to Richard Florida’s estimation – such as a concentration and wide diversity of people, a large variety of buildings such as apartments, bars, shops, small factories and underutilised structures ideal for creative enterprises (Florida 2002, 42) – was not being delivered in the SuperTown planning. However, the urban plazas, with their attendant local artisan features (Shire of Morawa 2012, 74), attempt to catalyse some of this elusive creativity and economic diversification. Of course, the plazas cannot catalyse the knowledge intensive, creative jobs that could convince urban dwellers to relocate to inland SuperTowns – in isolation from the other necessary ingredients. Nonetheless, it would appear they remain as a signifier of economic diversification for rural town administrators.

Moreover, for the potential urban migrant, the plaza also acts as an antidote to many of the perceived social ills of rural inland towns. Sociologist A.P. Elkin, who surveyed the country towns of New South Wales in the early 1940s identified the ‘suffocating homogeneity, of rural society’ which was ‘unrelenting in its demands for conformity’ (In Davison 2016a, 155). The deployment of urban plazas in the rural SuperTowns signifies a more urban attitude to diversity in which the ‘urban
community displays mere indifference to the eccentricities of its members’ where ‘strangers become fellow citizens’ (Davison 2016a, 268).

Finally, their commissioners presume plazas to function to reinforce a sense of belonging. Within the context of the vast Wheatbelt ravaged by over clearing, salinisation, soil erosion, pests and droughts (Diamond 2011, 379), the plaza, drawing on the symbolism of the city square, agora, and forum, acts as a site of civic belonging (Davison 2016b, 211). While ‘the bush’ and the openness of the country is entwined with landscape public open space in inland rural towns, in these urban plazas these qualities are partly diminished. In doing this the neatly delineated plaza potentially satisfies a psychological desire for boundedness sometimes experienced by those visiting or living in in Australia’s wide open, hostile, interior landscapes. As Susan Bright observed of the Wheatbelt, ‘the heat, the loneliness and the pressures of small rural communities are palpable’ (Kullmann 2013, 247). The desire to ‘plug the gaps’ in SuperTown urban structure (Hames Sharley 2012, 75; Shire of Katanning 2012, 83), with all their vagueness and unease, reaches its zenith in these plazas which provide a rational ordering of, what can be for visitors, ‘strange space’ (Dovey and Sandercock 2005, 30). Of course given the low population density of Katanning and Morawa for the plazas themselves to not become windswept and vacant they require careful management of social and cultural festivities year round (Shire of Morawa 2012, 50).

Repairing, and connecting to, environmental assets

The Wheatbelt, in the mind of residents of Western Australia’s major urban centres, tends to be thought of in terms of environmental destruction (Kullmann 2013, 250). This situation is no accident – of the Wheatbelt’s original native vegetation, 90% has now been cleared, mostly between 1920 and 1980.
culminating in the ‘Million Acres a Year’ program pushed by the Western Australia state government in the 1960s (Diamond 2011, 403). In part as a result, the proportion of the Wheatbelt sterilised by salinisation is expected to reach one-third within the next two decades (Diamond 2011, 403). Within this context, planning for improved environmental health in the SuperTowns is timely.

Figure 14. Photograph of the Katanning civic plaza.
Note: Given the low population density of Katanning and Morawa for the plazas to not become windswept and vacant they require careful management of social and cultural festivities year round (image courtesy of RPS Environment).

Figure 15. A photo of Morawa civic plaza.
Note: Civic plazas are presumed to function to reinforce a sense of belonging. Within the context of the expanse of the Wheatbelt ravaged by vast forest clearing, salinisation, soil erosion, pests and droughts the plaza, drawing on the symbolism of the city square, agora, and forum, acts as a site of civic belonging (image courtesy of The Planning Group/ Shire of Morawa).
To this end, a number of the SuperTown Growth Plans focus on forging stronger connections between existing town sites and adjacent rivers, in particular the Hotham River in Boddington and the Avon River in Northam (Hames Sharley 2012, 74), as well as improving the environmental health of the rivers (Figures 17 and 18). In the Northam SuperTown Growth Plan, land owners and developers were encouraged to ‘turn around’ to face the river precinct (Shire of Northam 2011, 60). Concomitantly, the local government delivered river health programs and upgraded foreshore public open space so that the ‘river would become a major focal point for the sub region’ (Shire of Northam 2011, 60).

In the Katanning SuperTown Growth Plan, a Green Infrastructure Connectivity Concept called for the rehabilitation of creeks within the townsite – which were heavily infested with weeds and marred by bank stabilisation measures – as well the introduction of formalised pedestrian trails along these corridors (Shire of Katanning 2012, 23). Local government believed the result of such interventions would be recreational benefits and ‘visual appeal’ that would help to develop Katanning’s ‘unique sense of place’ (Shire of Katanning 2012, 39). Remnant vegetation, which tends to disproportionately concentrate within the townsites as opposed to the surrounding cleared agricultural land, was also slated for protection from Business As Usual (BAU) suburban sprawl (Shire of Katanning 2012, 49).

**Discussion.** Improving environmental health and connecting to environmental assets in SuperTown planning can be understood both as a gesture to reverse (to a small extent) the ecological devastation which the Wheatbelt embodies but also as a means of attempting to reverse settlement decline (Newman 2005, 530) – and to increase the appeal of the SuperTowns to potential urban migrants. In SuperTown planning, policy makers hoped that environmental initiatives would help to ameliorate the urban dweller’s connotations between the Wheatbelt and environmental devastation that tends to curtail the attractiveness of Wheatbelt towns. Rather these rejuvenated environmental assets, through tourism, and potentially migration, are (in part) perceived to form a potential economic mainstay (Kullmann 2013, 249).

A focus on environmental health in SuperTown planning also represents an attempt to balance the urban drawcards of such planning (including main street upgrades and urban plazas) with the ‘natural’ attractions of rural towns. This is by no means a new strategy, employing access to nature, as an incentive for population decentralisation has a long history. Indeed, Ebenezer Howard’s now historic Garden Cities model aimed to combine the best of town and country in a new kind of settlement, TownCountry (Hall 2002, 93). What is missing in the case of the SuperTowns is a regional plan for the Wheatbelt which is based on the principles of ecological balance and resource renewal (Hall 2002, 8).
Figure 17. Katanning creek rehabilitation.
Note: In the Katanning SuperTown Growth and Implementation Plan a Green Infrastructure Connectivity Concept called for the rehabilitation of creeks within the townsite which are heavily infested with weeds and marred by bank stabilisation measures, as well formalised pedestrian trails along these corridor (image courtesy of Ecoscape).

Figure 18. Northam townsite and proposed connections to the Avon River.
Note: In the Northam Regional Centre Growth Plan land owners and developers were encouraged to ‘turn around’ to face the river precinct (image courtesy of Hames Sharley).
within which the SuperTowns could be nestled. While important at a local scale, the small efforts made towards ecological restoration and remnant vegetation protection made in SuperTown planning were unlikely to recast the Wheatbelt’s general image problem around environmental issues – and as such do little to entice urban dwellers to the inland SuperTowns.

**Part two: evaluating the SuperTown policy, and its spatial design strategies, from the perspective of inland population decentralisation**

This section examines recently released demographic data to allow us to form a provisional picture of the success, or otherwise, of the SuperTown’s policy in enabling population decentralisation away from major urban centres. It is important to note at this point that the success of SuperTown strategies can be evaluated using criteria other than population statistics (Kullmann 2013, 248), such as increased civic pride, or retention of families over longer time periods. These criteria are however not part of the scope of this paper. Concerning population decentralisation, the picture is mixed at best. Of the SuperTowns studied in this paper all of the populations fell, to varying degrees, when considered at the State Suburb Level, the most detailed data the Australian Bureau of Statistics provides (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016) (Figure 19). In detail, Morowa’s population fell from 655 in 2011–532 in 2016 (minus 123), Northam’s population fell from 6,580–6,548 (minus 32), Boddington’s from 1,908–1,198 (minus 710) and Katanning’s population fell from 4,183–3,687 (minus 496). In total, the case study SuperTown’s lost 1,361 people in the 2011–2016 period, despite the substantial $85 million investment made through the SuperTowns program (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). As such, readers could expect this situation has led to political commentary from the reasonably freshly elected Labor State Government. New Regional Development Minister Alannah MacTiernan recently said there was little evidence the SuperTowns scheme had achieved its goal of attracting people away from Perth:

> When we look at the amount of money that has been invested, and we look at the population changes, we can’t be really confident that this money has necessarily produced the result… the beautification of town centres had failed to improve employment opportunities which is what will bring people to those country centres (Walker et al. 2017).

As a result, the new State Government has flagged axing the SuperTowns scheme (Walker et al. 2017). Regardless of the political commentary, what is evident is that spatial design gestures, applied in relative isolation, have not yielded significant population decentralisation to inland rural towns. Strangely, some of the actual SuperTown Growth Plans, which saw significant spending on spatial design interventions predicted this at the time – as, did the Shire of Morawa:

> Morawa’s regional location may otherwise prove to be a disincentive for a large number of people to take up residency there unless there is a very good reason for them to do so. The reason is usually employment related (Shire of Morawa 2012, 60).

Interestingly the Shire of Morawa identified the main street upgrade as being their fourth priority for State Government funding. As they recently explained: ‘we as a shire chose industry. However, the decision was not ours as to where the money would be spent…’

**Figure 19.** Wheatbelt SuperTown population growth between 2006 and 2016. While all the SuperTowns studied lost population the degree varied. Boddington and Katanning lost the most population while Northam effectively flat-lined. Data courtesy of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The SuperTowns policy was launched in 2011.
indicating such decisions may have been enacted on a higher, probably political, level (Walker et al. 2017).

The limits of spatial design interventions

This situation reveals the relative inability of spatial design alone to deal with broader problems facing inland rural towns. This is principally because the problems facing these towns, e.g., farm amalgamation and expansion or the substitution of capital for labour (Plummer, Tonts, and Argent 2017, 1) – are not at their core spatial design issues. Even the related environmental issues facing the Wheatbelt, such as salinisation, soil erosion, introduced species and water shortages (Diamond 2011, 379) are not within the remit of spatial urban design. Given this situation, the overt focus on funding spatial design interventions within towns would appear to not have been well targeted.

Planning for the decentralisation of population to the inland SuperTowns has been principally about delivering spatial outcomes by which towns could accommodate population increases but also shaping an image of a confident, creative, engaged and diverse rural society – to draw people from larger urban centres. Of course, the actual cultivation of an expanded rural society is less predictable than planning for its hard infrastructure. As Marcus Westbury explains, ‘there are few roadmaps to apply to the challenging task of fostering a dynamic successful culture. It is much more than placement of monuments, buildings or transport link’s (Westbury 2008, 173). In the creation of such a culture, spatial design remains a ‘blunt instrument’ that is at best a device which can spatially enable such a society over time and provide images which evoke it.

Alternative strategies to partially mitigate the barriers to inland decentralisation

If they had reviewed the literature, concerning previous attempts at decentralisation in Australia, policy makers might have been able to predict the failure of the SuperTowns program to yield substantial decentralisation. First and foremost while the capital city of Perth remains highly liveable (The Economist 2016) there is little in the way of an ‘urban crisis’ to prompt residents and businesses to re-evaluate their current location (Lonsdale 1972, 326). In short, while the larger urban centres remain liveable there is no ‘push’ factor to drive population decentralisation to inland regions. In this respect, state government could consider implementing stronger urban containment policies in major urban centres (Bolleyer 2015). Among the most popular are urban growth boundaries and greenbelts, which aim to limit urban development beyond boundaries and within greenbelts (OECD 2012, 16). Such policies, in time, might be able to redirect the forces of greenfield suburban expansion into regional decentralisation.

Moreover, it would appear to be a futile decentralisation strategy to attempt to duplicate the urban amenity of larger urban centres in a bid to draw people from these same centres. This is because a small rural SuperTown will be unlikely to be able to match the urban amenity that requires a larger population base to be authentic. In this respect, SuperTown planning may have had greater success in promoting decentralisation by catering for alternative lifestyles that larger urban centres do not provide. Peter Newman has raised the potential of rural Eco-Villages in this respect – communities which would be off-grid and allow for social experimentation (Newman 2005, 531). Nonetheless, these communities will need to work hard to overcome the preference of Australians for climatically favourable locations on the coast.

Economic factors continue to work against population decentralisation as Australia’s economy is becoming ever more concentrated. Evidence of this is that 80% of economic activity takes place on just 0.2 per cent of Australia’s land mass in capital cities – and they remain the backbone of our economy (Kelly and Donegan 2015, 23). Even within these cities, economic activity is heavily concentrated, as such central business districts alone are critically important to the nation’s prosperity (Kelly and Donegan 2015, 23). In this situation, decentralising economic activity to metropolitan Activity Centres in suburban locations is challenging enough, let alone to rural inland centres. This is particularly the case when governments are carrying out the decentralisation of economic activity through the lens of spatial design, not job creation strategies.

In this regard, the Western Australian state government could direct their investment towards transport improvements between Perth and select SuperTowns, so that regional residents can access the high paying jobs of Perth. In recent years, advocates of high-speed rail – which can travel at 350 km/h – have made similar assertions for both the west and east coasts (Bolleyer and Weller 2013). However for high speed rail to be feasible, it normally needs to connect cities of well over 1,000,000 people that are separated by travel times of less than 3 h (Department of Infrastructure 2010, 1), a situation unlikely to arise in Western Australia any time soon. However, strengthening and improving regional rail services from Perth to the closer inland SuperTowns such as Northam and Boddington is sensible. Indeed, with such a service the train journey from Perth to Northam (97 km) should be 40 min and Perth to Boddington under one hour (127 km). As Fiona McKenzie explains rail has had a renaissance, in rural areas around Australia ‘The restored rail network has reconnected towns across the country. Automation has enabled passenger and commercial services that are reliable, affordable and in high demand’ (McKenzie 2016, 18). In this respect,
it is strange that in 2013 (with the SuperTowns policy in full-swing) the Public Transport Authority (PTA) announced the cancellation of the AvonLink service (which connects Perth to Northam)\(^{10}\) and its replacement by a bus service (Ducey 2013) – a move which no doubt reflects a lack of shared policy objectives between the PTA and Department of Regional Development.

**Conclusion**

This paper has reviewed the use of spatial design in inland SuperTowns in a bid to overcome psychological barriers potentially curtailing the migration of residents of larger urban centres to the regions. The paper concludes, on the basis of population data, that while such spatial design gestures may yield benefits to the local community in terms of increased civic pride, they are unlikely (in isolation) to yield substantial population decentralisation to inland regions. This is particularly when deployed in relative isolation from regional public transportation strategies, regional environmental plans and policies for curtailing and redirecting urban growth in major centres. In short, the issues facing the Wheatbelt such as chronic structural decline are not spatial in nature. In this context, spatial designers are reduced to creating the ‘containers’ for, and images of, vibrancy, creativity and growth but are unable to deliver the economic conditions that could significantly grow rural society.

**Notes**

1. Moreover, in the U.S, decentralisation proponents believed siphoning people from the major cities into new or boosted cities in regional areas was the answer to the urban crisis of the ‘big cities’, in its various manifestations (1967, 711).

2. While this funding was much overdue, the policy has political origins. The substantial new funding was the non-negotiable demand won by the then National party leader (and state Regional Development minister) Brendon Grylls as a condition of his party’s support for the Liberal party in the state’s hung parliament (Australian Associated Press 2008). The political origins of such a policy is nothing new – politicians ‘wooing’ country electorates often reaffirm their support to the principle of dispersion of funding, economic opportunity and population to rural areas (Lonsdale 1971, 116).

3. The eleven Regional Centres, identified in the Regional Centres Development Plan (Western Australian Planning Commission 2012, 14), which are projected to absorb much of this population growth are Albany, Broome, Bunbury, Busselton, Carnarvon, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie, Karratha, Kununurra, Mandurah and Port Hedland (Department of Regional Development 2016b, 31). These are existing substantial regional centres, which, except for Kalgoorlie, are on or near the coast.

4. In addition to enticing people away from larger urban centres, the SuperTowns plan aimed to build on the attributes, resources, capabilities and potentials of existing regional communities (Department of Regional Development 2011, 13) as well as incubate their own natural population increase (Department of Regional Development 2011, 4).

5. The priority projects across the nine SuperTowns were: Boddington – Ranford Water Capacity ($1.25 million), and Economic Development Implementation in the Boddington District ($1.17 million), Collie – Collie CBD Revitalisation ($12.40 million), Esperance – Esperance Waterfront Project ($19.7 million) Esperance Town Centre Revitalisation Masterplan ($3.80 million) Esperance Economic Development ($1.19 million), Jurien Bay – Jurien Bay City Centre Enhancement Project ($12.42 million), Katanning – ($9.31 million) Multicultural and Aboriginal Engagement and Enhancement ($2.55 million), Manjimup – Manjimup’s Agricultural Expansion ($6.95 million) revitalisation of Manjimup’s Town Centre ($5.71 million), Margaret River – Margaret River Perimeter Road and Town Centre Improvements ($1.94 million) Surfers Point Precinct ($4.70 million), Morawa– North Midlands Solar Thermal Power Station Feasibility Study ($8.50 million) Morawa Town Site Revitalisation ($3.00 million), Northam – Avon River Revitalisation and Riverfront Development ($3.65 million) Avon Health and Emergency Services Precinct – $4.81 million (Department of Regional Development 2017).

6. In this paper, I typically refer to the practitioners delivering the SuperTown Growth Plans as spatial designers or planners. I intend this to be inclusive of urban planners, urban designers, landscape architects and architects. Town Planning Management Engineering/Ecoscape produced the Growth Plan for Katanning, Hames Sharley for Boddington, The Planning Group and Emerge Environmental for Morowa, and Hames Sharley and RPS Environment for Northam.

7. Larger urban centres will be subsequently used in this paper to refer to the capital city and Regional Centres as defined by the Department of Regional Development (2016b, 31).

8. There are exceptions, however. Several rural towns in eastern Australia have successfully enacted locally adapted main street upgrades. A topical example is the rural town of Coolah in the state of New South Wales that suffered decline following rural recession and the closure of the local mill in the 1980s (Kullmann 2013, 248).

9. I have based this calculation on an average speed of 150 kmh. This is substantially less than the Kalgoorlie-Perth ‘Prospector’ which has a maximum service speed of 200 kmh (Department of Infrastructure 2010, 12).

10. Due to a public outcry this cancellation never occurred.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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