

A TOWN LIKE BYRON BAY: FUTURE RISK, DESIGN and HEALTHY INDUSTRIES

Jim Prentice

Byron Bay has a special status. It has the imagery to attract international and national visitors. Yet that status is contingent on it recreating itself attractively for the future, and holding on to its past. With ferocious competition from other coastal towns in Australia and internationally, tourism needs supplementation. Despite Byron's special amenity and particular character, the future is not along a straight road with a clear destination. Byron will need to agree to include but go beyond tourism.

Let's remember for a moment what a small coastal town meant to earlier visitors and inhabitants. Wasn't it somewhere to escape to, where you could just be 'laid back' - road test your thongs? Somewhere where you didn't need the latest gadget but rather shared the picturesque beaches and inviting water, the fresh air and sea breezes, plenty of early nights (variations apply) and a BarBQue full of freshly caught fish. These were the big attractions: a family experience and a young person's.

Of course, for others a coastal town was a; port, jetty, train station or half way between here and there. Some service industries and some agriculture funnelled money back, along with schools and the like. However these models are static. They tell of a slowly changing world. A world where things like a dairy industry existed: one never doubted; logging that no one thought would stop; fishing even whaling in abundance for evermore. None of this now applies: least not in the same way in any coastal town in Australia. Now its tourism and retirement - bums on beds. We can only pretend the future is 'steady as she goes, even if these remain bedrocks. You'd have to be dreamin' or rather you should be dreamin' something new.

Yet life seems a bit different in Byron because the community views are diverse and more segmented in some ways. Yet many towns have cultural divisions in this regard. Byron is no exception. It is the welding these differences and understanding them that will make Byron great for the future.

Has a community sufficient listening skills to connect to emerging needs, trends, outlooks, industry programs, products and problems or not? The Council has set in train a community planning project but the community and especially the Councillors seem divided. Why? Some assume life will go on - largely the same. For them, looking after the old community stand-bys will do: just service, expand and improve on what's established by increasing current types of commerce. That makes a deal of sense. Others notice change and focus on it but how will they divine change good for Byron?

Change quickly undoes 'common sense'. That's where imagination comes into play.

What sort of change will impact this icon of Australian culture? Often new trends have none of the usual routes of influence. And sometimes traditional voices are dismissed too easily as old hat. Imagination works with both old and new ideally. The difference is that a future plan; one which cobbles and hobbles along with a-more- of- the- same-mentality is actually high risk. Doing the same is a dangerous supposition.

A new batch of industries are rising in our developed societies. Financial and educational services, for example, have more recently accounted for a considerable part of the new employment possibilities emerging in Australia. There are many more of these types of service industries and Byron has a representation of these in no small degree. We might call these industries such names as; sunrise, creative, tertiary, niche marketing - driven, post- industrial and education - oriented. Education for the 2-3 times you need to retrain in the new economy. Call it what you will. It is not mass production but these industries are creative and creativity needs a stimulating, design positive and uniquely attractive environment. A place to call home with clients who notice it has the future written all over it.

In such work - mental in the main- we commit energies producing incomes large and small. They are design oriented. They lend themselves as industries, to places like Byron Bay. They will attract others to towns and shires that show respect for the underlying premise efficiency; sustainability; creativity and design. Have we the Shire to attract them? Is this an address they want their clients to associate with their brand. Byron already has quite a representation of these people. Many more might come but not if we lose or fail to place creative design at the centre of planning in Byron. Yet some will still say that's not enough. I would.

I have left one 'industry' out. The one that is much less visible: care of the elderly and disabled. Many of us have complex opinions and emotions about such care, including its cost. There is no doubt that care of these people will require a solution which will be very design focused, not least because of its cost. Care will have to be and already is, very innovative in these areas. Equally such care is very work intensive. Such care invokes an intergenerational depth that all communities need. The elderly and disabled for their capacities and abilities are great assets for any community.

Simply such care is very necessary, very hands on and very worthwhile. Byron could be both model innovator, servicer of these needs and recipients of the benefits of such residents and visitors. These are ideal industries for Byron if done well sensitively and with compatibility with an older Byron with a tourist focus. Done well, our initiatives that integrate this care into the community will be another attraction. One to be very proud of. Perhaps it returns Byron partly to its family based roots.

Byron has the capability and the climate to innovate here, where models of care are rapidly altering. The idea of integrating the elderly or disabled safely and appropriately through accessibility design and inclusive thinking, specialised design and locational variations, into the community will create great interest. Very innovative planning in these areas has started to take off in Europe, especially Holland.

This sounds frightening! Old people in the streets, beautiful Byron and tourism - no way. The elderly and bikini designers! Wheelchairs and latte! Aging disabling is confronting: you already know that, but not if you can plan upfront for it. Proper innovative, safe, respectful and inclusive planning and especially a community adoption of the aging population and the disabled could set Byron apart. It would give it a great new and complementary impetus. It may be a frightening idea at first. Rest with it a while.

Other countries manage it and we can learn as a community. It's all about planning, responsibility and drawing up very well defined rules that make everyone comfortable, communicative and cared for in terms of their needs: locals, tourists and recipients of care. Mostly it's about an ingenious accessibility. Byron a proud inclusive, compassionate and sexy community with jobs and money: let's explore it a little more.

If we are thinking of aged and other care, we can achieve a good service and a small footprint with greater densities of occupation. The elderly often, or nearly always don't have cars, don't want back yards, don't require more than one or two rooms. They are travelling light in terms of space needs, but in need of many services and deserving of them. It's real and less riskier to diversify our services to include them. We should be looking at this wider picture and plan because that will bring prosperity.

A LOWER RISK FUTURE

Part of thinking about small coastal towns is to look at the limits and strengths of our large capital cities where we all know an alarming and increasingly dissatisfied population live with traffic chaos, long commutes, and a shattered work life balance.

The dislike of large cities encompasses prices of houses, lack of relaxing environments, lack of opportunities for cheap workspace. Crammed and cramping is not conducive to creativity, which needs space, time stimulation and amenity. Space can be creative and that as urban space and rural planning creates creativity and pleasure in this type of work. Local good urban /rural design attracts new industries. It brings perhaps the same amenity that parks did to industrial cities.

Add the internet and we no longer all need the big city urban life.

We could create an exciting new and attractive version of urban life in small coastal towns. I suggest these post-industrial industries because they stand out but I am not providing an exclusive list. My point is that if those are the sorts of futures, then what sort of town would suit them?

Not only are research and advice required but also recognition of Byron's unique mystique and why the coastal shift is on. It's not for the laid-back appeal if that is part ...it's for the space, freedom, blue skies, community, easy relaxation and good vibes street life. Creative work is already high stress. These things are wonderful de-stressors. These attributes complement an innovative caring community. One enriched by very ordinary problems and by innovation applied to them. Solutions may well be achieved in extraordinary ways. Byron would gather a new reputation of an expanded one where outsiders are included, yet vibrant and innovative characteristics are accentuated.

Byron beautiful one day; innovative the next and caring as well. Beat that!

BAD DESIGN – HIGH RISK

New housing estates bring new bank accounts and credit cards, new business opportunities and entrepreneurs. However at what cost? If it is done badly it creates many problems. Worse problems if it makes a town into a name synonymous with bad planning and design. Especially if it is synonymous with bad environmental planning. There is plenty of that so maybe just stay in the big city. There would be many tourists and other residents who felt that way too. Byron could lose the glaze or haze of an Aussie coastal town paradise.

If the hidden cost of large estates is a downgrading of community; design, water movement and use, the good health of estuaries, and the well-being of flora and fauna, not only will tourists shy away but so too those who want to associate with a place with a reputation. If Byron is not innovative, nor interesting, nor designed with historical emblems nor greenall it is then is a beach and a town with an

old lighthouse and not a significant laser artist. Ho hum... Where's the work? Nothing between bums on beds and bums on beaches - except sand castles.

GOOD COASTAL DESIGN

Besides infill and specialised aged and disabled accommodation. We might still find room for low and high cost housing without isolation and lack of transportation, which is a recipe for greater inequality. We can grow with developments in the near hinterland. Across the highway. Let's image! Imagine housing proposals which look for the best not the easiest option in this less than perfect world. Look for areas close but not so destructively close as current plans. Future safety is more important than adding housing blocks where they will do a great deal of damage to the real environment and the attractiveness of the potential marketing environment.

Imagine phoneable maxi taxis and buses on random customer specific routes generated through computers, as well as traditional public transport for these more distant suburbs – a small price for good design. Routes so generated will bring people to the CBD and back out, how about carpooling? Or park'n ride. Just more design.

Smart designs can get people out of their cars, into car parks, easy local transporters, then to malls and city pathways with greenery around, and beaches on the other side. People can walk thru the wired city or use public vehicles. These don't have to be boring buses: **they could be mobile art galleries with seats inside**. We might suggest council involvement in delivery of goods encouraging more abandonment of the car....or CBD specific transport using multi-hire taxis.

Can we work on the new vision, low human footprint but vibrant model so the most fearful can feel safe that this will bring a prosperity: one full of hope, jobs and community? That is future oriented but low risk.

Will the Byron community just cobble or plan? Take high risk roads or low risk ones?

When we look at the big broad picture of the future we should imagine something very different.

Why wouldn't just more young people and working families in more subdivisions do? This is the industrial mentality - mass work forces and mass consumers mean mass wealth. Bulk is best. It fits little Australian industry now. Such thinking has gone with its industries to China.

Let's imagine a different Byron: one up for the challenges and concerns clearly emerging as our future and with a particular interest in uniting with a focus of a future for the young, families, the elderly and the sick and the environment. Byron will grow – differently and similarly to before and now.

Dr Jim Prentice

Old Byron surfer and now frequent visitor.