Imagining Albury-Wodonga

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Abstract

On its inception in 1973, the Albury-Wodonga National Growth Centre project was hailed as novel, experimental and imaginative. It was a pilot scheme which involved three governments entering on an ‘exciting adventure’ in cooperative federalism. It was a ‘brave attempt’ to solve a long-standing problem and a ‘bold venture’ in selective decentralisation expected to influence the urban settlement pattern in Australia.

This paper examines how and why the experiment was imagined and, then, re-imagined. It explains how Albury-Wodonga was grown and promoted and makes assessment of the impact the experiment had at the local and national levels.

It explores how the experiment is remembered, tracking how traces of the experiment fit within the current thinking about the nature and purpose of heritage that emerges from the increasing work body of work emanating from critical heritage scholars. It argues that the heritage of the memory of the growth centre experiment is precarious.

Gough Whitlam imagined Albury-Wodonga as a National Growth Centre. He saw the joint and rapid development of Albury and Wodonga as a selective decentralisation project that the Commonwealth could undertake with the two state governments of Victoria and New South Wales. Within the spirit of cooperative federalism, all three governments would work together to establish another Canberra between Sydney and Melbourne. Albury-Wodonga would be a trend-setting pilot project to relieve growth pressures on both those capitals. He advanced the idea first during the 1969 election campaign and acted on it immediately after he was elected in 1972. He was to fund another three places as part of a wider growth centre programme, but Albury-Wodonga received 62 percent of that programme funding and became its icon. It was the largest and one of the longest-lasting national growth centre projects, officially designated as such from 1973 until 1989.

Altogether $143 million was advanced to the project, principally to acquire land. As a result, the Fraser Government found it difficult to withdraw its support without adversely affecting the Commonwealth investment in land. It did, however, decrease the scope of the project by reducing the ambitious population target from 300,000 to 150,000. Subsequent governments also re-imagined an even less ambitious project, but they, too, were anxious to recoup the initial funding stimulus. Until the project was formally ended at the end of 2014, the Commonwealth sold the surplus Commonwealth-owned land in an orderly and profitable way. Over several years it withdrew from its commitment to Albury-Wodonga slowly, even tenderly, so as to maximise its returns. The current calculation is that the Commonwealth has retrieved $325 million. In the end, it will not make a profit, but it will have a direct monetary return, and that on a government investment in regional development must be highly unusual.
What is more, the project laid the basis for a large and economically viable inland centre in which pleasant neighbourhoods are set within a surrounding area that demonstrates an unusually high respect for environmental values. Albury-Wodonga is the twentieth largest urban centre in Australia.

At base, the term ‘Albury-Wodonga’ proved to be an excellent piece of place-branding. The insertion of a hyphen between the two place names was a pithy and effective marketing device to signal the joint development of the two cities into one major regional centre. The term was advertised frequently and energetically enough to win national recognition. Like all good brands, the term was loaded with sentiment. With it, images were projected of a forward-looking, vibrant place that encouraged innovation and experiment. ‘Australia’s Growing Place’ was a place that attracted those who sought the excitement and stimulation of being involved in the experiment of establishing a city on the border between the two most populous states. The challenge attracted those who were challengeable. It appealed to the resilient and adaptable among those who were long-resident.

Words like ‘imagining’ are subject-less gerunds, action words without actors. Who, in this instance for example, is doing the imagining – Gough Whitlam or Malcolm Fraser; the residents of Albury-Wodonga or the residents of the rest of Australia; the contemporaries of the first years of the experiment or the people of today? ‘Imagining’ admits all those constructions. It refers to the ways Albury-Wodonga was to be known both within and outside the immediate district and raises questions about how it is similarly known today. It refers to how the locality was made on the ground, and how it was, and still is, made in the mind.

Some heritage scholars and government agencies see heritage as a similar gerund-like verbal noun. They write of ‘heritageisation’, ‘heritage-making’ and ‘re-membering’. They claim heritage as something ‘actively made in the present’ in response to present-day needs. They see heritage as a meaning-making activity that involves positioning traces of the past in the present (Smith 2005: 64-66, 82-84, 237-265; Harrison 2013: 229; Department of Environment 2010-2012). For them heritage is both present-minded and future-driven: the imagined pasts relate to present-day imaginings of the future. Nations/communities/individuals use traces of the past to imagine where they have been, where they are and where
they may be going (Department of Environment, 2010-2013). Indeed, Rodney Harrison argues that heritage has ‘very little to do with the past, but instead emerges out of the relationship between the past and present as a reflection of the future’ (2013: 228). Heritage concerns are nearly always spurred by uncertainty about the present and the future. ‘The appreciation of heritage’, Graeme Davison suggests, ‘often grew … in proportion to the sense of peril’ (2000: 117). Heritage thrives in times of rapid change.

This paper explains some of the challenges encountered in preparing for exhibitions to mark the fortieth anniversary of the inauguration of the Albury-Wodonga National Growth Centre experiment in 1973. The exhibitions trace how Albury-Wodonga was imagined, re-imagined and crafted – and how it is remembered. It is, in essence, a case study of place-making – a key heritage activity (L Smith 2005: 237-275; Harrison 2010: 36-38).

Albury LibraryMuseum commissioned me to assess the significance of a collection of photographs and promotional materials which had been lodged with it by the Albury-Wodonga Corporation. Further, I was engaged to prepare a thematic history for an exhibition which would mark the 40th anniversary of three governments signing an agreement to develop Albury and Wodonga jointly and rapidly as a National Growth Centre. In effect, my role was to develop a rationale and provide a structure to help secure funding and to guide a curator of the commemorative exhibition. Two exhibitions, one dealing broadly with the growth centre, the other showcasing five artists’ impressions of living with the experiment, were mounted in October 2013 in Albury and in Wodonga respectively. My thematic history forms a major part of what is loosely called a catalogue.

Figure 3: Locals had to be convinced that the Growth Centre experiment was in their interests.
(Paul Greene, The Champion, Albury-Wodonga 10 July 1974)
Plainly the funding body anticipated that the exhibitions would be heritage-making activities. The guidelines for the Your Community Heritage programme stressed ‘the role [of heritage] in bringing people together, creating community identity and a sense of pride’. It encouraged locals to explore their local pasts. It offered support for the construction of participant-driven, bottom-up rather than top-down histories (Department of Environment 2010-2013). Consequently the exhibitions are memory prompts which use traces of the past to engender a sense of place. They build, in part, on memories solicited pre-exhibition and they invite further remembering. They explore how, as in this instance, Albury-Wodonga is known, not only by its residents, but also by the wider world. They invite reflection on place identity.

Positioning story

As an historian, I started my tasks with story, for as Graeme Davison has said, ‘The best way to establish the importance of a building, site [or place], the historian will tend to argue, is by telling a rich evocative and complex story about it.’ (2000: 125) Indeed, the funding application required me to position the story of Albury-Wodonga as a growth centre so that it fitted more general stories and had ‘national significance’ (National Library 2011). I claimed relevance to two familiar Australian stories and a third of both wider and more particular interest. The story of Albury-Wodonga not only fitted into these overarching stories, but had something to add of each of them. All three stories had an eye to the present and the future as well as the past: they grew out of present-day anxieties about the future.

First, as a tale of urban and regional development, accounts of how and why a National Growth Centre was imagined at Albury-Wodonga fit within and add to broader, national stories about peopling Australia, or more specifically the geography of population growth. In explaining the new attention given to rural and regional Australia in the hung parliament of 2010–2013, Judith Brett declared the nation as ‘obsessed…with population growth’ (2011: 19). As we edge towards a Big Australia there has been increasing uncertainty about how dense we want our metropolitan cities to become and where and how governments might better support rural and regional living. That tale of the search for cures for metropolitan obesity provides a political context and a chronological frame for unfolding the fortunes of Albury-Wodonga. It also points to the future. Like other regional centres, Albury-Wodonga is anxious about how comfortably it will saddle future divides between city and the bush.

The Growth Centre story is not a cheery tale about the success of selective decentralisation. Albury-Wodonga did not attract sufficient people from Sydney and Melbourne to make any discernible difference to the problems faced by those cities. This story of selective decentralisation is, in key ways, cautionary rather than exemplary. It raises questions about the efficacy of government intervention to change metropolitan/ non-metropolitan population patterns. Journalists, more often than not, now sneer at the ‘Whitlamite delusion of creating growth centres’ (‘Regional making their own luck’ The Australian, 26 March 2003 editorial). They suggest that, ‘Historical experience shows regional settlement policies are expensive and ineffective and result in inefficient allocation of resources’ (Taylor 2010). For urban policy critics, Albury-Wodonga might seem a folly rather than an achievement. This lack of conspicuous success plainly affects the remembering of the project. It is not a ‘humiliated silence’ (Connerton 2008: 67-69), but ‘there are few things more forlorn than the remnants of abandoned, or superseded, public policy programmes’ (Lloyd & Anderton 1990: 6).

Second, as a cooperative federalism venture, Albury-Wodonga fits within and adds to broader tales about how the Australian federation functions. Three governments agreed to legislate and commit to the project. They agreed to establish a Ministerial Council to oversee the experiment and to set up a single development authority to direct and manage it. Because three governments were involved, three legal corporations were required, one for each government. The primary role of each of the two state corporations was to acquire, hold, manage and provide land in the area designated in its respective state. The three corporations would act as one entity responsible to the Ministerial Council. They had common membership and a common staff. The two states continued to hold separately their responsibilities not
only for land but also for services such as education, health, transport and public housing. The Ministerial Council would always act unanimously. That unanimity seems to have depended on the equal distribution of Commonwealth largesse between the two states. This was, plainly, a complex experiment in cooperative federalism.

The cross-border nature of the undertaking turns attention to the stories geographers tell about boundaries. How do entangled cross-border communities work through their differences? How do people behave along and across borders (Minghi 1963)? It raises questions about how porous or elastic our Australian state/territory borders are (Pennay 2001). How do different jurisdictions rub against each other (NSW Cross-Border Commissioner, 2012)? The anguish and the achievement of cross-border Albury-Wodonga relates to our past and future as a federated nation with its internal sovereign state borders. It has been said that if you want to gauge the health of the body politic, you should not only examine its heart, but also take its pulse at the periphery (Lang 1874). To paraphrase Appadurai (2010:12), a cross-border locality is an evidence of the reality of a federated nation.

The third story I nominated with which to link the Albury-Wodonga experiment was that of place-making. Appadurai (1996: 178-199) has coined the phrase ‘production of locality’ and refers to the ‘manufacture’ of local subjectivity and local meaning. Neighbourhoods are ‘imagined, produced and maintained’. Place understanding, place attachment are continuously being made and remade: ideas of locality are constantly being negotiated and refreshed. They exist in the minds of their residents and, by reputation, in the minds of outsiders. Albury-Wodonga was and, given the above, still is a place-making exercise. It and the places within it are ‘like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly written’ (Augé 1995: 79).

The Albury-Wodonga story contributes to the wider tales of place-making as an interesting example in which government deliberately tried to shape the fortunes of a place, to generate positive feelings within it and, perhaps unlike other place-making ventures, to establish an attractive reputation outside it. There is debate on how far legislation and promotional campaigns were successful in creating a sense of cross-border community within Albury-Wodonga. I argue that strong forces continue to grow cross-border community ties, but memory of the growth centre story is fragile and the heritage associated with it is precarious.

Figure 4: Travelling exhibitions advertising Australia’s Growth Centre were displayed in state capitals. (Albury Library/Museum).
Place-making on the ground and in the mind

Albury-Wodonga Development Corporation planners drew bold lines of major roads on maps. They plotted neighbourhood frames within suburban pods. Building allotments were well serviced with water and sewer connections, paved footpaths and roads, underground power lines and pedestrian-friendly streets. The new residential estates were carefully landscaped and treed ‘ahead of time’. Neighbourhood parks were carefully laid out with grassed and treed areas to keep a natural environment feel. Inventive playground sculptures were supplied. Each new landowner was supplied with ten trees and forty shrubs.

This place-making coincided with and demonstrates a rise in urban environmental consciousness. From the beginning a basic challenge was to ensure that growth did not impact adversely on the Murray River. The impact on the riverine environment was carefully monitored, just as the Commonwealth Government was improving its understanding of the need to conserve Australia’s river resources. Further, three million trees and shrubs were planted in new, carefully landscaped residential, industrial and commercial areas, alongside roads and thoroughfares, through recreation areas, and in otherwise degraded rural areas. The tree planning was for aesthetic and environmental reasons. Towns always looked more attractive if they were well-treed. More native trees would reduce soil erosion, create wildlife corridors, and encourage birds. Publicists boasted there were in public spaces nineteen trees for each head of population (Pennay 2005: 236-240).

The hill tops and the creek and river frontages within the growth centre land bank were always intended to serve environmental and recreational purposes. In 1985 the Development Corporation launched a Regional Parklands strategy for the development of an open space system. It gave particular emphasis to the reafforestation of the major surrounding hills to set the landscape character of the city. It made provision for recreational uses in a variety of interconnected parklands. Subsequently the Development Corporation and its successor organisation negotiated the transfer to public ownership of large swathes of environmentally sensitive land, principally hilltops and creek/river/lake frontages. This has been generous, but, given that much of this kind of land was unsellable, they were disposing of surplus land without affecting the returns to the Commonwealth. They were being shrewd as well as environmentally virtuous.

A different set of planners looked to establishing a sustainable urban economy, based on manufacturing, but with a diverse mix of public and private sector jobs. Through them the Development Corporation signalled one of its central concerns was with jobs, jobs, jobs. A third set of planners looked to fostering social development. Plainly place was more than subdivisions, bricks, mortar, trees and workplaces. Special efforts were made to welcome newcomers, especially the most vulnerable: an arrivals officer arranged special programmes; neighbourhood houses within the newly established residential estates provided a variety of support services. A fourth set of Development Corporation colleagues in promotions and public affairs used large sums of money to promote the economic prospects, lifestyles and character of the place. They refined all their fellow workers’ efforts into pithy representations of place. They were making a city in the country in the mind as well as on the ground.

Selling Albury-Wodonga

The social history exhibition makes much of the materials used to establish images of the growth centre both inside and outside the district. The National Growth Centre Collection at Albury LibraryMuseum includes materials used in promotional displays in Albury, the metropolitan cities and overseas; there are examples of metropolitan and local newspaper supplements, advertisements and good news stories; there are materials related to site tours, display houses and show-and-tells; there are some radio and television interviews, brochures, flyers, bumper stickers, a jingle, and short advertising and documentary-type films.

Promotion was concerned with selling location: city investors and residents had to be attracted to relocate to this specific place. The campaigns were constant in selling to investors the idea
that Albury-Wodonga was ‘beautifully placed’. Midway between Canberra and Melbourne, on the main rail and road routes between Sydney and Melbourne, it was a convenient site for a manufacturing centre and distribution point. The campaigns were also constant in selling to potential newcomers the idea that they would readily find jobs and houses and a wide range of family-friendly services and facilities in the district. Further, they would find in Albury-Wodonga a place that was well endowed with Nature’s gifts of beauty, rich and rare. A city in the country had ‘the best of both worlds’: urban sophistication, yet a country-town feel and rural charms.

Promotion was to instil confidence, not only among potential investors and newcomers, but also among existing residents and governments, whose support was so necessary to the project. New or existing residents were assured that the planning was being undertaken imaginatively and carefully by skilled professionals, many with contemporary and relevant overseas experience. Investors could be confident that the experiment had the energy of three governments behind it. It was a place with unusual vitality which would be attractive to people with imagination and drive. Residents were encouraged to be excited about the opportunities that came with the growth centre adventure: they could see it, feel it, all around them. ‘There was,’ as a promotional jingle declared, ‘a feeling in the air, and it was growing stronger in Albury-Wodonga.’

An interesting sub-set of the promotional materials was to promote tourism. Plainly promotion of the charms of the district was in many ways self-congratulatory. Residents could take pride that they lived in a place that was attractive to visitors. They could enjoy every day the lifestyle that appeared in brochures for holidaymakers. The promoters were sure that there was something for everybody to enjoy in the Albury-Wodonga region, ‘where the mountains met the Murray’. It proved easy to attract increasing numbers of visitors during the 1980s. Poker machines were banned in Victoria, and Albury took advantage of the border-hopping that comes with sharp regulatory distinctions between neighbouring jurisdictions. Fleets of ten or more buses brought poker machine players from Melbourne each day. Registered clubs expanded their venues. Motels, golf clubs and Lake Hume resort revamped their accommodation facilities. The number of motel rooms more than doubled between 1974 and 1985.

*Figure 5:* Publicists showed some of the interesting life styles in the Albury-Wodonga district. (Albury Library Museum).
Remembering Albury-Wodonga

Karlie Hawking, the curator, faced the challenge of ‘bringing the outdoors into the context of an exhibition space’ (Pennay 2013: 62). She found inventive ways to use the huge collection of aerial photographs held by the Albury-Wodonga Corporation and filmed oral testimonies to prompt memory. My story was on the catalogue page. I had the luxury of referring to objects, places and practices well beyond the museum and the current collections. Indeed, I was looking beyond the exhibition to ways the story of the Albury-Wodonga experiment might outlive this anniversary moment.

There are three fundamental complications to remembering the growth centre experiment. First, just as the lack of conspicuous success complicates the remembering of the Albury-Wodonga growth centre story, so does the lack of current government ownership at all levels of government. We know full well that it is government agencies that endow heritage value and provide conservation and interpretation funds. Heritage is more often than not state-made (Ashton & Hamilton 2008).

As planning and development authorities passed from the Development Corporation back to the local government after 1995, the councils have tended to work apart rather than together. They market what they see as their distinctive locations and products under their own logos. They claim for themselves the kudos for the positive developments of the growth centre years (Crapp 2000). They have discarded the old as they busily form new separate identities (Connerton 2008: 62-64). Any attempt to realise the synergy of being Albury-Wodonga is limited to joint applications for Commonwealth grants.

Between 1996 and 2002 the two states flirted with the idea of making Albury-Wodonga one city, but they decided there was insufficient local enthusiasm for one local government authority. By 2004 the two states had withdrawn from the agreement. They have separately set in place new regional planning schemes which, on one hand, link Albury with territory north of the Murray to the South Australian border and, on the other, link Wodonga with territory in North-east Victoria stretching down to the northern outskirts of Melbourne.

In 2005 the Commonwealth replaced the Albury-Wodonga Development Corporation with the Albury-Wodonga Corporation. The development authority became, in effect, a government business enterprise focused on selling the remainder of the land bank. It related directly to the Minister of Finance. In November 2014, the Commonwealth passed the Albury-Wodonga Development Corporation (Abolition) Act and passed to the Minister of Finance the authority for collecting revenue of land as yet unsold.

Without government involvement there are now questions about how long the Albury-Wodonga brand might endure. There is no official energy given to the maintenance of the brand and no on-going commitment to what it stood for. Without government backing, memory of the growth centre experiment, and consequently its heritage are precarious.

A second complication lies with the nature of the physical evidence of the experiment. It is difficult to locate place anchors which might secure memory of this short-lived but exciting local adventure of the 1970s and 1980s. The most demonstrable physical evidence of planned rapid development is the layout of the newly developed areas. The houses and the spaghetti-like road patterns in the new residential estates, the positioning of industrial estates and the provision of recreational spaces continue to shape the way people live in Albury-Wodonga. They survive and demonstrate the rapid development of the place as well as the architectural and town planning enthusiasms of the time. About 18 000 people now live in suburbs that began as Development Corporation estates. Much of the physical evidence of the experiment is part of their every day. It has lost its resonance with the growth centre experiment, because it is quotidian. Further, it is not easy to point to or display everyday streetscapes or broad landscapes as evidence of a transitional moment in bygone times.

Further, there are no single buildings that have won community attention, let alone attachment, for the ways they mark important events or epitomise the spirit of the growth centre. Many of the new public buildings have been adapted to different uses and lack current community regard
for their origins or their links with the growth centre experiment. The Development Corporation built and occupied large modern offices, first in West Wodonga, then in Thurgoona. It seemed to be indicating that it regarded itself as a long-term fixture in the community. But these were administrative headquarters rarely frequented by anybody other than the staff. They have lost resonance with the growth centre experiment: their origins have been masked by subsequent adaptations to new uses.

Nevertheless, at least two single buildings do convey something of the spirit of the growth centre. The conversion of the Farmers and Graziers wool store into a Tax Office was an eloquent expression of the story of the political, economic and social consequences of the end of the long boom, for a country town dismounting from the sheep’s back and turning to country town manufacturing and to defence and service industries as its mainstays. It, too, is undergoing another transformation into inner-city apartments and is losing more of its original accoutrements. The Clyde Cameron College was architecturally adventurous and innovative in purpose as a Trade Union Training College. It continues to cast a strong contemporary presence, but like the Development Corporation offices it, too, was divorced from the experience of the local community. Its students and many of its staff were transients. It has been listed by Heritage Victoria, but the listing extols its architecture. The listing associates it quite properly with the Trade Union movement, and, while it mentions the Whitlam Government, it does not relate to its location to the growth centre.

Cross-border community cohesion

A third complication relates to community ownership of the story. Given our brief from the exhibition funding body, we were looking for items that demonstrated the role of heritage in ‘creating community identity’. The legislation and the well-funded promotional campaigns envisaged ‘the joint and rapid development’ of the place. The two places were sold as one community (Craig 1990). But could/did the legislation and promotional campaigns encourage a sense of belonging to a cross-border community? Was there, is there, a joint Albury-Wodonga identity? There is evidence of the rapid development of Albury-Wodonga, but what of joint development?

There are at least two sets of traces in the built environment which point fairly directly to forces that fostered cross-border community cohesion. First, the suburban nodes were discrete neighbourhoods laced together by a new road system. However, the most influential of the new road systems was the freeway that linked Albury and Wodonga tightly together. Begun in 1985 and not completed until 2007, it is a mundane roadway structure, a transport non-place of huge importance as it has brought most places in Albury-Wodonga within a twenty-minute drive of each other.

Second, the new factories and workplaces of the time also provide not only physical evidence of rapid development, but also suggest cross-border community cohesion. They indicate that Albury-Wodonga was, and still is, one labour market, and labour markets are important indicators of how communities interact economically and socially. In 2011 about 25 per cent of Wodonga’s workers were employed in Albury and about 25 per cent of Wodonga’s workforce came from Albury. Similarly, 17.4 per cent of Albury’s workers were employed in Wodonga and 18.6 per cent of Albury’s workforce came from Wodonga. So, around one in five, or one in four of the population crosses the border as part of their everyday work life. As far as the workforce is concerned the economic fortunes of one are the economic fortunes of the other.

For many former workers, workplaces must be redolent not only of chores, but also of cross-border acquaintance or camaraderie leading sometimes to friendship, and even courtship and marriage. Ken Mack, the current mayor of Albury, provides a striking example of Albury-Wodonga being one labour market, for he is an Albury resident who works in Victoria as a state-employed policeman.

Heritage does not necessarily privilege evidence in the built environment. There is other evidence of strong forces behind the creation of cross-border community cohesion. First, a
sense of border locality was conveyed continuously by the aptly named local newspaper, *The Border Mail*. As Anderson (2006) argued newspapers establish print communities and create a sense of belonging. *The Border Mail* weaves webs of cross-border familiarity. It has been remarkably successful in achieving its aim of providing a substitute rather than a supplement to metropolitan newspapers and has won 85% of weekday newspaper sales. The idea of an Albury-Wodonga is given new life each day in its pages. The principal hopes of its survival rest with the fortunes of the newspaper.

In 2013 *The Border Mail* won two Walkley awards. One was for its coverage of community and regional affairs and the other for editorial leadership in its ‘Ending the Suicide Silence’ campaign. That daring campaign involved telling the stories of those affected by suicide, examining the mental health system and lobbying for improved services. The campaign sits beside other efforts the newspaper has made to win regional health services and facilities (‘Yes’ 2011). Since 2009 there has been one hospital service for both the Albury and Wodonga districts. The communities find common cause in enhancing the quality of health care available to each other.

Second, the local arts bodies helped create consciousness of a border community. The identity of places is bound up with the stories told about their histories (Massey 1995). Like other regional centres in the 1970s and 1980s, Albury was taking a cultural turn, professionalising its library, art gallery, conservatorium and museum. Cross-border performing arts groups such as the Flying Fruit Fly Circus and the Hothouse Theatre (originally Murray River Performing Group) demonstrate regional cultural vitality within and outside the district. The circus is still regarded as an Albury-Wodonga signature piece, ‘ordinary kids doing extraordinary things’. The Hothouse Theatre ‘created locally, known internationally’. It draws on the local past and present to help the community understand itself and to present itself to others. Artists and storytellers help produce locality.

**Conclusions**

The exhibitions make a good starting point for exploring ideas about local belonging. They invite community self-reflection, and part of that reflection relates to ideas and feelings about previous, current day and future togetherness as a cross-border community. People live with a scramble of identities, and Albury-Wodonga sits variously within the hierarchy of place identities to which locals feel attachment.

The story of the experiment is important to those who lost land in the land acquisition process; to those who experienced the growing pains of living in new residential estates; to the Aboriginal families relocated to the growth centre; to the families relocated to expanded Army and Tax Office facilities; to the families who came as a result of new industrial and retail enterprises or expanded tertiary education facilities; to long-resident families whose flexibility was tested with sudden changes to their towns; to those anxious to protect the river and the natural environment; and to those involved in stimulating the cultural arts in the growing place. Thus far, the exhibition visitors indicate that, of all these groups, it is the growth centre newcomers who have personal attachment to the story. Albury-Wodonga is a part of that internal migration heritage which seems to have fuelled the current enthusiasm for commemorating Canberra’s heritage. Re-placed migrants look for place roots (Appadurai 1996: 6).

The exhibitions are not likely to attract notice or visitation from beyond the local district, but the growth centre place-making exercise was about establishing a nation-wide reputation. Places like Braidwood, Berrima and Beechworth provide invitations ‘to tea in the warm parlour of the past’ (Samuel 1985) and escapes from ‘our fragile present to a more stable past’ (Davison 2000: 196). But it is difficult to see what tourists might see and make of Australia’s Growing Place, if they come to do Albury-Wodonga. Places like Elizabeth and Footscray dwell proudly on being defiant communities. Perhaps Albury-Wodonga signals a stubborn cross-border togetherness irrespective of government support. Perhaps there can be a relatively uncommon border mystique in which entangled cross-border communities continue to try and make sense of the compromises involved in forming and maintaining the federal compact.
Whole-town heritage is a mélange of past, present and future imaginings that involve not only endowing meaning to traces of the past, but also tracing traces that prompt remembering, which is always both ‘cultivated and pruned’ (Harrison 2013: 167). Every place-making story has its complications. But for those curious about heritage this one outlines the challenges ahead for a story that was not of conspicuous success; a story that is no longer owned or nurtured by any level of government; a story that has a minimum of clearly demonstrable built environment reference points; a heritage story with little tourism potential; and a story that has only unofficial community attachment, with resonance limited, perhaps only to growth centre newcomers.

The memory of the Albury-Wodonga Growth Centre experiment is fragile. In the final analysis, its remembering depends, like all heritage, on ‘rich, evocative and complex storytelling’ and on constant retelling.

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Endnotes

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