

Movements and Connections in Lake Macquarie

A talk to the Lake Macquarie Business Network Breakfast

3 May 2006

Club Macquarie, Argenton

by

Phillip O'Neill

Director

Centre for Urban and Regional Studies

The University of Newcastle

phillip.oneill@newcastle.edu.au

Introduction

As a geographer, indeed as an economic-industrial geographer, one of my favourite artists is LS Lowry, a Manchester lad born in the late nineteenth century who died around 1975. His paintings portray the industrial towns of his patch: northern England. Like this one. What I love about Lowry is that he captures an extraordinary process that changed the way we live as humans. Not industrialisation or urbanisation necessarily (though these are implicated). No, I refer to his capture of the complex rhythms of modern life, of production, of work, of shopping, of leisure and so on. A little more than a century before Lowry, the British countryside had the simple rhythm of rural life. Lowry records its annihilation and replacement by complex divisions of labour, the separation of home life from work life, and of city from countryside, of commercial world from domestic life and so on. At the heart of these separations was the insertion of time into the organisation of life. Notably fixed *moments* of times for daily and weekly events to start and cease. Fixed and supervised *periods* of time for the undertaking of set tasks – work, schooling, shopping, drinking and so on. *Sequenced* time such that work periods, home periods, entertainment periods, schooling periods, shopping periods proceeded with order. And, critically, *synchronisation* of moments of time, periods of time and sequences of time so that life could proceed effectively. For ships, trains and, later, buses, to provide transportation of goods and people. For schools to open and shut at times that suited parents whose factories and offices opened and shut at related times. For the layers of the industrial city, as we see them here, to be coordinated and function interdependently. And, you know, it could be the lower Hunter anytime in the last hundred years couldn't it?

Notice Lowry's consciousness about the integration of industry, transport commercial and residential life. At another scale, Lowry has similarly acute observation: the movement and flow of people as they go and come from shops, factories and schools, as they wait for the specified time for the shop to open, the day to stroll on the promenade, the time to celebrate the end of a war. Even the festival has its rhythms, connections, ebbs and flows with ordered, sequenced and synchronised time at its core.

The modern city

The lower Hunter is a funny place. Each LGA – Lake Macquarie, Newcastle, Cessnock, Maitland and Port Stephens has its distinctiveness and loyal followers. Locals love their patch. Outsiders say they just don't get it. I've got a theory why this might be the case. (Although it's not original--it's based on a book called *Cities* by British geographers Nigel Thrift and Ash Amin.) In short, I reckon the rhythms of the lower Hunter are not immediately obvious compared to urban areas elsewhere, and so they take some time to learn. And Lake Macquarie could well be the most difficult of the lower Hunter districts to get a handle on. Hang around long enough and you'll know and maybe love the place, but don't rush it. The city of Lake Macquarie isn't easily read.

Rhythms in any city come from things that circulate. So the three basic rhythms of the lower Hunter come from travel: travelling to work, travelling to school and travelling to the shops. And we all do these in remarkably ordered ways. Once there were piercing whistles of pits, smelters and mills to start the day in the lower Hunter – and, like Lowry's England, the regularity of a steam plume or smoke stack as a compass. Now there are familiar radio sounds or jingles that send us bolting for the door and buckling up. Then we drive along, mostly mindlessly, spotting the same cars at just about the same intersections, catching the sun reflecting off the Lake or straight in your face as you climb up Hillsborough Road, and the 4WD in front lets fly with its windscreen washers, and we regard it all as normal. Our journeys-to-work have an amazing synchronicity. We know where the busy intersections will be, even though Lake Macquarie has a strangely dispersed set of employment sites. We know the days and weeks to avoid Five Islands altogether, and we know when Charlestown and Cardiff are no-go zones.

And when we leave for work other rhythms commence. Kids brush and rush for the school bus; washing lines get a visit; dogs get walked; retired folk stroll down for the paper or a coffee. All across the city our journey-to-whatever decisions take place without any grand plan to guide us. Not a fat controller in sight. Then we stand and marvel at ants and wonder how they are so organised and don't bump into one another

By night and at weekends the rhythms of new circulations take hold. We drive along our familiar weekday roads and are soon annoyed by unfamiliar traffic flows as not-driven-for-a-week cars cut across the lane, off to sport and the shops. Or Sydney day trippers expose their unfamiliarity with local habits and tolerances. After dark, different flows and patterns are observable. P-platers hoon up the highway to Nobby's car park and Glebe Road in their impossibly-shiny jaffa-red Honda Civics, doof-doofing, with an attention to appearances and detail that their parents and teachers could only have dreamed about. Meanwhile twenty, thirty and forty-somethings cruise sailing clubs and beachy pubs, and clubs and cafés and restaurants, tanned, increasingly-leathery skin, more and more bleached (or disappearing hair), the same groups of old friends at the same places leaving with (mostly) the same partners at predictable times.

And then when the night air is cooler and quieter, local native wildlife start their own rhythms, though no less independently from ours. Reliably-placed garbage bins are overturned by possums; and rats follow obligingly. Wallabies hop free, unthreatened,

across neighbouring suburbs to the golf links. So too there are night-time foxes and rabbits on the move, and bats, with predictable, repeated circulations. By day, there are maggies, kookaburras, galahs and rosellas, tuned into the waking patterns of our elderly and knowing perfectly well the verandas where there's a regular feed on offer.

A curious thing about this city is that it can't resist tying its rhythms to natural circulations. In London and New York they listen to the "shipping news" on radio. Here we turn our heads as a shiny new cruiser crosses the bar at Swansea or news of rising swells drags surfers from their beds at dawn. The summer nor'easterly fills streetside cafes with the idle; the winter westerly sends them packing.

It's worth contemplating how it comes together. Of course, it's historically assembled. Each new circulation has to have some sequence and synchronisation with the flows that are already there. So as houses, mines, factories, warehouses, schools and shops were built so too roads, bus routes (can they ever get them to feel the city's rhythm?), rail lines, electricity grids, water mains, gas pipes all expanded their own networks. It could be all so chaotic couldn't it? So to synchronise our journeys around all these "meshworks" we use lots of technologies, simple things like watches, clocks, radios, diaries, newspapers, telephones, timetables and rosters. And the city works—except for when something goes wrong to upset our rhythms: the car breaks down, the bus fails to show, the babysitter is sick, your partner works late. Yet we cope because we can second-guess what alternatives there are to get us by – because we're in a place whose rhythms we know.

Lake Macquarie and the lower Hunter

So what are these rhythms I speak of? What do we know of them? What can they tell us about Lake Macquarie and the lower Hunter?

Like LS Lowry, let's start with the rhythms of work. Here we use the 2001 census reconfigured by place of employment rather than place of residence. We find Lake Macquarie to be an important site of employment with over 45,000 jobs compared to about 17,000 in inner Newcastle and 57,000 elsewhere in the Newcastle LGA. The other LGAs have significant though smaller numbers of jobs.

What journeys, then, do we make to work? A feature of the Lower Hunter (and you might dispute this from your daily wrestling with traffic) is the remarkably local labour market behaviours we have. The table shows just how many of us work locally. In Cessnock LGA, for instance, 51% of residents work within the LGA. For Maitland its 44%, Newcastle a very high 66%, Port Stephens 57% and Lake Macquarie 45% with an additional 33% of LM residents working nearby in Newcastle.

This table shows who actually fills the jobs in each local government area. Again the figures demonstrate a high level of local containment. 68% of Cessnock jobs (and there were 11,954 in 2001), for instance, are held by locals, For Maitland (15,353) it's similarly high at 63%, for Newcastle (73,500) its 50%, 68% in Port Stephens (17,778) and, highest insularity of all is Lake Macquarie (45,033) with 71%. And they talk about the "insular peninsular" down Palm Beach way!

These pie graphs show Lake Macquarie's tight local labour market behaviour.

But work actually constitutes only one part of the rhythms of a city. Here we can draw on annual survey work by the NSW Transport Data Centre conducted for the entire GMR of Sydney by the HVRF. Each year about 8,000 people in about 5,000 households are interviewed and the results are cumulative over about a five year period. So it's a sample sure, but quite applicable at LGA level. So let's see what's going on.

The data confirm about 43,000 job journeys in the Lake Macquarie LGA on a typical weekday. There are also about 33,000 education journeys, 83,000 shopping trips, and 109,000 social and recreational journeys.

This figure tells the story. Each day there are 688,000 trips undertaken with a Lake Macquarie LGA origin. 554,000 or 80.5% of these are internal trips. For the other LGAs the proportions are Cessnock 84.2%, Maitland 80.2%, Newcastle 79.2% and Port Stephens 82.8%. All very similar, and all showing strong local connections, just as we found with labour market behaviours.

This figure shows the percentages I just referred to.

Delving a little deeper into Lake Macquarie we can see the reasons why people travel and where they travel to. Notice shopping. Notice the driving we do for others – poor old mum doing the school, soccer, ballet run and so on. Yet underpinned by work and school, as we said, the rhythmic foundations to how we run our city. Again, the figure shows that Lake Macquarie is very self-contained and where people seek something else, it's to Newcastle they go. Rarely do they step into another LGA.

So too the next figure confirms this insularity with Lake Macquarie people sticking 'local' on the weekends. Why would you leave I suppose, save for a few shoppers and social visitors to Newcastle?

But others do journey to Lake Macquarie. Of a weekday it's for work, shopping and recreation. I suspect Charlestown and Glendale play a major role here. And the pattern recurs on the weekend with work dropping off while social and recreational visits climb. Notice, again, the importance of Newcastle residents in this visitation. Maybe it's all those Darby Street latte sippers sneaking away for a shopping mall fix!

Conclusion

So what do we make of this. Allow me some comment by way of a conclusion. Tight localised communities, then, seem to be what makes up the lower Hunter, and Lake Macquarie is no exception. Perhaps this LGA is more localised than most on some measures. There are important advantages in this. Locally-conscious communities develop local pride; participation in local voluntary groups, sporting clubs and so on rises. People are more likely to know each other so personal and social problems are dealt with more appropriately and before they get out of hand. There are friendship networks based on old school chums, old work chums, mates at the club, walking groups and so it goes. For business, there is customer loyalty and familiarity. Word of

mouth counts a lot. Innovation is cheaper and more effective. The success of local business networking, like this event, is enhanced. All good you say.

Yet tight localised communities produce difficulties nevertheless. For business there is a problem of growth. Once you've got the local market where do you go next when the flows past your door on a daily basis are just about all you can hope for? And where is the incentive for betterment, for new products and efficiencies if it's all so very localised and predictable?

Localised communities also suffer from a lack of access to wider scales. Life is, well, local. Compare the connections and flows that would wander in and through a community like Cabramatta, like Bondi Junction, like Chatswood, like Byron Bay even. Communities where the person you run into was just as likely to have returned, not from a trip to Cardiff or Redhead, but from Hanoi or Hamburg.

Too much 'local' also breeds possessiveness, assumptions about territorial rights and a fear of the outsider. There are lessons from Cronulla and Umina about potential problems that can arise within tight knit local communities, however friendly and supportive they are internally.

Finally, and perhaps the biggest challenge of all, Lake Macquarie stands as the next LGA in the face of an ever expanding GMR of Sydney. LM has its rhythms, clearly. How these are disrupted and re-formed by the city's engagement with this expansion will have major implications for its liveability and sustainability. I wish you luck with the challenge. Thank you for listening.