

Conurban

- Gerard Goggin
- [Respond To This Article](#)

Volume 5 | Issue 2 | May 2002 |

- 1 Conurbation [f. CON- + L. urb- and urbs city + -ation] An aggregation of urban areas. (OED)
- 2 Beyond the urban, further and lower even than the suburban, lies the con-urban. The conurban: with the urban, partaking of the urbane, lying against but also perhaps pushing against or being contra the urban. Conurbations stretch littorally from Australian cities, along coastlines to other cities, joining cities through the passage of previously outlying rural areas. Joining the dots between cities, towns, and villages. Providing corridors between the city and what lies outside. The conurban is an accretion, an aggregation, a piling up, or superfluity of the city: Greater London, for instance. It is the urban plus, filling the gaps between cities, as Los Angeles oozing urbanity does for the dry, desert areas abutting it (Davis 1990; Soja 1996).
- 3 I wish to propose that the conurban imaginary is a different space from its suburban counterpart. The suburban has provided a binary opposition to what is not the city, what lies beneath its feet, outside its ken. Yet it is also what is greater than the urban, what exceeds it. In modernism, the city and its denizens define themselves outside what is arrayed around the centre, ringing it in concentric circles. In stark relief to the modernist lines of the skyscraper, contrasting with the central business district, central art galleries and museums, is to be found the masses in the suburbs. The suburban as a maligned yet enabling trope of modernism has been long revalued, in the art of Howard Arkeley, and in photography of suburban Gothic. It comes as no surprise to read a favourable newspaper article on the Liverpool Regional Art Gallery, in Sydney's Western Suburbs, with its exhibition on local chicken empires, Liverpool sheds, or gay and lesbians living on the city fringe. Nor to hear in the third way posturing of Australian Labor Party parliamentarian Mark Latham, the suburbs rhetorically wielded, like a Victa lawn mover, to cut down to size his chardonnay-set inner-city policy adversaries. The politics of suburbia subtends urban revisionism, reformism, revanchism, and recidivism. Yet there is another less exhausted, and perhaps exhaustible, way of playing the urban, of studying the metropolis, of punning on the city's proper name: the con-urban.
- 4 World cities, as Saskia Sassen has taught us, have peculiar features: the juxtaposition of high finance and high technology alongside subaltern, feminized, informal economy (Sassen 1998). The Australian city proudly declared to be a world city is, of course, Sydney while a long way from the world's largest city by population, it is believed to be the largest in area. A recent newspaper article on Brisbane's real estate boom, drew comparisons with Sydney only to dismiss them, according to one quoted commentator, because as a world city, Sydney was sui generis in Australia, fairly requiring comparison with other world cities. One form of conurbanity, I would suggest, is the desire of other settled areas to be with the world city.
- 5 Consider in this regard, the fate of Byron Bay a fate which lies very much in the balance. Byron Bay is sign that circulates in the field of the conurban. Craig MacGregor has claimed Byron as the first real urban culture outside an Australian city (MacGregor 1995). Local residents hope to keep the alternative cultural feel of Byron, but to provide it with a more buoyant economic outlook. The traditional pastoral, fishing, and whaling industries are well displaced by niche handicrafts, niche arts and craft, niche food and vegetables, a flourishing mind, body and spirit industry, and a booming film industry. Creative arts and cultural industries are blurring into creative industries. The Byron Bay area at the opening of the twenty-first century is attracting many people fugitive from the city who wish not to drop out exactly; rather to be contra wishes rather to be gently contrary marked as distinct from the city, enjoying a wonderful lifestyle, but able to persist with the civilizing values of an urban culture.
- 6 The contemporary figure of Byron Bay, if such a hybrid chimera may be represented, wishes for a conurbanity. Citizens relocate from Melbourne, Canberra, and Sydney, seeking an alternative country and coastal lifestyle and, if at all possible, a city job (though without stress) (on internal migration in Australia see Kijas 2002): Hippies and hip rub shoulders as a sleepy town awakes (Still Wild About Byron, (Sydney Morning Herald, 1 January 2002). Forerunners of Byron's conurbanity leave, while others take their place: A sprawling \$6.5 million Byron Bay mansion could be the ultimate piece of memorabilia for a wealthy fan of larrikin Australian actor Paul Hogan (Hoges to sell up at Byron Bay, Illawarra Mercury, 14 February 2002).
- 7 The ABC series Seachange is one key text of conurbanity: Laura Gibson has something of a city job she can ply the tools of her trade as a magistrate while living in an idyllic rural location, a nice spot for a theme park of contemporary Australian manners and nostalgia for community (on Sea Change see Murphy 2002). Conurban designates a desire to have it both ways: cityscape and pastoral mode.
- 8 Worth noting is that the Byron Shire has its own independent, vibrant media public sphere, as symbolized by the Byron Shire Echo founded in 1986, one of the great newspapers outside a capital city (Martin & Ellis 2002): <<http://www.echo.net.au>>. Yet the textual repository in city-based media of such exilic narratives is the supplement to the Saturday broadsheet papers. A case in point is journalist Ruth Ostrow, who lives in hills in the Byron Shire, and provides a weekly column in the Saturday Australian newspaper, its style gently evocative of just one degree of separation from a self-parody of New Age mores: Having permanently relocated to the hills behind Byron Bay from Sydney,

it's interesting for me to watch friends who come up here on holiday over Christmas... (Ostrow 2002). The Sydney Morning Herald regards Byron Bay as another one of its Northern beaches, conceptually somewhere between Palm Beach and Pearl Beach, or should one say Pearl Bay. The Herald's fascination for Byron Bay real estate is coeval with its obsession with Sydney's rising prices: Byron Bay's hefty price tags haven't deterred beach-lovin' boomers (East Enders, Sydney Morning Herald 17 January 2002). The Australian is not immune from this either, evidence 'Boom Times in Byron', special advertising report, Weekend Australia, Saturday 2 March 2002. And plaudits from The Financial Review confirm it: Prices for seafront spots in the enclave on the NSW north coast are red hot (Smart Property, The Financial Review, 19 January 2002).

⁹ Wacky North Coast customs are regularly covered by capital city press, the region functioning as a metonym for drugs. This is so with Nimbin especially, with regular coverage of the Nimbin Mardi Grass: Mardi Grass 2001, Nimbin's famous cannabis festival, began, as they say, in high spirits in perfect autumn weather on Saturday (Oh, how they danced a high old time was had by all at the Dope Pickers' Ball, Sydney Morning Herald, 7 May 2001). See too coverage of protests over sniffer dogs in Byron Bay in Easter 2001 showed (Peatling 2001). Byron's agony over its identity attracts wider audiences, as with its quest to differentiate itself from the ordinariness of Ballina as a typical Aussie seaside town (Buttrose 2000). There are national metropolitan audiences for Byron stories, readers who are familiar with the Shire's places and habits: Lismore-reared Emma Tom's 2002 piece on the politics of perving at King's beach north of Byron occasioned quite some debate from readers arguing the toss over whether wanking on the beach was perverse or par for the course: Public masturbation is a funny old thing. On one hand, it's ace that some blokes feel sexually liberated enough to slap the salami any old time... (Tom 2002).

¹⁰ Brisbane, of course, has its own designs upon Byron, from across the state border. Brisbane has perhaps the best-known conurbation: its northern reaches bleed into the Sunshine Coast, while its southern ones salute the skyscrapers of Australia's fourth largest city, the Gold Coast (on Gold Coast and hinterland see Griffin 2002). And then the conurbating continues unabated, as settlement stretches across the state divide to the Tweed Coast, with its mimicking of Sanctuary Cove, down to the coastal towns of Ocean Shores, Brunswick Heads, Byron, and through to Ballina. Here another type of infrastructure is key: the road. Once the road has massively overcome the topography of rainforest and mountain, there will be freeway conditions from Byron to Brisbane, accelerating conurbanity.

¹¹ The caf is often the short-hand signifier of the urban, but in Byron Bay, it is film that gives the urban flavour. Byron Bay has its own International Film Festival (held in the near-by boutique town of Bangalow, itself conurban with Byron.), and a new triple screen complex in Byron:

¹² Up north, film buffs Geraldine Hilton and Pete Castaldi have been busy. Last month, the pair announced a joint venture with Dendy to build a three-screen cinema in the heart of Byron Bay, scheduled to open mid-2002. Meanwhile, Hilton and Castaldi have been busy organising the second Byron All Screen Celebration Film Festival (BASC), after last year's inaugural event drew 4000 visitors to more than 50 sessions, seminars and workshops. Set in Bangalow (10 minutes from Byron by car, less if you astral travel)... (Cape Crusaders, Sydney Morning Herald, 15 February 2002).

¹³ The film industry is growing steadily, and claims to be the largest concentration of film-makers outside of an Australian capital city (Henkel 2000 & 2002). With its intimate relationship with the modern city, film in its Byron incarnation from high art to short video, from IMAX to multimedia may be seen as the harbinger of the conurban.

¹⁴ If the case of Byron has something further to tell us about the transformation of the urban, we might consider the twenty-first century links between digital communications networks and conurbanity. It might be proposed that telecommunications networks make it very difficult to tell where the city starts and ends; as they interactively disperse information and entertainment formerly associated with the cultural institutions of the metropolis (though this digitization of urbanity is more complex than hyping the virtual suggest; see Graham & Marvin 1996). The bureau comes not just to the 'burbs, but to the backblocks as government offices are closed in country towns, to be replaced by online access. The cinema is distributed across computer networks, with video-on-demand soon to become a reality. Film as a cultural form in the process of being reconceived with broadband culture (Jacka 2001). Global movements of music flow as media through the North Coast, with dance music culture and the doof (Gibson 2002). Culture and identity becomes content for the information age (Castells 1996-1998; Cunningham & Hartley 2001; OECD 1998; Trotter 2001). On e-mail, no-one knows, as the conceit of internet theory goes, where you work or live; the proverbial refashioning of subjectivity by the internet affords a conurbanity all of its own, a city of bits wherever one resides (Mitchell 1995).

¹⁵ To render the digital conurban possible, Byron dreams of broadband. In one of those bizarre yet recurring twists of Australian media policy, large Australian cities are replete with broadband infrastructure, even if by 2002 city-dwellers are not rushing to take up the services. Telstra's Foxtel and Optus's Optus Vision raced each other down streets of large Australian cities in the mid-1990s to lay fibre-coaxial cable to provide fast data (broadband) capacity. Cable modems and quick downloading of video, graphics, and large files have been a reality for some years. Now the Asymmetrical Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) technology is allowing people in densely populated areas close to their telephone exchanges to also avail themselves of broadband Australia. In rural Australia, broadband has not been delivered to most areas, much to the frustration of the conurbanites. Byron Bay holds an important place in the history of the internet in Australia, because it was there that one of Australia's earliest and most important internet service providers, Pegasus Network, was established in the late 1980s. Yet Pegasus relocated to Brisbane in 1993, because of poor quality telecommunications networks (Peters 1998).

¹⁶ As we rethink the urban in the shadow of modernity, we can no longer ignore or recuse ourselves from reflecting upon its para-urban modes. As we deconstruct the urban, showing how the formerly pejorative margins actually define the centre the suburban for instance being more citified than the grand arcades, plazas, piazzas, or malls; we may find that it is the conurban that provides the cultural imaginary for the urban of the present century. Work remains to be done on the specific modalities of the conurban.

¹⁷ The conurban has distinct temporal and spatial coordinates: citizens of Sydney fled to Manly earlier in the twentieth century, as they do to Byron at the beginning of the twenty-first. With its resistance to the transnational commercialization and mass culture that Club Med, McDonalds, and tall buildings represent, and with its strict environment planning regulation which produce a litigious reaction (and an editorial rebuke from the Sydney Morning Herald [SMH 2002]), Byron recuperates the counter-cultural as counterpoint to the Gold Coast. Subtle differences may be discerned too between Byron and, say, Nimbin and Maleny (in Queensland), with the two latter communities promoting self-sufficient hippy community infused by new agricultural classes still connected to the city, but pushing the boundaries of conurbanity by more forceful rejection of the urban.

¹⁸ Through such mapping we may discover the endless attenuation of the urban in front and beyond our very eyes; the virtual replication and invocation of the urban around the circuits of contemporary communications networks; the refiguring of the urban in popular and elite culture, along littoral lines of flight, further domesticating the country; the road movies of twenty-first century freeways; the perpetuation and worsening of inequality and democracy (Stilwell 1992) through the action of the conurban. Cities without bounds: is the conurban one of the faces of the postmetropolis (Soja 2000), the urban without end, with no possibility for or need of closure?

¹⁹ My thinking on Byron Bay, and the Rainbow Region in which it is situated, has been shaped by a number of people with whom I had many conversations during my four years living there in 1998-2001. My friends in the School of Humanities, Media, and Cultural Studies, Southern Cross University, Lismore, provided focus for theorizing our ex-centric place, of whom I owe particular debts of gratitude to Baden Offord (Offord 2002), who commented upon this piece, and Helen Wilson (Wilson 2002). Thanks also to an anonymous referee for helpful comments.

References

- Buttrose, L. (2000). Betray Byron at Your Peril. Sydney Morning Herald 7 September 2000.
- Castells, M. (1996-98). *The Information Age*. 3 vols. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Cunningham, S., & Hartley, J. (2001). *Creative Industries from Blue Poles to Fat Pipes*. Address to the National Humanities and Social Sciences Summit, National Museum of Canberra. July 2001.
- Davis, M. (1990). *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. Verso, London.
- Gibson, C. (2002). Migration, Music and Social Relations on the NSW Far North Coast. *Transformations*, no. 2. <<http://www.ahs.cqu.edu.au/transformation...>>.
- Graham, S., and Marvin, S. (1996). *Telecommunications and the City: Electronic Spaces, Urban Places*. Routledge, London & New York.
- Griffin, Graham. (2002). Where Green Turns to Gold: Strip Cultivation and the Gold Coast Hinterland. *Transformations*, no. 2. <<http://www.ahs.cqu.edu.au/transformation...>>
- Henkel, C. (2002). *Development of Audiovisual Industries in the Northern Rivers Region of NSW*. Master thesis. Queensland University of Technology.
- . (2000). *Imagining the Future: Strategies for the Development of 'Creative Industries' in the Northern Rivers Region of NSW*. Northern Rivers Regional Development Board in association with the Northern Rivers Area Consultative Committee, Lismore, NSW.
- Jacka, M. (2001). *Broadband Media in Australia Tales from the Frontier*, Australian Film Commission, Sydney.
- Kijas, J. (2002). A place at the coast: Internal migration and the shift to the coastal-countryside. *Transformations*, no. 2. <<http://www.ahs.cqu.edu.au/transformation...>>.
- MacGregor, Craig. (1995). *The Feral Signifier and the North Coast*. In *The Abundant Culture: Meaning And Significance in Everyday Australia*, ed. Donald Horne & Jill Hooten. Allen and Unwin, Sydney.
- Martin, F., & Ellis, R. (2002). Dropping in, not out: the evolution of the alternative press in Byron Shire 1970-2001. *Transformations*, no. 2. <<http://www.ahs.cqu.edu.au/transformation...>>.
- Mitchell, W.J. (1995). *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Molnar, Helen. (1998). 'National Convergence or Localism?: Rural and Remote Communications.' *Media International Australia* 88: 5-9.
- Moyal, A. (1984). *Clear Across Australia: A History of Telecommunications*. Thomas Nelson, Melbourne.
- Murphy, P. (2002). Sea Change: Re-Inventing Rural and Regional Australia. *Transformations*, no. 2. <<http://www.ahs.cqu.edu.au/transformation...>>.
- Offord, B. (2002). Mapping the Rainbow Region: Fields of belonging and sites of confluence. *Transformations*, no. 2. <<http://www.ahs.cqu.edu.au/transformation...>>.
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (1998). *Content as a New Growth Industry: Working Party for the Information Economy*. OECD, Paris.
- Ostrow, R. (2002). Joyous Days, Childish Ways. *The Australian*, 9 February.
- Peatling, S. (2001). Keep Off Our Grass: Byron stirs the pot over sniffer dogs. Sydney Morning Herald. 16 April. <<http://www.smh.com.au/news/0104/14/natio...>>
- Peters, I. (1998). Ian Peter's History of the Internet. Lecture at Southern Cross University, Lismore. CD-ROM. Produced by Christina Spurgeon. Faculty of Creative Industries, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.
- Productivity Commission. (2000). *Broadcasting Inquiry: Final Report*, Melbourne, Productivity Commission.
- Sassen, S. (1998). *Globalisation and its Contents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money*. New Press, New York.

Soja, E. (2000). *Postmetropolis: critical studies of cities and regions*. Blackwell, Oxford.

. (1996). *Thirdspace: journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Blackwell, Cambridge, Mass.

Stilwell, F. (1992). *Understanding Cities and Regions: Spatial Political Economy*. Pluto Press, Sydney.

Sydney Morning Herald (SMH). (2002). Byron Should Fix its own Money Mess. Editorial. 5 April.

Tom, E. (2002). Flashing a Problem at Hand. *The Weekend Australian*, Saturday 12 January.

Trotter, R. (2001). Regions, Regionalism and Cultural Development. *Culture in Australia: Policies, Publics and Programs*. Ed. Tony Bennett and David Carter. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 334-355.

Wilson, H., ed. (2002). *Fleeing the City*. Special Issue of *Transformations journal*, no. 2. < <http://www.ahs.cqu.edu.au/transformation...>>.

Links

<http://www.echo.net.au>
<http://www.smh.com.au/news/0104/14/national/national3.html>
<http://www.ahs.cqu.edu.au/transformations/journal/issue2/issue.htm>

Citation reference for this article

MLA Style

Goggin, Gerard. "Conurban" *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 5.2 (2002). [your date of access] < <http://www.media-culture.org.au/0205/conurban.php>>.

Chicago Style

Goggin, Gerard, "Conurban" *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 5, no. 2 (2002), < <http://www.media-culture.org.au/0205/conurban.php>> ([your date of access]).

APA Style

Goggin, Gerard. (2002) Conurban. *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 5(2). < <http://www.media-culture.org.au/0205/conurban.php>> ([your date of access]).