

Zombie Is as Zombie Does

Issues and Opportunities for Small Town NZ

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Night of the Living Dead



Zombie

“Traveling in a fried-out combie
On a hippie trail, head full of zombie
I met a strange lady, she made me
nervous
She took me in and gave me breakfast ...”

Colin Hay / Ronald Strykert

What I will cover

- The old small towns debate
- The literature – new trends, new insights from urban economics, business, economic geography
- Megatrends that matter
- Buzz words that matter
- My approach to local ED – “engines” and “drivers”
- The core questions of regional development
- Clarifying objectives
- Building collaborative capability
- Measuring outcomes

What I will conclude

- Building regional capability is the main game
- Old debates are tired and miss the point
- We cannot control megatrends
- We cannot control local industry structure
- We cannot control the location decisions of firms and households
- New trends matter, especially hyper-mobility
- Local action matters

Who are “We”?

- ED is a team sport -
- Leaders
- Practitioners
- Civic entrepreneurs
- Boundary crossers
- Ecosystem builders

We are local

Shamubeel Eaqub (2016)

“I am unwelcome in some parts of New Zealand. You talk about 'Zombie-towns' at your peril. But the reality is our provinces are falling behind and many are at mortal risk.”

Shamubeel again (2014)

“It’s horrible to say but yes we have zombie towns and some of them do have to close. And you know it’s going to be devastating for those communities but it will be better for New Zealand if we target our resources in places that have some hope of growing and creating prosperity.”

Gordon Forth



Dr Death

- Dr Death from the Centre for Regional Destruction
- Initiated the dying small towns debate in 2000
- “Don’t Cry for Me Upper Wombat”
- Forth maintains propping up decaying towns is a waste of money
- "Just as governments provided assistance to move people off unviable farms and have done the same for certain manufacturers, I couldn't see why the argument wasn't equally cogent for people to be assisted to move out of non-viable settlements . . ."

Forth on Investing in “Dying” Towns

“You let nature take its course because there's no point investing in capital where there'll be no return”.

Again

“... the decline and ultimate demise of many smaller country towns is part of an inevitable historical process and should be accepted as such.”

The False Wizards

“Amongst the false wizards, who have intentionally or unintentionally misled Australia’s regional communities regarding the realities of decline, are certain opportunistic consultants with their glossy well-rehearsed butcher’s paper routines, less than honest politicians and the small town revivalists – the professional optimists with their quick-fix solutions for the complex problems of small town decline.”

Peter Kenyon (2014)

"There will always be people who see their town as home and . . . an important place to live. I'm not at all in favour of this philosophy of allowing townships to die."

E M Schumacher

“Perhaps we cannot raise the winds. But each of us can put up the sail so that when the wind comes we can catch it”

One view of a struggling region

“You don’t come over here if you’re a burglar, because there is nothing to steal”

Business person from the West Coast

Core questions of regional development

- What are we trying to achieve?
- Who is responsible?
- What drives local/regional success?
- Why drivers can we influence locally?
- What economic activities should we grow?
- What works?

Evolution of regional development

- Community ED “bottom up” (1980s)
- Economic gardening (Chris Gibbons)
- Learning regions
- Competitive advantage (Porter)
- New economic geography
- Innovation systems
- Creative class (Florida)
- Startup ecosystems (Brad Feld)

My approach to ED

- ED is team sport
- ED is future facing
- Differentiate engines (industries) from drivers (capability)
- Focus on things we can influence locally
- Identify, mobilise, link and leverage assets
- Turn endowments into ecosystems
- Lessons of lean startup and agile strategy
- Invest in capability, not industry structure

Components of Capability

- Infrastructure (re-imagined)
- Entrepreneurs
- Skills
- Business prowess
- Social capital
- Governance of ED, institutional strength
- Proneness to collaboration
- Innovation systems
- Networks
- Business culture / mindset
- Strategy
- An ecosystem – nodes and connections

Things we cannot control (locally)

- People movements in
- People movements out
- Hyper mobility
- Ageing population
- Our location
- Business location decisions
- Our legacy industries and legacy jobs
- Industry disruption
- Changing consumer preferences
- VUCA world

The Key Debate

- Michael Storper, *The Rise and Fall of Urban Economies*
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItfQ8sVwRbc>
- LA versus San Francisco since 1980
- Scott's critique – industry structure versus culture
- ***The debate is unresolved***

The problem of path dependence

Path dependence explains how the set of decisions one faces for any given circumstance is limited by the decisions one has made in the past or by the events that one has experienced, even though past circumstances may no longer be relevant.

Measure – what?

- Case studies in success?
- Successful economies? Good process? Good culture? Good strategy?
- We confuse measuring efforts with measuring outcomes
- Leaders (of course) want to link the two, to show their voters \$ well spent
- We should be measuring capability
- Measure our collaborative capacity

Insights from various disciplines

- Annalee Saxenian - *Regional Advantage*
- Richard Florida and people attraction
- Henton et al and “civic entrepreneurship”
- Brian Arthur, network effects and increasing returns
- Santa Fe Institute and metabolism – the speed of circulation of ideas
- Johannson *The Medici Effect* and the “intersection” – innovation space
- Ecosystems thinking, agile strategy, lean startup, design thinking, strategic doing
- McKinsey – no ordinary disruption
- Military strategy – VUCA world
- Clay Christensen and vulnerability to disruption

One useful approach – “strategic doing”

- Emerged in the USA in the 1990s – Oklahoma City
- Agile strategy for a networked world
- Purdue University Indiana’s Agile Strategy Lab – Ed Morrison
- <http://agilestrategylab.org/>
- It fits perfectly with lean start-up thinking
- Speed dating for building collaboration
- Key insights – strategic planning is dead; the value and power of networks and of network thinking; dealing with complexity; ABCD – asset based community development; link + leverage; collaboration is a discipline + can be learned; open source models

Strategic Doing

- Change the narrative(s)
- Guide conversations towards outcomes, don't merely facilitate
- Develop rules of civility
- Focus on “the big easies”
- Leave hats and egos at the door
- Work with whoever is in the room – a “coalition of the willing”
- Recognise your resources which are not always \$\$\$
- Aim high - co-create, innovate together
- Take small steps at first

Measurable outcomes through action oriented collaboration

It is simple – but not easy

Five Levels of Collaboration

- Mutual awareness;
- Learning exchange (sharing information);
- Sharing resources;
- Co-execution;
- Innovating together (or “co-design”)

Success now means “collaborative advantage”

Alas

“Regional
collaboration is an
unnatural act
between non-
consenting adults”

Common Errors

- The tyranny of the announcable
- Misplaced focus on ED machinery, and endless tinkering
- Industry attraction
- Confusing engines and drivers
- Investing in industry structure instead of capability
- Lack of investment in collaboration

Summing up

- Zombie is as zombie does ...
- Meaning – how we work on local ED will both determine AND reflect what will become of our community
- This applies to ALL sorts + sizes of regions
- Whether it survives economically is Another matter
- But we can influence our local economic trajectory
- We should try
- We should do this by building capability + culture + strategy
- Yes this IS a wicked problem ...
- Simply be a place that “works”

Sources

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