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2013

# Pimp My Ride: mapping vernacular creativity in an industrial city

Andrew T. Warren

*University of Wollongong*, [awarren@uow.edu.au](mailto:awarren@uow.edu.au)

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## Publication Details

Warren, A. (2013). Pimp My Ride: mapping vernacular creativity in an industrial city. In L. Andersen & M. Malone (Eds.), *All Culture is Local: Good practice in regional cultural mapping and planning from local government* (pp. 42-47). Sydney, Australia: UTS epress.

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# Pimp My Ride: mapping vernacular creativity in an industrial city

## **Abstract**

This case study reveals how a researcher mapped a creative industry sector - custom car designing in Wollongong - and made it 'visible'. It outlines a process of responsive engagement with youth that revealed a skilled and economic scene that challenges standard conceptions of artistic expression. 'Cruising' with youth and plotting their sites of activity using Google Maps identified an extensive, largely overlooked market and encouraged a renewed discussion about what constituted the city's creative strengths and assets.

## **Keywords**

my, pimp, ride, mapping, city, vernacular, creativity, industrial

## **Disciplines**

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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This case study reveals how a researcher mapped a creative industry sector – custom car designing in Wollongong – and made it ‘visible’. It outlines a process of responsive engagement with youth that revealed a skilled and economic scene that challenges standard conceptions of artistic expression. ‘Cruising’ with youth and plotting their sites of activity using Google Maps identified an extensive, largely overlooked market and encouraged a renewed discussion about what constituted the city’s creative strengths and assets.

## Pimp My Ride mapping vernacular creativity in an industrial city



### AUTHOR

Andrew Warren is Lecturer, School of Behavioural, Cognitive and Social Sciences, at the University of New England

[awarren7@une.edu.au](mailto:awarren7@une.edu.au)

### WHY

#### *map vernacular creativity?*

Wollongong is a vibrant regional city comprising a diverse mix of people, places and landscapes. Over the last five decades Wollongong has become one of Australia’s key centres for heavy industry. The city is noted for coal and steel production, as well as sea transport, freight and logistics. At the same time, however, this ‘steel city’ is grappling with anxiety over deindustrialisation. Regional economic plans have variously looked to tourism, higher education and creative industries for their capacity to diversify the city’s

economy and to insulate jobs from global economic fluctuations.

The development of local and regional cultural narratives plays an important role in imagining an expanded regional economic future. There is a presence in Wollongong of what are typically described as ‘creative industries’, including a theatre scene, visual artists, filmmakers and designers. The city also has pockets of gentrified ‘creative class’ activity, partly in the inner city and also on its scenic northern beaches (a function of lifestyle and amenity). Yet, conceptions of what constitutes artistic expression have tended to exclude any industrial potential for creativity. One consequence is that thriving, largely working class and

## WHERE



### WOLLONGONG CITY COUNCIL

#### Size

714 km<sup>2</sup>

#### Remoteness

Inner regional/ Major city

#### Location

Illawarra region of NSW,  
80 km south of Sydney CBD

#### Population

202,000  
283 people per km<sup>2</sup>  
Australia's ninth largest city

#### Centres

Wollongong City, with smaller neighbourhoods of Helensburgh, Coledale, Thirroul, Corrimal, Port Kembla, Unanderra, Berkeley, Dapto

#### Industry

Manufacturing, education, research and development, coal mining, tourism, port activities, health and community services

#### Demographics

14 per cent are from non-English speaking backgrounds; 6 per cent attend university (4 per cent nationally). Youth unemployment is 13.2 per cent

youth-led sites of activity have gone unacknowledged.

Wollongong City Council cultural planners – industry partners on the CAMRA project – sought to include well-established arts communities in the project. But also, mindful of the critiques of creativity as pigeon-holed to a select group of ‘arts’ and innovative activities, city centre focused and classist, they were supportive of exploring a more expansive understanding of what local creative industry might be, and where it could be found in the city.

This was important in Wollongong because, with its industrial base, strong working class culture and demographic mix – high levels of cultural diversity, newly arrived migrant and refugee communities, socioeconomic inequality, problems of youth unemployment – any project focusing only on the established arts and creative industries would quickly run the risk of reinforcing existing divides and being accused of elitism.

### *Why the custom car scene?*

I was born in Wollongong and have lived in the area most of my life. I came into the CAMRA Project as both a city ‘insider’ and researcher. As a local of ‘the Gong’ I was well aware of the city’s existing car culture. I often attended local ‘[Shown N Shine](#)’ meets around the region. Strikingly decorated cars were a regular accompaniment of local beach-side car parks. I spent many weekends on ‘cruises’ with friends who owned customised cars. Aware and appreciative of Wollongong’s custom cars meant that when I became involved with CAMRA through my PhD research with the project, I gravitated towards researching the scene.

In the mainstream media young drivers are commonly demonised

because of illegal street racing and noisy ‘hoon’ behaviour. However, in a city where youth unemployment rates are more than double the national average, I was interested in exploring Wollongong’s custom car scene from another point of view: that of a unique form of ‘enabling’ local creative production, with qualities, skills and networks that ought to be better understood when considering our ‘imperilled’ industrial city. In particular, my interest in the local custom car scene was a direct response to:

- A dominant narrative of economic revitalisation that shuns ‘brown’ industrial images and embraces development policies that encourage ‘creativity’, economic diversity, job creation, tourist flows and internal migration of the creative classes to reverse regional decline and rebadge place.
- Wollongong embraced a ‘creative city’ strategy in the 1990s and in 2001 was positioned as a ‘City of Innovation’, following a place-marketing consultancy. But the process privileged traditional notions of ‘the arts’, high-tech industries and middle-class aesthetics. Vernacular cultural identities and activities existing locally were marginalised.
- At the same time, however, Wollongong’s industrial base has not disappeared: around 15 per cent of the workforce remains ‘blue collar’. The city’s port has expanded and steel-making continues.
- Local cultural activities in Wollongong, particularly related to the city’s industrial heritage and working classes, were being overlooked. I sought to provide a different story to the normative creative city script and to offer Local Government policy-making evidence of already existing creative activities.



*to locate and  
value vernacular  
creativity*

**There is growing recognition by academics and regional development practitioners that conventional assumptions around what constitutes ‘legitimate’ creative industries excludes alternative forms of everyday creativity – be it community gardening, Elvis impersonation, Christmas lighting displays or gnome collecting. Paradoxically, despite their visibility, audits of creative industries often miss many of these forms because they fall outside of standard ‘cultural’ and ‘creative’ categories. In Wollongong, it is impossible not to be aware of the custom car scene, in which cars are restored, modified and elaborately painted. Regular**

**car shows and festivals such as *Revfest* attract hundreds of enthusiasts, young and old alike. But despite the visibility of the scene, it has not previously been examined or even considered as a creative industry.**

Photographic documentation of design and production in the custom car sector in Wollongong was an important component of this research. Photos: Andrew Warren



*Cars at the popular American Muscle Car Club show, Towradgi*



*Young custom car fans at a ‘Show N Shine’ in Unanderra*

The process I followed in conducting research on Wollongong's custom car scene included:

- As a first step, I contacted young people through car clubs, social media, personal networks and online platforms such as car forums.
- Discussion about the research and its goals was then held with different car groups and individuals.
- I made regular, informal 'catch-ups' with custom car enthusiasts at local hangouts, front yards, garages and workplaces.
- At this early 'scoping' stage, I was interested primarily in making contacts and building trust with individuals, not on gathering 'data'.
- Over a period of several weeks and as trust developed, research proceeded to an observational and 'groundwork approach': participants gave guided tours of their garages, driveways, workplaces and cars; I was taken on 'rides' through the design and production of a custom car; and participants 'showed off' their work, outlining sources of creative inspiration, methods for completion, time involved, money invested and social networks utilised.
- Tours and other interactions with custom car designers were captured with a digital recorder. Digital cameras captured images of cars, shows and work being carried out. Each tour lasted between one and five hours, and I maintained a fieldwork diary to help document observations and important details.
- Tour and diary notes were transcribed, analysed and

used to develop follow up questions and activities. I carried out the analysis myself. Transcription of audio material is time consuming, but helped me become more familiar with the data.

- Overall, the research took one year and involved 14 custom car enthusiasts. Most research participants were from blue-collar backgrounds, working as carpenters, electricians, mechanics and spray painters. Participants were from Italian, Greek, Lebanese, Cambodian and British migrant backgrounds. The intensive nature of the fieldwork produced an exceptionally rich source of data.
- To complement the primary research with car designers I then mapped the location of automotive businesses across Wollongong. In talking with custom car designers they provided the names of local businesses that helped to customise, maintain and repair vehicles. The location of these businesses was then mapped in Google Maps. This produced a region-wide picture, depicting activity in areas not 'known' for their creativity.
- A custom data run was also purchased (at a cost of \$450) from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, showing employment in the automotive industries by postcode in Wollongong. This gave supplementary evidence for the geographic spread of this vernacular activity.

## *The skills of custom car designers are adaptive, creative, resourceful and social*

Andrew Warren



*Map showing the custom car cruise scene across Wollongong suburbs*

## Reflections

The stories collected in the research provide a corrective to the misunderstood narrative of the local car enthusiast as ‘hoon’ and ‘dangerous’ citizen as well as the nature of the creative economy. In reflecting on the research it has become clear that there remains a critical need to consider what is being included or excluded in any region’s particular narratives around regeneration and future economic directions. This consideration not only stems from the importance of properly recognising and supporting vernacular creative activities, but also to help appropriately value the qualities and skills that exist locally, and which can be built upon further.

1200  
automotive  
jobs rely on  
the ‘scene’

## OUTCOMES

The important outcomes of the research included highlighting the economic contribution of custom car design to Wollongong. But I also revealed the important social dimensions of custom car scenes, which predominantly involve young people from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds. Specifically, the research showed that:

- While the custom or modified car industry has not traditionally been thought about as a ‘cultural asset’ for Wollongong it makes important contributions to the city’s economy, and forms part of Wollongong’s regional identity.
- The local automotive industry supports over 1200 local jobs, with many workshops relying on the custom car scene for sustaining their business. Custom car designers possess practical skills in fabrication, mechanics, spray painting, sound design and use of automotive parts and materials. The skills of custom car designers are adaptive, creative, resourceful and social. This vernacular creative industry was complete with expert networks and organised professional circuits.
- Economically, the average participant spent more than \$21,000 on customising their car, in addition to the amount originally paid for their vehicle. Many planned additional work.
- Mapping the locations of this activity revealed how official investment in cultural infrastructure doesn’t necessarily align with patterns of vernacular – particularly working class – creative activity and cultural economies.

- There is a critical need for local/regional, grounded research to inform policy and decision making in terms of creative industry and arts-based regional development.

In concluding the research, all participants were provided copies of an article for publication in *Environment and Planning A* (reference below) and had the opportunity to voice any concerns with the presentation of results. Regular updates on progression of the research and results were also communicated via the [CAMRA](#) website and through a popular online custom car forum, of which participants were members. The research is now also being used by custom car clubs to help in efforts to receive approval for hosting local car shows and events.

## MORE

Warren, Andrew, and Gibson, Chris. 2011. ‘Blue-collar creativity: reframing custom-car culture in the imperilled industrial city.’ *Environment and Planning A* 43(11) 2705 – 2722.



Photo: Andrew Warren

*A custom car receiving a new paint job in a Dapto automotive workshop*

