



**boom**  
CLUNES

# boom [ing]

takes creativity and community -  
**small town decline is not inevitable**

In Westernised societies the boom and bust cycle is ever-present across all industries and economies. While this applies in multi-trillion dollar National economies or industries as often as it does in local economies, the impact in a small town is often more visible and harder to reverse.

World-wide, economic impacts as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic mean that many communities (big and small) are focused on recovery – and Clunes, Victoria is right there among them.

Clunes Neighbourhood House has long been interested in the traits that help small towns ameliorate the downside of a boom and bust cycle. As we regroup amid this pandemic, these traits may just prove to be the key to our recovery now and ultimately, to our ability to disrupt the effects of the boom and bust cycle in our community in the future.

## The downside of Boom and Bust Cycles

Fluctuations are all part of a normal business cycle, also known as a Boom and Bust Cycle. The cycle typically has four main phases - expansion, peak, contraction and trough. After things hit their 'worst' in the trough, the cycle upswings back to expansion in a period of recovery until it once again hits its peak - and the cycle continues. Business Cycles vary greatly in lengths, as do the depths of the troughs (Reserve Bank of Australia, The Australian Business Cycle, 2020).

Though a regular occurrence, the effects of a downturn can be far-reaching. Economic contraction leads to a drop in personal income for some individuals, as well as a decrease in industrial production and retail sales. It increases unemployment rates because companies stop hiring staff due to lowered demand and if it continues, workers can be made redundant, sending unemployment rates higher (The Balance, Economic Contraction, 01 December 2020).

*Clunes was founded in 1857 following the discovery of the first gold strike in Victoria in 1851. At one stage Clunes had more than 6000 people and was one of the largest townships in the state. Despite this booming beginning, employment opportunities in Clunes diminished as local industry (mining, food, textiles, agriculture) declined. Today Clunes has a population of 1728\* and the economy is still largely agricultural, but tourists and local residents have been able to support hospitality, retailers (including a small supermarket and butcher), artisans and accommodation. The stark beauty of the landscape and historic buildings make Clunes a popular destination (when COVID-19 isn't limiting movements). Yet, this popularity hides the fact that Clunes is in fact the third lowest socio-economic postcode in Victoria and even prior to the pandemic, had unemployment levels significantly above (at 9%) the rest of the country. Generational unemployment combined with limited public transport and poor access to services mean Clunes is a town where young people are three times less likely to graduate high school than their peers in other towns and the incidence of preventable diseases and even death is higher than average. \*Based on the last census, 2016.*

# Decline is real but is it inevitable?

While the business cycle is usually used in relation to national economies, it stands to reason that it can relate equally to small economies, such as small towns. The greater national or state economies often have a strong influence over the micro-economies of small towns. In regional areas the effects can be magnified so that instead of boom and bust, it can be thought of in terms of Small Town Decline and Survival.

In Paul Collitis's June 2000 paper presented at the "Future of Australia's Country Towns" Conference at La Trobe University, Bendigo, he outlines four main views of small town problems as expounded by government and through Australian media. These range from the idea that small town decline is inevitable, through to the idea that regional Australia is doing well. He asserts the truth lies somewhere in between.

It's our experience that the fourth view outlined by Collitis is the one that most resonates with people living in Clunes – that small town decline is not inevitable and communities can turn their economies around themselves through local action. The underlying assumption behind this stance is that governments are not going to "save" small towns and there needs to be a focus on community action, strategic planning and leadership in order to create the activity that generates investment (private, industry and government) to create a robust local economy.

*Clunes is a town that has had innovation in its DNA since its inception. Once home to one of the most cutting-edge mines in the world, this ability to **think – and act** – differently in order to prosper still runs like a gold seam through the community. It's led to infrastructure decisions that have improved the quality of people's lives, as well as attracted tourism and investment by the national and international film industry. It's led to economic investment, such as attracting Wesley College to set up a local campus, that creates opportunities for business and residents alike. It's led to activation of spaces, exemplified by Booktown and other cultural and sport activities, that have resulted in preservation and growth.*

*Achieving all of these outcomes has not been easy. It has required leadership at all levels, an understanding of local assets and how to share them, and an ability to build relationships beyond our town boundaries. Sustaining the energy and balance of focus between community, economic and environmental wellbeing, is a constant tug, pulling us back into the boom and bust cycle. But despite this, our lived experience and successes bode well. It's evidence that the traits that underpin robust communities have long been a part of our culture and we are not afraid of bringing them together to achieve results.*

*In an article printed in the Sydney Morning Herald on 14 August 1999, it's asserted that "enterprise and ingenuity can prevail over rural adversity" (Derriman, P. 1999, Passion and Creativity Give a New Future to Our Old Country Villages").*

A variation of the view that small town decline can be mitigated is that some towns will die while others thrive. Regional Development specialist and author, Roy Powell explains this further:

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Nowadays towns are really not so different from businesses, they need to keep recreating themselves. Not so many years ago country towns were subject to general trends. They would all do well or all do badly. The picture is now very uneven. The successful towns are likely to be driven by people who are passionate and creative, who see an opportunity and go for it. You need communities with a bit of get up and go spirit. Some have it, some don't.

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According to Powell, success hinges on "passion and creativity". In Clunes, the ability to link creativity with local leadership at all levels is critical to the sustainability of the outcomes we seek.

# So what are the local resources of a small town?

What are some of the common characteristics and local resources which seem to tip the balance of the scales for small town survival and ameliorate the effects of the bust cycle? According to Peter Kenyon from Bank of Ideas, these include:

## Proactive and shared leadership

Leadership is diversified and representative, providing the community with vision and hopefulness. The town should also be committed to a community leadership strategy which is continuously growing and renewing its own leadership capacity.

*Clunes people are used to rolling up their sleeves and getting involved. At the last census more than 26% of the population was involved in volunteering in their community, compared to a national average of 21%. Today there are 40 plus community groups active and while COVID-19 has put pressure on how those activities engage, the experiences of 2020 have led to the emergence of a range of innovative responses to community, economic and environmental wellbeing. These include the reclamation of old walkways, COVID-normal approaches to social, intellectual and physical activities specifically for older people (yet open to all ages), mental health links for men led via our Men's Shed, and the launch of BOOM Clunes.*

## Understanding the importance of relationships with regular and meaningful conversations

Harnessing community wisdom, gifts and ideas and paying attention to global trends and innovations, while cultivating external relationships. This means creating systemic as well as more organic links between individuals and organisations within our community and beyond.

## Positive mindset

Meaningful and lasting transformation originates from within the community, not from the outside. A positive community mindset accepts the inevitability of change and welcomes new alternative thinking and ideas. With a focus on optimism and expectation, the 'can-do' outlook takes risk and encourages resilience.

*BOOM Clunes is a social enterprise start-up designed to combine and strengthen all the characteristics and resources small towns use to tip the bust cycle towards a resounding BOOM.*

*It's a physical manifestation of Clunes 'can-do' outlook, taking a calculated risk at a time when, at worst, we'll help aid recovery in our town, and, at best, we'll found an incubator for our future. Operating out of the old State Bank, BOOM Clunes is a retailer delivering on the town brand; providing new and secondhand books, giftware, collectibles and tours.*

*Providing visitors with a sense of place, BOOM Clunes reinvests that spend into employability and skill training for residents, deliberately nurturing local entrepreneurs and artisans. Beyond the shop front, through a separate entrance, BOOM Clunes is a business centre incorporating serviced offices. In the last census Hepburn Shire was recognised as an entrepreneurial hotspot, attracting sole traders, innovators and those working from home (a demographic that's grown exponentially since COVID-19). BOOM Clunes seeks to provide the space, proximity and opportunity necessary to nurture new and existing entrepreneurs in a way that strengthens community, economic and environmental wellbeing. BOOM Clunes is an experiment in busting out our moves in order to BOOM into the future.*

## Balance of focus

Focus must be balanced between community, economic and environmental wellbeing, which all go hand in hand to create a strong and resilient community.

## Strong economic development behaviours

These behaviours pursue a diversified locally-controlled economic and employment base, promoting a 'buy-local' mindset. Creating an entrepreneurial development ecosystem which connects and supports local initiatives is part of fostering best practice behaviours within the local business base.

## Healthy community building practices

Healthy community building practices encourage broad based and inclusive community involvement, formulate and implement strategies with specific priorities, actions and indicators, such as prioritising strategies for the retention and expansion of the existing business base and enhancement of infrastructure. Systemically, these practices are often core business for community development organisations such as Neighbourhood Houses ([www.clunesnh.org](http://www.clunesnh.org)). However, the impact of healthy community building practices demonstrated by one organisation only is limited. A shared appreciation and approach builds capacity across the community, reaping real and lasting results. Focusing on the neighbourhood first, rather than the house, is something Clunes Neighbourhood House has prioritised for nearly a decade. **This long-game approach, combined with the town's existing traits, means that Clunes scores well on a healthy community building practices scorecard.**

Healthy thinking identifies and promotes awareness of local assets, capacities, strengths, opportunities and competitive advantages. In particular, it develops specific youth engagement, including employment diversity, education options, transport, accommodation, lifestyle, image and participation. Building healthy community practices supports collaboration, partnership and networking. It nurtures altruism and community support and actively builds community spirit, pride and sense of attachment.



S. A. I. E. S. W. E. R. S. E. A. A.

# Characteristics of healthy community thinking versus an unhealthy community

Optimism, hope and 'we are in this together'

"We can do it"

Value intangibles like vision and values

Consensus building

Collaboration

Focus on the future

Interdependence

Broad community participation

Leadership renewal

Think and act in long-term

Listening

Reconciliation

Win-win solutions

Politics of substance

Diversity and involvement

Challenge ideas

Problem solvers

View challenges as opportunities

## VS

Cynicism

Nothing works

Emphasis only on tangibles

Polarisation

Confrontation

Debate the past

Parochialism

Few do everything

Same old faces

Short-term thinking

Attacking

Hold grudges

Win-lose solutions

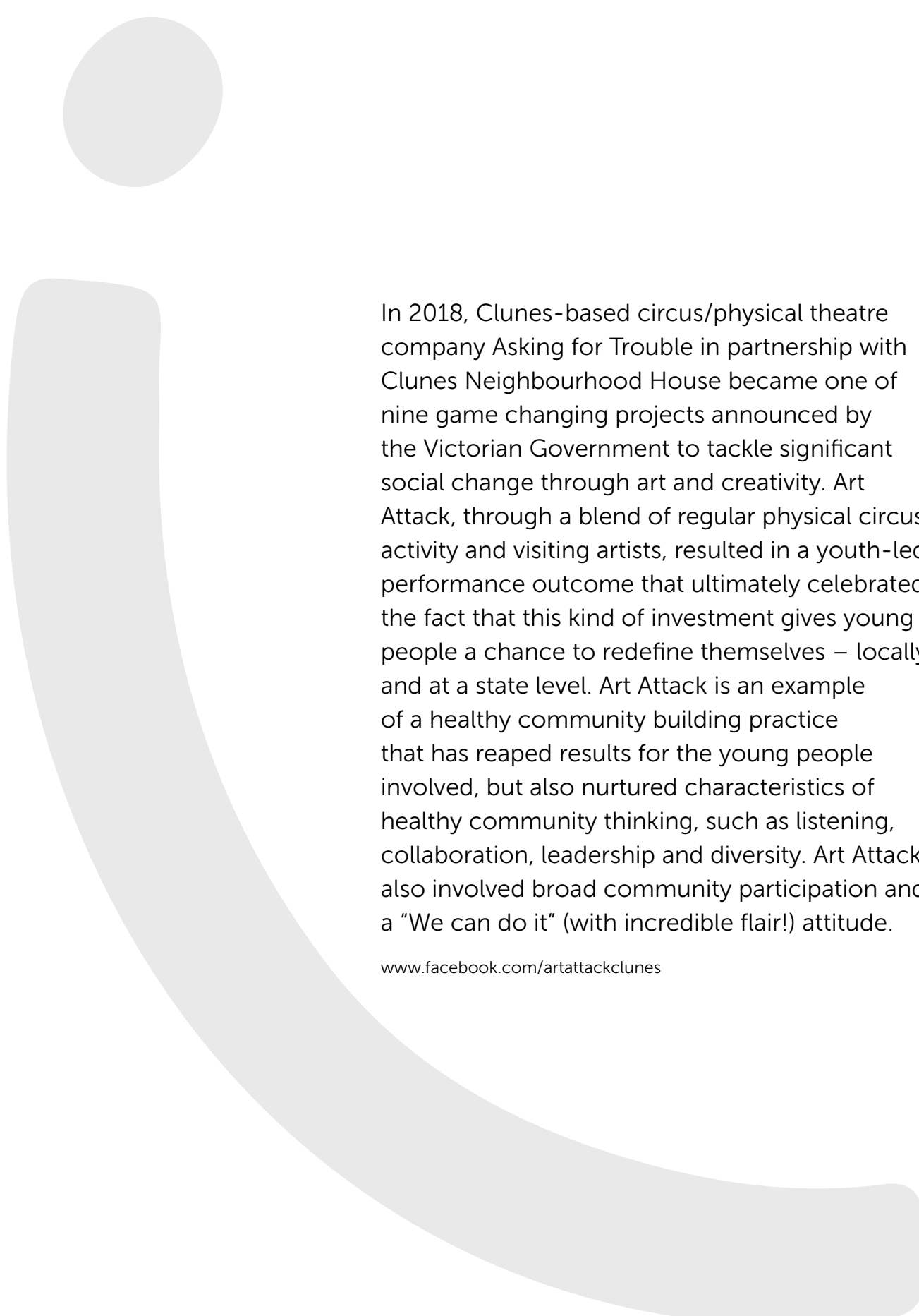
Politics of personality

Exclusion

Challenge people

Blockers and blamers

See themselves as victims



In 2018, Clunes-based circus/physical theatre company Asking for Trouble in partnership with Clunes Neighbourhood House became one of nine game changing projects announced by the Victorian Government to tackle significant social change through art and creativity. Art Attack, through a blend of regular physical circus activity and visiting artists, resulted in a youth-led performance outcome that ultimately celebrated the fact that this kind of investment gives young people a chance to redefine themselves – locally and at a state level. Art Attack is an example of a healthy community building practice that has reaped results for the young people involved, but also nurtured characteristics of healthy community thinking, such as listening, collaboration, leadership and diversity. Art Attack also involved broad community participation and a "We can do it" (with incredible flair!) attitude.

[www.facebook.com/artattackclunes](http://www.facebook.com/artattackclunes)



## Other regional success stories

There are many regional success stories which small towns like Clunes can draw on.

### **Kulin, Western Australia**

Kulin is a small town in the eastern Wheatbelt of WA, approximately 280km from Perth. Like many of the wheatbelt towns, it was struggling. In 1983 Graeme Robertson was elected to Council and set up the 'Cultivating Kulin Committee'. Graeme and his team determined that the town would be more than a dot on the map by building local pride and commitment and addressed stopping the depopulation and loss of town services. They promoted the natural beauty of the area, established the Kulin Football Club, and a Community Bank. The Kulin Bush Races were started, which attracts visitors state-wide and which is then able to support other services such as a \$10,000 donation to the Retirement Homes Committee, allowing the project to proceed and thus further enriching the town. Regular meetings such as star gazing parties are organised by the group, where they tried to break a Guinness World Record.

### **Parkes, New South Wales**

Parkes also boasted population growth in the 1990's and a reasonably low unemployment rate. Promoting itself as a key location, Parkes has become a freight hub with large multi-million dollar investments attracted and over 40 jobs created. Like Clunes with the Booktown festival, Parkes also developed a highly successful Elvis festival to stimulate tourism annually. [www.parkeselvisfestival.com.au](http://www.parkeselvisfestival.com.au)

### **Mudgee, New South Wales**

Throughout the early 1990's Mudgee had a strong average annual population growth rate and its average unemployment rate is habitually lower than the the national average. The region has a diverse economic base including agriculture, mining, viticulture, tourism, and, increasingly, regional cuisine. The Mudgee region has 2000 hectares of vines and attracted investment of \$100m and over 20 wineries in the area. Over the past few years projects have included the expansion of the Cudgegong Abattoir, with an investment of \$9m and 120 full time and 40 part time jobs; and Simon Gilbert Wines' new plantings and wine making facilities, an investment worth \$4.5m with 9 full time and 20 part time jobs.

### **Beechworth, Victoria**

Once the administrative centre for the Victorian goldfields, Beechworth reached a population of 20,000. With the decline of the goldfields, the town became reliant on welfare institutions and by the mid-1980's most of the town's employment revolved around a prison, district hospital, Hospital for the Aged and mental health facility housing over 500 patients. The Beechworth Bakery was indicative of the downturn and rebuilding of the town's economic environment. Once employing just two part time staff, within 15 years it had increased its turnover by 3,000 percent, making it the largest turnover of any retail bakery in Australia. Beechworth Bakery also employs 65 staff and attracts 670,000 customers every year, as well as the Victoria Tourism Award winner for significant Regional Attraction on three occasions, plus a host of national and state business and customer service awards.

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*“You can change the future of your community or you can sit back and allow whatever happens to happen. However, the cost is high. It means organising a group of people who are willing to give of their time and energy to make things happen. It means putting aside individual differences to work together for the good of the community. It means working together to decide what you want for the future and then working together to make it happen. You can do it. People are doing it.”*

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*(Jack McCall,  
'Small Town Survival Manual' 1988:14)*

## Now is another time to take a risk

To break out of a bust, or even head one off at the pass, small towns have had to think – and act – differently. Clunes, like other regional success stories, has a history of tackling the big issues in order to achieve growth. Infrastructure investments, festivals and preservation of natural or built environments require energy and, when ongoing, continued resources. It's a slog and the gains can often be incremental and difficult to sustain over generations. It can be a bit like chipping away at a gold seam without any hope of dislodging a nugget big enough to sell. Sometimes it takes a seismic disruption, like COVID-19, to make us dig deep and review this. Sometimes it takes times without compare to offer us the freedom to say,

**“Now is the time to act  
without compare.”**

In Clunes we've decided to do just this, with the help of our whole community and as many others as we can attract to join us. The outcome we are seeking for all is a resounding **BOOM!**

To find out more about

# boom

**CLUNES**

BOOM Clunes is an initiative of Clunes Neighbourhood House [www.clunesnh.org](http://www.clunesnh.org). Its origins lie in strategic planning and culture building started nearly a decade ago, although we suspect the willingness to think innovatively is something the Clunes community has demonstrated for generations. BOOM Clunes is a social enterprise start-up designed to combine and strengthen all the characteristics and resources small towns use to tip the bust cycle towards a resounding **BOOM**.

#### **To become a volunteer:**

BOOM Clunes offers people the opportunity to gain retail, administration and business management skills, qualifications and experience locally. Linking formal volunteers to broader employability and employment networks, BOOM Clunes also provides simpler opportunities to get involved – from providing us with book reviews to share with customers, to sharing tips for great things to do around Clunes.

#### **To become an innovator or local entrepreneur:**

BOOM Clunes offers people the opportunity to work with mentors to design, develop and launch retail products which can be sold in BOOM Clunes retail store and online. In particular, BOOM Clunes will actively support emerging entrepreneurship activities amongst local young people, working closely with strategic partners to provide links to state, national and international networks in order increase the educational participation of our young people.

#### **To become a local supplier:**

Perhaps you don't need a mentor and already have a product that speaks of the Clunes experience - the land, our history, industry, our creativity and community? If you do, BOOM Clunes retail outlet is stocked through stall holder, consignment and/or buy and return agreements.

#### **To become a member:**

BOOM Clunes offers shared workspace, with access to high speed Wi-fi and facilities, mentoring support to grow and enhance your business or business practices, and exclusive invitations to members to meet and talk with innovative thinkers, and industry and business leaders.

#### **To lease serviced offices:**

BOOM Clunes offers serviced offices on short and long sub-lease terms to provide businesses with an opportunity to grow their business in an environment that nurtures community, economic and environmental wellbeing at all levels.



**BOOM Clunes retail is open**

Thursday to Monday – 10am til 3pm

**BOOM Clunes business and serviced offices are open**

Monday to Friday – 9am til 5pm

**BOOM Clunes is located at**

28 Fraser Street, Clunes, Victoria. 3370

**To find out more call**

03 5345 4078 or email: [chiefentrepreneur@boomclunes.org](mailto:chiefentrepreneur@boomclunes.org)

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Lessons Learned From Past Boom and Bust Cycles:  
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