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AMENITY MIGRATION, LIVEABILITY, AND PLACE DYNAMICS IN CAIRNS, AUSTRALIA

Submitted by

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Abstract

This thesis provides a critical exploration of regional migration and liveability in Australia, focusing on the experiences of migrants in the tropical city of Cairns, Queensland. It sits at the intersection of migration, liveability, and regional studies, exploring how these domains interact within specific regional contexts. By employing episodic narrative interviews, participatory mapping, and qualitative GIS, the thesis captures the subjective and experiential dimensions of migrant experiences in Cairns and reveals the diverse ways in which migrants navigate and negotiate their new urban environment. The findings highlight the importance of considering the specific socio-spatial contexts, amenity characteristics, and community dynamics of regional cities in shaping migrant aspirations, experiences, and outcomes. The thesis challenges monolithic and essentialist notions of 'regional Australia' and 'liveability', and proposes a more place-based, and people-centred approach to understanding the complex interplay between migration, place, and well-being in regional settings. The research has important implications for policy and practice, highlighting the need for more inclusive, responsive, and place-based approaches to regional development and urban planning that recognise the diversity and dynamism of migrant experiences and needs. By exploring the perspectives and narratives of regional migrants in Cairns, the thesis contributes to the development of more sustainable, equitable, and vibrant regional futures in Australia and beyond.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background

When my family and I moved from Sydney to the tropical city of Cairns in 2020, I found myself constantly noticing little things that were different from our old life. It got me thinking about what it really means to live in a new place and how we adjust to it. As I navigated this new life, I started a PhD exploring the complexities of regional migration, which—in a context of COVID-19— included examining the factors drawing migrants to regional places and away from Australia's capital cities. Although the scholarly literature on 'amenity migration' proved helpful for the Cairns context, it tended to present simplified and romanticised notions of life in regional Australia, glossing over the diverse realities and challenges migrants face in growing regional cities (Argent et al., 2016; Ragusa, 2010). It also obscured the complex interplay of factors shaping migrant experiences and outcomes (Osbaldiston, 2010; Moss, 2006). The concept of 'liveability' helped augment an understanding of amenity migration, but this too proved limited—with liveability often reduced to a set of objective indicators, failing to capture the distinctiveness of place and the subjective dimension of migrants' experiences (Lloyd et al., 2016). These issues of amenity-driven migration and liveability in regional cities like Cairns are the focus of this dissertation. It explores the complex interplay between migrant expectations, lived experiences, and the socio-spatial dynamics of regional cities. In so doing it foregrounds people-centred understandings in high-amenity urban destinations like Cairns.

The research is the first to bring together the concepts of amenity migration (Glorioso & Moss, 2012; Osbaldiston, 2011), liveability (Badland et al., 2014), and regionality (McManus & Pritchard, 2000). Amenity migration refers to the movement of people based on the attractions of landscape, culture, and climate rather than traditional economic opportunities, as articulated by scholars like Moss (2006) and Gosnell and Abrams (2011), who examine how natural and cultural amenities draw migrants to less urbanised areas. Liveability, on the other hand, extends beyond mere amenity attraction; it encompasses the broader quality of life available in a location, including factors such as safety, access to public services, and community connectivity (see Badland et al. (2014) and Lloyd et al. (2016)). McManus and Pritchard (2000) argue regionality emphasises the diverse and dynamic nature of regional spaces, challenging monolithic and static representations of these areas. Drawing these concepts together helps provide a contextualised understanding of amenity migration and liveability in Cairns. It captures the complex and often contradictory nature of migrant experiences in high amenity but nevertheless urban places, highlighting the ways in which migrants negotiate, experience, and make sense of their new environment. Cairns is a rapidly

growing city with its own frustrations of urban growth and sustainability (Bohnet & Pert, 2010; Guaralda et al., 2020).

Regional cities offer a blend of natural amenities, lifestyle opportunities, and urban services, and attract a diverse range of migrants, including retirees, families, and young professionals (Argent et al., 2016; Gurran & Blakely, 2007). Quality of life is a significant motivator for these migrants to amenity-rich regional areas, with amenities playing a crucial role in attracting individuals to such environments (Ulrich-Schad & Qin, 2017). However, the experiences of these migrants are often shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including housing affordability, employment opportunities, social networks, and cultural diversity (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011). By exploring the lived experiences of migrants in Cairns to understand the factors that shape their experiences and migration outcomes, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates in liveability, regional development, and migration studies.

1.2 Research Aim, Objectives, and Questions

This research aims to examine the interplay between regional identity, amenity migration, and urban liveability in Cairns, exploring how this tropical regional city fits within broader conversations about Regional Australia and how it attracts and accommodates new migrants. To achieve this aim, I have developed a set of specific research objectives designed to systematically address these key aspects. My investigation will begin by analysing Cairns' position within the broader context of Regional Australia. I will then identify and evaluate the specific amenity characteristics that attract new migrants to Cairns. Then, to assess the city's liveability for newcomers, I will investigate both objective indicators and subjective experiences and perceptions and how they interact. Throughout this process, I will explore the challenges and opportunities faced by new migrants in Cairns through analysis of migrant narratives, particularly in relation to housing and social integration, and how they shape the new residents' settlement outcome. To guide this research, I seek to address three overarching research questions: How does Cairns fit into conversations about Regional Australia? What amenity characteristics attract people to Cairns? How liveable is Cairns for new migrants? By addressing these questions, my ambition is to contribute to a more comprehensive perspective on regional migration and urban liveability in tropical Australia. In the following sections, I will elaborate on these research questions.

1.2.1 *How does Cairns fit into conversations about Regional Australia?*

The concept of 'Regional Australia' often evokes certain images and assumptions about non-metropolitan areas. This first research question aims to explore how Cairns, with its distinctive

features, fits into these conversations, challenging simplistic homogeneous notions of regional Australia by examining the diverse geographies and experiences of regional migration. This exploration interrogates prevailing, often-reductive views of regional Australia and seeks to understand Cairns' place within this complex landscape. Scholars have increasingly recognised the heterogeneity of regional Australia (Argent et al., 2016; Ragusa, 2010; Osbaldiston, 2010), and its mosaic structure of varied geographies, economies, and communities, each interpreted and experienced differently by diverse groups and individuals (Tonts et al., 2012; Tonts et al., 2014; Dufty-Jones, 2018). Cairns, as a regional city, presents an intriguing case for examining these varied interpretations. Its characteristics as a tropical, tourism-focused urban centre raise important questions about how it is perceived and positioned within broader discussions about regional Australia and its migration patterns. These patterns shaped by interplaying factors such as lifestyle preferences, economic opportunities, and social connections (Argent et al., 2016; Ragusa, 2010), add further layers to these conversations. Cairns, with its unique blend of urban amenities and natural attractions, offers a compelling context for exploring how these factors influence migration decisions and experiences. This research question examines these interplays and encourages a reconsideration of what 'regional' means in the Australian context and how diverse places like Cairns contribute to ongoing discussions about regional Australia's identity and future.

1.2.2 *What amenity characteristics attract people to Cairns?*

Amenity migration has become a growing global phenomenon, with more people increasingly seeking to escape urban pressures and pursue a better quality of life in regional areas (Moss, 2009; Argent et al., 2016). This movement is driven by a diverse array of motivations, ranging from retirement aspirations to lifestyle change and economic opportunities (Berzins & Krisjane, 2008; Glorioso & Moss, 2007; Stockdale, 2014). While existing literature emphasises the role of natural and cultural amenities in driving amenity migrants to regional areas (Argent et al., 2016; Moss, 2006; Osbaldiston, 2010), the case of Cairns offers a more complex perspective that challenges some of these established views. With its iconic Great Barrier Reef, vast tracts of tropical rainforests, and lifestyle embodying the Australian ideal of relaxed coastal living (Wilson & Turton, 2011), Cairns exemplifies the allure of scenic beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities that typically attract amenity migrants (Osbaldiston, 2010; Kordel & Pohle, 2018). However, these distinctive amenities interact with practical considerations such as housing availability, employment prospects, and social networks (Daniel, 2014; Gibson & Law, 2022; Gurran, 2008; Law, 2019; Su et al., 2019). This interplay of factors creates a unique urban-regional context that can both enhance and complicate the migrant experience. The city's blend of natural beauty, urban amenities, and regional character raises important questions about what specifically attracts migrants to this area. To better

understand this complexity, the second research question examines the characteristics that attract migrants to Cairns and how these factors shape migrant expectations and experiences.

1.2.3 *How liveable is Cairns to new migrants?*

The third research question explores the complex interplay between objective measures and subjective experiences of urban life, specifically focusing on how new migrants perceive and experience liveability in Cairns. Traditional liveability assessments, such as the Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Liveability Index (EIU, 2021), often prioritise objective indicators like housing affordability, and accessibility of services. While these measures provide valuable insights, they often fall short in capturing the full spectrum of what makes a place truly liveable, especially for those experiencing significant life transitions like migration. The concept of liveability for new migrants in Cairns is inherently multifaceted, encompassing both measurable factors and deeply personal experiences. As newcomers navigate unfamiliar social, cultural, and economic landscapes unique to Cairns, they encounter a complex array of challenges and opportunities that shape their perceptions of liveability. These experiences are influenced by migrants' unique sets of expectations, backgrounds, and aspirations (Flognfeldt, 2006; Kordel & Pohle, 2018), which interact with the city's distinctive characteristics. My personal journey as a migrant vividly illustrates this complexity. When we first arrived in Cairns, I found myself constantly comparing the new surroundings to the familiar bustles of Sydney's streets. The stark differences in pace, climate, and lifestyle prompted deep reflections on the essence of liveability. This experience, shared by many fellow migrants, highlights the critical importance of subjective and experiential dimensions in understanding liveability (see Lloyd et al., 2016; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2013; Balsas, 2004). To better grasp how liveable Cairns is for newcomers, this research question seeks to look beyond conventional objective measures and explore the rich tapestry of personal experiences and perceptions of amenity migrants in this city.

Having established the research questions that guide this study, I now turn my attention to the specific setting of this investigation. Cairns, a rapidly growing regional city in tropical North Queensland, provides a unique backdrop for exploring the dynamics of amenity migration and urban liveability. Understanding the distinct characteristics and growth trajectory of Cairns is crucial for interpreting the experiences of amenity migrants of the city's liveability. The following section examines the factors contributing to Cairns' rapid growth and its emergence as a key regional centre. This contextual brief provides essential background for my investigation into the interplay between migration, amenity, and liveability in this dynamic urban environment. It helps me to better situate my research questions within the city's unique social, economic, and environmental

landscape, setting the stage for an exploration of regional migration and urban experience in tropical Australia.

1.3 Cairns as a Case Study

Situated on the northeast coast of Australia, Cairns offers a compelling case study for examining regional migration and urban liveability. This tropical city is renowned for its proximity to the iconic Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics World Heritage rainforest areas (Prideaux, 2022). These natural amenities, combined with its tropical climate and multicultural community, create a unique urban environment that attracts both tourists and migrants alike. The city's appeal extends beyond its role as a tourist destination, drawing individuals and families seeking a distinctive lifestyle and environment that blends urban amenities with natural assets (Woods, 2017). This diverse and dynamic fabric woven from the interplay of natural assets, cultural diversity, and growing economy, provides an ideal setting for exploring the experiences of migrants in regional contexts. It allows us to gain valuable insights into the complex interplay between regional identity, amenity migration, and urban liveability. The city's unique characteristics provide a rich context for exploring how migrants navigate and experience life in a rapidly growing regional centre.

1.3.1 Cairns: A Rapidly Growing Regional City

The rapid growth of Cairns can be attributed to various factors, including its strong tourism industry, diverse economy, and appealing lifestyle offerings. Nestled between the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics rainforest, the only two World Heritage Areas to coexist side by side, Cairns has leveraged its strategic location to become a thriving regional centre. This strategic location not only shaped the city's identity but also has fuelled its economic engine, particularly through tourism (Cairns Regional Council 2024a; Prideaux 2022; Zhang and Peng 2014). Attracting millions of visitors annually, this thriving tourism sector has created numerous employment opportunities and stimulated local economy (Hipsher 2017). The Great Barrier Reef alone injects approximately 6.4 billion AUD into the Australian economy each year, with Cairns capturing a substantial portion of this economic activity (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017). Despite facing challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector has demonstrated remarkable resilience, implementing effective recovery strategies that have helped maintain its vitality (O'Sullivan et al., 2020).

Beyond tourism, other key sectors such as healthcare, retail, social services, education, and construction also offer significant employment opportunities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b). This diversification has been crucial in fostering economic stability and social resilience (Maclean et al., 2009). The healthcare sector, in particular, has seen significant growth, with the Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service emerging as one of the region's largest employers (Cairns and

Hinterland Hospital and Health Service, 2023; Evans et al., 2017). Education has also played a vital role in Cairns' development. Institutions like James Cook University have not only attracted students from around the world but have also contributed to the city's cultural diversity and economic vitality (Forbes & Hamilton, 2004). This economic strength is reflected in Cairns' employment figures. As of December 2023, the city boasted an unemployment rate of 2.8%, significantly lower than the national average of 3.7% (Cairns Regional Council, 2024b).

Extending beyond its economic opportunities, the appeal of Cairns lies in its lifestyle offerings. The city's tropical climate, relaxed atmosphere, and access to natural attractions create an enticing package for both tourists and potential residents (Azzali et al. 2020; Bohnet & Pert, 2010; Fagence 2012). The city's urban design and infrastructure have complemented these natural assets (Law & Musso, 2020), enhancing Cairns' reputation as a desirable destination. The local government has also been proactive in promoting sustainable growth, balancing economic development with environmental conservation (Cairns Regional Council, 2024a). These efforts are reflected in the increasing number of international and domestic flights to the city, making it more accessible than ever before (Tourism and Events Queensland, 2023). The improved connectivity has further bolstered tourism and migration, contributing to the city's population growth and economic diversification.

However, Cairns' growth has not been without challenges. The city has experienced a 14% increase in median housing prices over three years, approaching 500,000 AUD, which has impacted housing affordability (Property Council of Australia, n.d.). While still more affordable than many Australian cities, this trend aligns with patterns observed in other regional centres and has had implications for economic development (Beer et al., 2007; Erol & Unal, 2022). Safety concerns have also emerged, with an increase in property crimes in some areas, despite a slight decline in overall offenses from 2019 to 2022 (Queensland Government Statistician's Office, 2022c). These issues could potentially influence the city's attractiveness to future migrants. Additionally, environmental challenges, particularly the potential impacts of climate change on the Great Barrier Reef and the tourism industry, loom on the horizon (Barnes et al., 2022). As Cairns continues to grow, addressing these challenges will be essential for maintaining the city's unique qualities that have made it such an attractive destination for both tourists and new residents alike.

1.3.2 Diverse Migrant Population in Cairns

Cairns' story of growth and diversity is one of steady expansion and cultural enrichment. Over the past decade, the city has experienced consistent population increases, painting a picture of a thriving regional centre that continues to attract new residents from across Australia and around

the world. As of June 30, 2023, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported an Estimated Resident Population (ERP) of 175,398 for Cairns, marking a 1.98% increase from the previous year. While this growth rate is slightly lower than the 2.16% observed in Regional Queensland during the same period, it nonetheless reflects the city's enduring appeal (Local community, n.d.). The city's growth trajectory becomes even more apparent when examining the longer-term trends. Between 2016 and 2021, Cairns welcomed 10,042 new residents, representing a 6.4% increase in population. This translates to an average annual growth rate of 1.25% during that five-year period (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b). What makes this growth particularly interesting is its composition. While international migration and natural increase have been significant contributors to Cairns' population growth, internal migration patterns have also played a crucial role in shaping the city's demographic landscape (Cairns Regional Council, 2021). These internal migration flows have fluctuated over time, reflecting changing perceptions of Cairns' appeal and economic opportunities among Australian residents from other regions and cities.

One of the striking aspects of Cairns' demographic profile is its relatively youthful population. With a median age of 39 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b), the city has proven especially attractive to younger adults. The 25-34 age group, in particular, has contributed significantly to recent migration gains (Cairns Regional Council, 2021; Gurran et al., 2007). This influx of young adults not only injects vitality into the local community but also brings fresh skills and perspectives to the workforce, further fuelling the city's economic dynamism. Another defining feature of Cairns' population is its diversity. The 2021 Census revealed that 29.3% of the city's residents were born overseas, surpassing even the state average of 28.6% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b). This multiculturalism spans across the globe, with England, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, and India ranking as the top countries of origin for Cairns' migrants. This diversity not only reflects the city's strong ties with the Asia-Pacific region but also underscores its global appeal as a destination for migrants seeking new opportunities and lifestyles. Adding another layer to this diverse population is the significant presence of Indigenous Australians. With 10.6% of Cairns' residents identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b), the city boasts a rich Indigenous heritage that contributes to its unique cultural landscape. The impact of this diversity extends far beyond mere demographics. Migrants bring with them a wealth of skills, knowledge, and international networks that contribute significantly to the city's economic, social, and cultural vitality (Baycan-Levent, 2010). As Cairns continues to evolve into a multicultural city, it offers a compelling case study for exploring the intersections of migration and liveability in this unique regional setting blending natural and urban amenities.

1.3.3 The Blend of Natural and Urban Amenities in Cairns

Cairns' unique appeal lies in its seamless integration of natural wonders and urban sophistication, a phenomenon termed 'tropical urbanism' (Law & Musso, 2020; Law, 2019). This distinctive blend has become a powerful magnet for migrants seeking to strike a balance between adventurous outdoor pursuits and the conveniences of city living (Barry et al., 2022). The city's strategic location, nestled between two World Heritage sites, offers residents and visitors alike unparalleled access to a diverse array of natural marvels. From the vibrant underwater ecosystems of the Great Barrier Reef to the lush, ancient rainforests of the Wet Tropics, Cairns provides a backdrop for an active lifestyle that few other cities can match. This proximity to nature translates into a rich tapestry of recreational opportunities. Residents can easily transition from their urban routines to world-class snorkelling and diving experiences, immersing themselves in the colourful marine life of the reef. For those who prefer terra firma, the surrounding rainforests offer extensive networks of hiking trails and opportunities for birdwatching, allowing individuals to connect with the unique flora and fauna of tropical Australia. These natural amenities contribute significantly to the high quality of life that has become synonymous with living in Cairns, offering a daily escape into nature that many find rejuvenating and enriching.

However, Cairns' appeal extends beyond its natural wonders. In tandem with its environmental assets, the city has cultivated a sophisticated urban environment that seeks to cater to the diverse needs and aspirations of its growing population (Law & Musso, 2020). This urban development has been carefully planned to complement rather than compete with the natural surroundings. The urban core of Cairns boasts a range of amenities typically found in larger metropolitan areas, ensuring residents don't have to sacrifice urban conveniences for their proximity to nature. A prime example of Cairns' urban sophistication is its thriving arts and culture scene. The city is home to numerous galleries, museums, and performance venues that showcase the talents of both local and international artists (Milledge & Law, 2020). This cultural vibrancy enriches the residents' lives and adds another layer to the city's appeal for potential migrants, seeking a balance between natural beauty and cultural stimulation.

The success of Cairns in attracting and retaining a diverse population can be largely attributed to this unique ability to offer the best of both worlds (Prideaux & Falco-Mammone, 2007; Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018). Migrants are drawn by the promise of a lifestyle that allows them to engage with world-class natural environments without sacrificing urban comforts and opportunities. This combination of factors creates a compelling narrative for those considering a move to regional Australia, positioning Cairns as a destination that can fulfill a wide range of lifestyle aspirations. As

Cairns continues to grow and evolve, maintaining this balance between natural preservation and urban development will be crucial. The city's future success will depend on its ability to nurture its unique brand of tropical urbanism, ensuring that its natural amenities remain accessible and unspoiled while continuing to develop the urban infrastructure and cultural offerings that make it a vibrant and liveable city for residents and future migrants. To fully explore the complexities of migration and liveability in a setting like Cairns, this thesis adopts a multi-dimensional approach, examining various aspects of the migrant experience through multiple lenses. The following overview of the thesis structure outlines how each chapter contributes to our understanding of Cairns' unique position within regional Australia and its appeal to diverse migrant populations.

1.4 Thesis Structure: An Overview of the Chapters

This thesis by publication consists of eight chapters. Each chapter addresses specific parts of the research questions and objectives outlined in this introduction, while also making distinct contributions to theoretical, methodological, and policy debates in various fields related to migration and liveability.

1.4.1 Chapter Two: Literature Review

Following this introduction, chapter two lays the foundation for the study with a literature review that provides an examination of key concepts and debates relevant to the research. It starts with an exploration of regionality in the Australian context, setting the stage for a better understanding of Cairns' unique position. The review then turns its attention to the concept of liveability, examining various definitions, measurement approaches, and its relevance to migration decision-making processes. This exploration is crucial for understanding how migrants perceive and experience life in Cairns. The chapter also investigates amenity migration, focusing on the experiences of migrants seeking a higher quality of life in a regional setting like Cairns. Finally, the chapter presents a conceptual framework that integrates these key concepts, providing a solid theoretical foundation for the subsequent chapters and guiding the empirical investigations that follow.

1.4.2 Chapter Three: A Note on Methodology

This chapter provides a brief review of the research framework that forms the backbone of this study. It explains the epistemological framework, showcasing the synergy between the thesis' two complementary paradigms: constructivism and interpretivism. The chapter also explains the rationale behind employing a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative GIS, episodic narrative interviews, participatory mapping, surveys, and Importance-Performance Analysis. The chapter then addresses ethical considerations, emphasising the importance of participant welfare,

informed participation, and data confidentiality. It also briefly reflects on the researcher's positionality as a migrant, acknowledging the potential influences on data collection and interpretation. By detailing the epistemological foundations and methodological tools, chapter three sets the stage for the investigations that follow, ensuring a robust and ethically sound approach to examining the complexities of amenity migration and liveability in regional Australia.

1.4.3 Chapter Four: Understanding the 'Region'

Building on the conceptual groundwork laid earlier, chapter four critically examines the notion of 'regional Australia'. It challenges monolithic and homogenising discourses prevalent in media, policy, and academia. By critically examining the various ways in which 'region' is classified in the Australian context, this chapter highlights the diversity and complexity of regional places and the limitations of binary urban-rural categorisations. It argues that the essentialisation of 'regional' as a knowable, non-urban entity obscures the unique characteristics and challenges of different regional contexts, including small cities, coastal towns, and peri-urban areas. This critical anti-essentialist analysis sets the stage for the empirical investigations in subsequent chapters by providing a better understanding of the regional context in which migrant experiences unfold.

1.4.4 Chapter Five: Mapping Migrants' Narratives

Chapter five marks a pivotal transition from theoretical foundations to methodological innovation. It introduces the methodological approach applied in this thesis to studying migrant experiences. By integrating qualitative GIS with episodic narrative interviews, this chapter develops an innovative approach for capturing the spatial and experiential dimensions of liveability, moving beyond traditional objective measures and indicators. By employing participatory mapping techniques, such as annotated maps and sketch mapping, the chapter empowers migrants to articulate their subjective attachments and place-based experiences. This approach yields rich insights into the varied factors shaping migrants' sense of liveability and belonging in Cairns. The methodological framework developed in this chapter informs data collection and analysis in the subsequent parts of the thesis, enabling a deep exploration of migrant perceptions and experiences in this tropical urban setting.

1.4.5 Chapter Six: Expected versus Experienced Liveability

Chapter six applies the methodological framework established earlier to examine the core of migrant experiences in Cairns. This section probes the potential disconnect between the romanticised vision of Cairns as a tropical paradise and the day-to-day realities encountered by new residents. Applying Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA), the chapter scrutinises migrant perceptions of critical liveability indicators. This analytical approach unveils significant disparities

between the perceived importance and actual performance of key factors, including housing conditions, employment opportunities, social integration, and sense of community. By illuminating these gaps, the chapter offers vital insights into the lived experiences of amenity migrants, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of these themes in the following section.

1.4.6 Chapter Seven: The Interplay of Housing, Community, and Re-Migration

Chapter seven builds upon the revelations of the previous chapter, focusing on housing as a critical factor in shaping migrant experiences in Cairns. This chapter explores the intricate relationships between housing challenges, community integration, and the potential for re-migration with a focus on rental market in Cairns. It examines how housing affordability, availability, and quality influence migrants' ability to establish roots in their new environment. By interweaving personal narratives with broader rental trends, this chapter paints a comprehensive picture of the housing landscape in Cairns from a migrant perspective. It offers a deeper exploration of migrants' lived experiences, providing a qualitative counterpoint to the quantitative analysis presented earlier.

1.4.7 Chapter Eight: Conclusion

The final chapter serves as a synthesis of the research, weaving together the diverse threads explored throughout the thesis. It begins by distilling key findings from each preceding chapter. Then it reflects critically on the theoretical contributions of the thesis, examining how it advances our understanding of regionality, liveability, community dynamics, and the evolving nature of amenity migration. It situates these insights within the broader mobilities paradigm, offering fresh perspectives on the fluidity of contemporary migration patterns. Particular attention is given to the methodological innovations employed in this research, especially the innovative integration of qualitative GIS with episodic narrative approaches. The chapter discusses how this methodological synergy has enabled a more spatially informed exploration of migrant experiences. The conclusion also briefly discusses the practical implications of the research findings. Finally, the chapter acknowledges the study's limitations, suggests directions for future research, and offers reflections on the broader significance of the findings in the context of evolving landscape of mobility and regional development in Australia.

Having outlined the structure of this thesis, I now turn to the foundational knowledge that underpins this study. The following chapter presents a critical review of literature on regionality, liveability, and amenity migration, unpacking the complexities of these concepts within the Australian context. This review engages with current scholarly debates, identifies knowledge gaps in the field, and critically examines the intersections between these key themes. By synthesising existing research and highlighting areas for further investigation, this chapter establishes a robust

contextual framework. This foundation will inform and guide the subsequent exploration of Cairns' regional context and amenity migrant experiences in this tropical urban setting, preparing the stage for the empirical investigations that follow.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter presents an exploration of the key concepts central to this thesis: regionality, liveability, and amenity migration. By examining these interconnected themes, I draw from diverse fields including geography, sociology, urban planning, and migration studies to provide a holistic understanding of their complex relationships in the context of regional Australia. The review begins by exploring the concept of regionality, challenging simplistic categorisations and emphasising the diversity and complexity of regional places. It highlights the shift from productivism to post-productivism in rural and regional areas, particularly in the Australian context. This section sets the stage for understanding Cairns' unique position within broader conversations about Regional Australia. I then delve into the concept of liveability, examining its various definitions and measurement approaches. The review highlights the limitations of purely objective measures and emphasises the growing recognition of subjective and experiential dimensions of liveability. It also addresses the gap in liveability research in regional and rural settings, positioning the study of Cairns as a contribution to this understudied area. Finally, I explore amenity migration, discussing its drivers, impacts, and challenges in the Australian context. This section examines the motivations of amenity migrants, the potential discrepancies between their expectations and realities, and the complex impacts of this migration on regional places. Throughout the review, I highlight the interplay between these three core themes, demonstrating how they are intrinsically linked and mutually influencing. The chapter concludes by presenting a conceptual framework that integrates these concepts within the mobility paradigm, viewing regions as dynamic systems shaped by continuous movements of people, ideas, and resources. This literature review establishes the theoretical foundation for the study of Cairns, identifying gaps in current research and positioning this work to contribute meaningfully to ongoing discussions about regional development, migration patterns, and urban liveability in Australia.

2.1 Regionality

The concept of 'region' provides the spatial context within which liveability and amenity migration occur, shaping our understanding of 'regionality' and how we conceptualise and measure liveability in different contexts. However, defining regional and regionality is a complex and often contested endeavour. As Paasi (2011) argues, relatively little attention has been paid to the fundamental questions of what constitutes a region, how regions come into being, and how social power is implicated in region-building processes. This complexity is further compounded by the fluid and dynamic nature of regional boundaries, which are continually redefined and negotiated due to ever-changing social, economic, and political circumstances (Allen et al., 1998; Kessler & Helmig,

2007; Oedl-Wieser et al., 2020; Paasi, 2002; Woods, 2007; Woods, 2009). Rather than being ontological realities, regions are constituted through diverse socio-cultural and political processes that imbue them with meaning and significance (Macleod & Jones, 2001; Paasi, 2011). This fluidity challenges simplistic categorisations and highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of regional spaces.

The diversity and complexity of regional places defy simplistic classification. Regions encompass a wide spectrum of settings, ranging from peri-urban fringes to rural heartlands, each with distinct characteristics, challenges, and opportunities. This diversity is not just spatial but also temporal, as regions evolve in response to economic, social, and environmental changes. Binary distinctions between urban and rural, or metropolitan and non-metropolitan, fail to adequately represent the multidimensional nature of regional spaces (Smailes et al., 2002). Attempts to capture this heterogeneity within rigid typologies inevitably obscure important nuances and variations. In theoretical discourse, regions have been conceptualised from both territorial and relational perspectives in theoretical discourse (Goodwin, 2013; Jonas, 2012). Traditional approaches viewed regions as bounded, static, and internally coherent spatial units—a ‘territorial politics’ approach critiqued by Carter and Pasquier (2010). This view aligned with historical notions of regions as distinct geographical areas with unique cultural, economic, or administrative characteristics. However, in an era of intensifying globalisation and connectivity, these rigid definitions have been challenged, leading to the emergence of more dynamic conceptualisations.

Relational understandings have gained traction, emphasising regions as open, porous, and constituted through networks and flows that transcend territorial boundaries (Allen et al., 2012; Amin, 2004; Goodwin, 2013; Paasi & Zimmerbauer, 2016). This shift reflects a growing recognition of the complex, interconnected nature of modern regional dynamics. Despite these theoretical advancements, notions of a monolithic ‘regional Australia’ persist in popular and policy discourse, belying the profound diversity of places outside the capital cities. The category of ‘regional’ encompasses a spectrum of economic bases, cultural identities, and development trajectories, ranging from coastal amenity zones to dry farming towns, mining centres to indigenous communities (Bourne et al., 2020). Paralleling the simplistic metropolitan/non-metropolitan dichotomy, regional places are often stereotyped as uniformly agricultural and sparsely populated—a ‘rural idyll’ that erases their economic and demographic complexity (Champion & Hugo, 2017; Shucksmith, 2018). This oversimplification fails to capture the rich tapestry of regional Australia and the unique challenges and opportunities faced by different regional communities.

The real-world consequences of oversimplifying regional Australia are pronounced. McManus and Pritchard (2000) demonstrate that ‘regional’ and ‘rural’ are frequently defined in a residual sense—as that which is not metropolitan. This ‘othering’ of regional Australia, defining it by what it lacks rather than its inherent qualities, shapes policy imaginaries and resource allocations. While different regional taxonomies are mobilised to target programs and incentives, they often reflect political imperatives more than lived realities. The disconnect between theoretical understanding, policy application, and regional diversity underscores the need for alternative approaches to regional development and governance. The city of Cairns in Far North Queensland exemplifies the limitations of prevailing regional typologies and tropes. Various classified as ‘outer regional’ (ASGC), ‘rural’ (RRMA), and a ‘regional city’ (RAI), Cairns defies straightforward categorisation. As a commercial hub and tourist gateway with a diverse, service-oriented economy, modern infrastructure, and a sizeable, multi-cultural population, Cairns bears little resemblance to the ‘rural’ archetype (Law & Musso, 2020). Yet its distance from metropolitan centres also distinguishes it from near-city regions and peri-metropolitan growth corridors. This complexity – which I will explain more in chapter four– highlights the inadequacy of current classification systems in capturing the complicated realities of regional cities.

Conceptualising regionality, therefore, requires attunement to the diversity and dynamism of non-metropolitan places, and the complex mobilities and imaginaries that constitute them. Rather than reifying ‘the region’ as a knowable, bounded space, we must attend to the multiple, shifting ways in which regions are invoked and invested with meaning in particular contexts. In an era of unprecedented transformation, there is an urgent need to develop more responsive and inclusive languages of regionality that do justice to the lived realities of places like Cairns. Only by recognising regions as fluid, multidimensional, and socially constructed can we move beyond the metropolitan/non-metropolitan binary and develop policies consistent with their complexity. The case of Cairns serves as a compelling example of how traditional regional classifications fall short in capturing an all-encompassing picture of modern regional cities. Its unique blend of urban amenities, diverse economy, and geographical position illustrates this gap.

The next chapter will study Cairns’ tropical urban setting to challenge existing regional paradigms and demonstrate how cities like Cairns necessitate a reconceptualisation of ‘region’. This reconceptualisation is crucial for understanding the complex dynamics that shape the liveability of different areas. As we shift our focus from understanding regions to exploring what makes them liveable, we encounter another complicated concept that has gained significant attention in urban planning, policy, and research: liveability.

2.2 Liveability

Liveability has emerged as a central concept in discussions about urban and regional development, reflecting a growing recognition of its profound impact on life satisfaction and overall well-being (Lloyd et al., 2016; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2013; Veenhoven, 2000). While there is no universally accepted definition, liveability is generally understood as the intersection of quality of life and well-being experienced by residents in a particular place (Badland et al., 2014; Ruth & Franklin, 2014; Sochacka et al., 2021). This concept has become a significant component within the broader framework of urban sustainability, though it diverges from sustainability in its focus and methodology (Gough, 2015; Istrate, 2019, 2022). In urban studies, liveability often serves as a bridge between quality of life and well-being, encompassing elements of both while maintaining its distinct characteristics. This positioning allows for a more comprehensive approach to understanding and improving urban environments, taking into account both objective measures of urban quality and subjective experiences of residents. Liveability encompasses a diverse range of interconnected factors that shape our daily lives and experiences, from housing and employment to social connections and environmental quality (Badland et al., 2014; Gough, 2015).

These factors span physical, social, economic, and environmental dimensions, reflecting the diverse needs and aspirations of urban inhabitants (Giap et al., 2014; Lloyd et al., 2016; Sepe, 2018; Southworth, 2016). Collectively, they contribute to making a place attractive, healthy, and conducive to human flourishing, ultimately influencing residents' sense of place and attachment to their community (Tournois, 2018). The complexity and breadth of liveability underscore its significance in contemporary urban research, as it directly impacts the quality of life for city dwellers. However, the intricate nature of liveability poses challenges for its conceptualisation and measurement. Academics and researchers employ various dimensions and factors to define and measure liveability, depending on their discipline, culture, and research goals (van Kamp et al., 2003; Pacione, 2003). This diversity in approach reflects the complex nature of the concept and the different priorities that various stakeholders may have when considering what makes a place liveable. Despite this variety, there is a growing consensus on the importance of incorporating both objective and subjective factors in conceptualising liveability (Evans, 2002; Namazi-Rad et al., 2016; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2013; Vine & Buys, 2010). Objective factors encompass tangible aspects of the living environment such as health, safety, education, and housing, while subjective factors relate to community and personal perceptions and evaluations of these conditions (Pacione, 2003).

In practice, the measurement and assessment of liveability have predominantly relied on objective indicators and indices, despite the growing recognition of the importance of subjective factors. Organisations such as the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Mercer, and the OECD have

developed liveability rankings and benchmarks based on quantitative metrics across domains including stability, healthcare, culture, environment, education, and infrastructure (EIU, 2021; Khalil, 2012). A scoping review by Khorrami et al. (2021) examines these liveability measurements, highlighting their reliance on objective indicators such as air quality, crime rates, educational attainment, and economic metrics. While these objective measures provide a foundation for comparison across cities, they may not fully capture the subjective experiences of residents. This limitation has led to an increasing recognition of the need for a more comprehensive approach to assessing liveability. The shortcomings of purely objective approaches to liveability have become increasingly apparent. While valuable, objective measures may not fully capture the lived experiences and subjective well-being of residents (Lloyd et al., 2016). They tend to prioritise externally defined criteria and may overlook locally specific factors that shape quality of life in particular contexts (Khorrami et al., 2021; Namazi-Rad et al., 2012; Perez et al., 2017). Moreover, the weightings and aggregation methods used in liveability indices are often opaque and contested, reflecting the values and priorities of the organisations constructing them rather than those of the residents themselves (Conger, 2015).

Subjective approaches foreground the importance of individual perceptions, emotions, and meanings in shaping the experience of place (Buys et al., 2013; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2013; Van Kamp et al., 2003). This shift recognises that people's lived experiences and personal interpretations of their environments are crucial to understanding liveability. Consequently, concepts such as sense of belonging and place attachment have been increasingly recognised as key components of liveability. These concepts reflect the emotional bonds and affinities that people develop with their environments over time, highlighting the complex interplay between individuals and their surroundings (Goldberg et al., 2012; Hogan et al., 2016; Mouratidis & Yiannakou, 2022). The subjective experience of liveability is shaped by a complex interplay of individual characteristics, expectations, and place-based factors. Perceptions of liveability may vary significantly based on personal attributes and experiences (Howley et al., 2009), underscoring the need for a multifaceted approach to understanding liveability. This recognition of the subjective nature of liveability calls for a more nuanced approach to its study and measurement.

Given the complex and subjective nature of liveability, the methodological approaches used to study it become crucial. To capture these diverse lived experiences, researchers must employ a range of methodologies, including qualitative, participatory, and ethnographic methods. These approaches can elicit rich, context-specific insights into the meanings and values that people ascribe to place, providing a more comprehensive understanding of liveability beyond quantitative measures alone (van Kamp et al., 2003). However, despite the recognised importance of such

subjective assessments, there is a notable lack of studies employing these approaches in liveability research (Khorrami et al., 2021). The dominance of quantitative methodologies in liveability research, which rely on objective indicators to construct comparative assessments of cities (Khorrami et al., 2021; Marans, 2012; Van Kamp et al., 2003), often obscures the rich tapestry of individual experiences and the social characteristics of specific locales. This methodological gap is particularly pronounced in the study of regional liveability, an area that has been largely overlooked in favour of metropolitan-focused research.

Choosing Cairns as the case study addresses a significant gap in liveability literature, which has predominantly focused on metropolitan contexts (Khorrami et al., 2021) while neglecting the specificities of regional and rural settings. The factors contributing to quality of life in smaller towns and rural environments can differ significantly from those in metropolitan areas. Regional liveability is shaped by distinct challenges and opportunities, such as access to services, employment prospects, community cohesion, and environmental amenity (Giles-Corti et al., 2022; Shucksmith et al., 2009). In recent years, liveability has emerged as a key driver of regional migration and population retention in many countries, with studies highlighting the role of specific liveability attributes in motivating people to move to and remain in regional areas. These attributes include affordable housing, strong community spirit, and easy access to nature (Bijker & Haartsen, 2012; Gkartzios, 2013). In an era of heightened mobility and competition for human capital, the liveability of regional places can be a decisive factor in attracting and retaining residents (Cresswell, 2014; Salama & Wiedmann, 2016). While these regional attributes contribute to liveability, understanding their impact requires considering individual perspectives and experiences.

Perceptions of regional liveability are shaped by various factors such as individual life stages, aspirations, and experiences of inclusion or exclusion (Browne et al., 2019; Namazi-Rad et al., 2016; Tournois, 2018). Strategies to enhance regional liveability must be attuned to the diverse needs and preferences of different population groups, from young families to aging residents (Beer et al., 2020). Moreover, efforts to promote liveability in regional contexts must grapple with structural challenges, such as limited economic opportunities, service provision, and connectivity. While quantitative approaches can differentiate areas based on variables such as housing, transportation, environmental conditions, and access to services (Valcárcel-Aguilar & Murias, 2018), they fail to capture the diverse individual experiences and social characteristics of specific locales (Boschmann & Cubbon, 2014; Elwood, 2006a; Nastar et al., 2019). The objective appraisal of quality of life is challenging due to the influence of local characteristics and value systems (Capitanio, 2018), and liveability rankings based on objective measures reflect the biases of the institutions that create them (Lloyd et al., 2016). Therefore, a more critical understanding of liveability is needed, one that

recognises the heterogeneity of conceptualisations and contexts (Sochacka et al., 2021). The complexity of regional liveability and the limitations of current assessment methods highlight the need for new research propositions and frameworks.

This gap in current liveability research methodologies and the need for a more context-specific approach will be addressed in chapter five, where alternative frameworks for assessing and understanding regional liveability will be explored. Building on this foundation, chapter six delves into a case study of Cairns, examining the discrepancies between amenity migrant expectations and experiences of liveability, thereby providing a concrete example of how these methodological considerations play out in a specific regional context. To establish the conceptual framework for this case study, the literature on amenity migration, which offers valuable insights into the motivations and experiences of those who relocate to areas perceived as having high liveability, will be reviewed next.

2.3 Amenity Migration

The Amenity migration has emerged as a significant phenomenon in recent decades, representing a distinct form of human mobility driven by the pursuit of a higher quality of life and the attraction of natural and cultural amenities in destination areas (Moss, 2006). Unlike labour migration or forced displacement, amenity migration is voluntary and primarily motivated by non-economic factors, such as the desire for a better lifestyle, a closer connection to nature, and an escape from urban pressures (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011; Glorioso & Moss, 2007). This trend reflects a broader shift in how people perceive and value rural and regional areas, particularly in the Australian context.

In Australia, the rise of amenity migration is closely intertwined with the transition from productivism to post-productivism in rural and regional areas. For much of the 20th century, Australian agricultural and rural policy was dominated by productivism, which emphasised maximising agricultural output through intensification, concentration, and specialisation (Argent, 2002). This approach viewed regional areas primarily through the lens of their productive capacity, particularly in agriculture and resource extraction. However, as Holmes (2006; 2008; 2009) argues, the Australian regional landscape has undergone a multifunctional transition, moving beyond the traditional productivism paradigm to encompass consumption and protection values. This multifunctional transition has created fertile ground for amenity migration, as rural and regional areas are increasingly valued not just for their productive capacity, but for their lifestyle and environmental attributes (Eimermann, 2015). While this shift aligns with broader global trends of post-productivism in regional areas, it has taken on distinctly Australian characteristics.

The 'sea change' and 'tree change' phenomena in Australia exemplify this shift, describing urban-to-rural coastal and inland migrations respectively (Burnley & Murphy, 2004; Osbaldiston, 2012). These movements have been driven by a complex interplay of factors, including early retirement, changing lifestyle preferences, and increasing work flexibility, particularly in the wake of technological advancements and the COVID-19 pandemic (Ragusa, 2010; Zenkteler et al., 2022). While the concept of amenity migration has its roots in the counterurbanisation literature examining urban-to-rural movement (Berry, 1976), it extends beyond this narrow definition. Amenity migration encompasses movement to various high-amenity areas, including coastal, mountain, and resort communities (Moss, 2006). In the Australian context, the key drivers of this migration align with global trends: the allure of natural and cultural amenities such as scenic beauty, outdoor recreation opportunities, a slower pace of life, and a strong sense of community (Argent & Plummer, 2022; Gosnell & Abrams, 2011; McGranahan, 1999; Ulrich-Schad, 2015). These factors combine to create a powerful motivating pull for those seeking to improve their quality of life through relocation.

The motivations and aspirations of amenity migrants are complex, centring around the pursuit of a better quality of life and lifestyle (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; Osbaldiston, 2022a; 2022b). Many are drawn to amenity-rich areas seeking escape from urban stressors such as long commutes, high crime rates, and environmental pollution (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011). The allure of living in a more natural and peaceful setting, where they can enjoy outdoor activities, fresh air, and a stronger sense of community, is a powerful draw (Moss, 2006). For some, the move represents a quest for a more authentic or meaningful life, often associated with the romanticised notion of the 'rural idyll' (Cortés-Vázquez, 2017; O'Reilly, 2007; Píša, 2019). However, the reality of amenity migration often diverges from these idyllic expectations.

The discrepancy between expectations and realities of amenity migration can be stark, often leading to significant challenges for migrants settling into their new communities, particularly in regional, rural, or remote areas. Migrants often harbor an idealised vision of their new life in a high-amenity area, underestimating the challenges and trade-offs involved in living in a rural or remote location (Matarrita-Cascante, 2017; Píša, 2019). They may not fully anticipate the costs of living, difficulties in finding suitable housing, or limited access to healthcare and other essential services. These unforeseen challenges can manifest in various forms, ranging from limited job opportunities and inadequate infrastructure to cultural differences between newcomers and long-time residents (Glorioso & Moss, 2007). Some amenity migrants may also grapple with a sense of isolation or disconnection from their previous social networks and support systems (Osbaldiston, 2010). Consequently, these obstacles can lead to disappointment, frustration, and in some cases, the decision to return to their previous location (Osbaldiston, 2010; Steiner, 2019).

The intersection of emotions with place-making in internal migration reveals a complex landscape where individuals forge attachments to new environments through various emotional and social processes. Emotional geographies have evolved significantly since Davidson et al.'s foundational work (2005). Recent studies, such as Datta (2018) and Berg (2020), emphasise the intersection of emotions with place-making in internal migratory contexts, highlighting different ways individuals form attachments to new environments. In regional migration studies, emotional geographies provide insights into how migrants negotiate belonging, identity, and community in diverse socio-spatial settings (Klocker et al., 2021).

While these immediate challenges are well-documented, the long-term experiences of amenity migrants remain understudied. Despite the importance of understanding how migrants' experiences evolve beyond their initial relocation, there is a notable lack of research examining the long-term, day-to-day interactions and entanglements of amenity migrants with their new rural environments. This gap in our understanding of the ongoing impacts and adaptations associated with this form of migration highlights the need for more comprehensive studies that explore the full trajectory of amenity migration experiences (Halfacree & Rivera, 2012).

The implications of amenity migration extend far beyond individual experiences, significantly impacting destination communities in complex and multifaceted ways (Åberg & Tondelli, 2021; Bartoš et al., 2008; Costello, 2007; Gosnell & Abrams, 2011). On one hand, this phenomenon can breathe new life into rural areas grappling with population decline and economic stagnation (Charnley et al., 2008; Moss, 2006). Amenity migrants often inject fresh skills, ideas, and entrepreneurial spirit into their adopted communities, helping to diversify local economies and create new employment opportunities (Vorobjevová & Novotná, 2020). Moreover, they can play a crucial role in revitalising local culture and heritage, while also contributing to the preservation of natural and cultural resources (Glorioso & Moss, 2007; Matarrita-Cascante, 2017).

However, the influx of amenity migrants is not without its challenges, particularly in terms of social and environmental sustainability (Abrams et al., 2012). One of the most significant issues is the potential for rising property values and housing costs, which can make it difficult for long-time residents to remain in their communities (Matarrita-Cascante & Stocks, 2013; Gosnell & Abrams, 2011; Osbaldiston, 2022b; Smith & Krannich, 2000; Williams & Gill, 2006). Additionally, the sudden population growth can strain local infrastructure and services and put pressure on the natural environment. These changes can exacerbate local inequalities, leading to social-spatial exclusion and community fragmentation (Abrams et al., 2012; Moss, 2006; Rainer, 2019). Given the complexity of

these challenges, a holistic and integrated approach is essential to address the needs and concerns of both newcomers and long-time residents (Moss, 2006).

In the Australian context, the impacts of amenity migration have been particularly pronounced in certain areas. The gentrification of regional landscapes, especially in peri-urban areas and coastal communities, has led to significant socio-economic changes (Argent et al., 2016; Gurran, 2008; Llausàs et al., 2016). Byron Bay in New South Wales serves as a prime example, having undergone rapid transformation due to amenity migration. This has resulted in housing affordability issues and alterations to the local cultural fabric (Gibson & Connell, 2003; Gurran, 2008). Similarly, the Victorian Alps region has experienced an influx of amenity migrants, bringing both opportunities and challenges to local communities (Buckley et al., 2006).

It is important to note that the Australian experience of amenity migration is not uniform across the country. Remote and very remote areas face distinct challenges and opportunities compared to peri-urban or high-amenity rural regions (Chipeniuk, 2007). The vast distances and sparse population characteristic of much of Australia's interior create unique considerations for both amenity migrants and policy makers. This diversity in landscape and varied experiences of amenity migration across Australia underscores the need for context-specific research.

To address this need, this thesis focuses specifically on the regional city of Cairns in Far North Queensland. This case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of several research gaps and future directions identified in this literature review. These include the need for more contextualised and people-centred approaches to regionality that capture the subjective and experiential dimensions of liveability, the importance of examining the discrepancies between migrants' expectations and experiences, and the necessity of exploring how amenity migrants' challenges shape migration outcomes. By concentrating on Cairns, this research seeks to provide nuanced insights into the complexities of amenity migration in a unique regional Australian setting. Drawing from these identified gaps and the broader themes that have emerged throughout this literature review, the following section synthesises the key concepts that form the theoretical foundation of this study.

2.4 Synthesis of the main themes

The interconnections between regionality, liveability, and amenity migration form a complex web that underpins this thesis. Understanding these relationships is crucial for addressing the intricacies of migration and liveability in places like Cairns. The way regionality is conceptualised and experienced directly influences perceptions of liveability and patterns of amenity migration, while

amenity migration, in turn, reshapes regional identities and transforms local understandings of what makes a place liveable. By situating Cairns within the broader context of regional migration in Australia, this thesis advances a deeper understanding of the unique characteristics and challenges of different regional contexts and how they shape migrant experiences and outcomes.

Regionality and liveability are inherently linked through the spatial and social characteristics that define different regions. The complexity and diversity of regional places (Crommelin & Osbaldiston, 2022; McManus & Pritchard, 2000) directly impact the liveability of these areas. For instance, the specific socio-economic and cultural attributes of a region can enhance or detract from its liveability (Kang et al., 2022). The availability of amenities, services, and infrastructure within a region determines the quality of life for its inhabitants, thereby influencing their perceptions and experiences of liveability (Badland et al., 2014; Mulligan & Carruthers, 2011). Liveability, in turn, is a key driver of amenity migration. People are drawn to regions that they perceive as offering a higher quality of life, encompassing not only natural and cultural amenities but also aspects such as safety, community cohesion, and economic opportunities (Glorioso & Moss, 2007; Moss, 2006). Amenity migrants often seek regions that promise a better lifestyle and well-being, as indicated by favourable liveability indicators. However, this migration can also impact the liveability of destination regions by introducing new social dynamics, economic activities, and potentially straining local resources and infrastructure.

The interplay between regionality and amenity migration is further evidenced in how regions are perceived and marketed as desirable destinations. The socio-spatial characteristics that define a region, including its natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and economic profile, are central to attracting amenity migrants (Mulligan & Carruthers, 2011). Regions that successfully leverage their unique attributes can position themselves as attractive destinations for those seeking to escape urban pressures and enhance their quality of life (Argent et al., 2010). However, this influx of migrants can also transform the very nature of these regions, creating a dynamic interplay between existing regional characteristics and the new socio-economic realities brought about by migration. This integrated perspective challenges us to engage with the complex processes through which regional places are continually reimagined and experienced by diverse actors. Building upon these complex interactions, this study proposes a conceptual framework that captures the detailed relationships between key elements identified in the literature review. The following section outlines this framework, which serves as the theoretical foundation for the research.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this thesis is anchored in the intricate interplay between regionality, liveability, and amenity migration. These three concepts form a complex triad, intertwining in ways that produce multilayered outcomes in regional contexts. This framework positions the study within the realm of complex systems theory, acknowledging that the relationships between these elements are characterised by twisted interactions that can produce unexpected results (Bakewell, 2014; de Haas, 2010; DeWaard & Ha, 2019; Huang & Butts, 2023; Liu et al., 2007).

At the core of this framework is the understanding that amenity migration, driven by perceptions of liveability, acts as a catalyst for significant changes in regional areas. Rather than causing mere incremental shifts, amenity migration has the potential to push a regional system past a tipping point, leading to a fundamental reorganisation of its social and ecological structures (Cumming et al., 2015; Walker and Salt, 2012). This perspective aligns with the observed impacts of amenity migration in regional contexts, where significant changes in land use patterns, economic structures, and social dynamics are evident (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011). It encompasses a cultural transformation that can lead to conflicts over the very meaning and representation of regionality itself (Nelson & Nelson, 2011; Thompson et al., 2016; Ghose, 2004). This framework suggests that amenity migration doesn't just change who lives in a region but can fundamentally alter what a region means and how it's understood by both long-term residents and newcomers.

Within this complex system, amenity migrants often face migration dilemmas stemming from the discrepancies between pre-migration imaginaries and post-migration realities (Benson, 2013). These dilemmas force migrants to continually renegotiate their relationship with place and community, contributing to the creation of a space of potential where alternative visions of regionality can emerge. This space is not just a conceptual construct but a lived experience where new ideas about regional identity, community, and place attachment are formed and tested. By framing the study within this complex systems approach, the research acknowledges the need for an interdisciplinary perspective to understand the intricate relationships between regionality, liveability, and amenity migration. This framework allows for an in-depth exploration of how changes in one aspect (e.g., amenity migration) may have far-reaching effects on others (e.g., liveability), providing a robust foundation for examining the sophisticated dynamics of regional development and migration in the context of Cairns.

Figure 1 illustrates the complex and dynamic relationships between these concepts as interconnected and reciprocal. The visual representation encapsulates the key arguments and

contributions of the thesis, revealing that the relationship between these concepts is not just interconnected, but fundamentally co-constitutive. As illustrated in the figure, liveability acts as a magnet for amenity migrants, while their migration, in turn, impacts the social, economic, and environmental factors that constitute liveability. This cyclical relationship creates a complex system of feedback loops that continually reshape the regional context. The challenges faced by amenity migrants influence their experiences of liveability, which in turn shape the evolving narrative of regionality. This dynamic conception of regionality shifts our understanding of place from a fixed entity to an ongoing process. It emphasises the embodied aspect of spatial experience over static representations (Buser, 2014), focusing on how regions are experienced and lived rather than merely described or categorised. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how people's day-to-day practices and interactions shape their sense of place and regional identity.

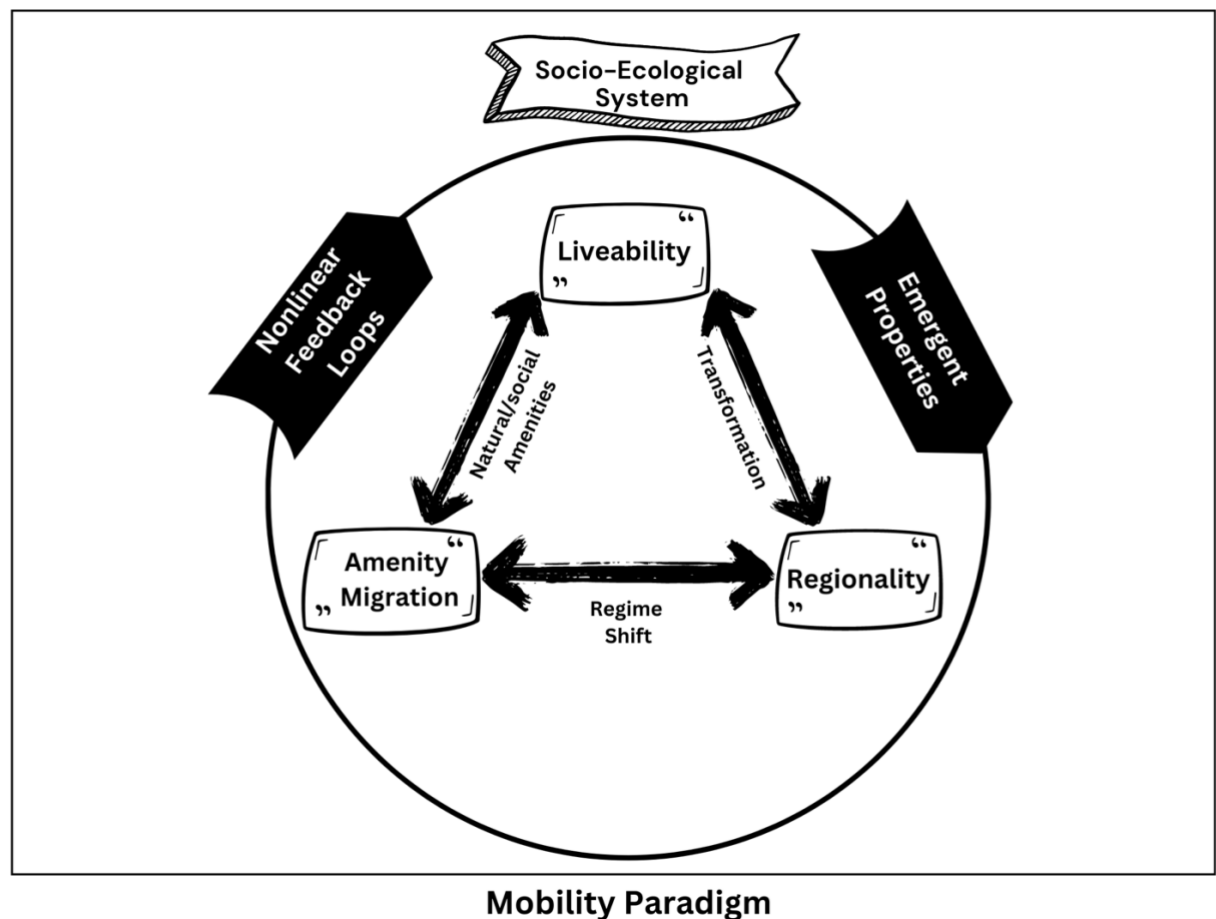


Figure 2-1 The thesis conceptual framework

The complex interplay between liveability, amenity migration, and regionality positions this thesis within the mobility paradigm – a shift in thinking that recognises social phenomena as

inherently shaped by various forms of movement and flow (Urry, 2012; Sheller & Urry, 2006). This paradigm challenges long-held notions of fixed communities and stable regional identities, instead proposing a more fluid and dynamic understanding of social spaces (Cresswell, 2006; Adey, 2006). It reframes our conception of regions as dynamic systems in constant flux, shaped by the continuous movement of people, ideas, and resources (Hannam et al., 2006; Massey, 2005; Cresswell, 2010). The mobility paradigm's emphasis on fluidity provides a lens through which we can examine how the influx of new residents, along with their ideas, values, and practices, interacts with existing regional dynamics (Bell & Osti, 2010; Halfacree, 2012; 2014). This approach allows us to explore how these movements not only alter the physical and social fabric of regions but also influence liveability and reshape regional identities. Moreover, it encourages us to consider the reciprocal nature of these flows, examining how regions themselves are not just passive recipients of mobile populations but are actively involved in attracting, repelling, and shaping these movements (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014). By embracing the mobility paradigm, this theoretical framework sets the stage for a dynamic analysis of the relationships between amenity migration, regionality, and liveability through the thesis' mixed-method methodology.

To operationalise this theoretical framework, a carefully crafted methodological approach is essential. The subsequent chapter presents the study's epistemological and methodological underpinnings, carefully crafted to align with and illuminate the complex dynamics of regional migration and liveability outlined earlier. At its core, the research adopts an integrated paradigm that combines constructivism and interpretivism, enabling a thorough examination of both societal constructs and individual lived experiences. This paradigmatic approach informs a mixed-methods methodology that leverages the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research traditions.

Chapter Three: A Note on Methodology

Building upon the theoretical foundations laid out in the previous chapter, this chapter explains the epistemological framework that guides my investigation. It outlines how the integration of constructivism and interpretivism enables a rich exploration of regional migration and liveability in Australia. The intricate interplay between these phenomena demands a multidimensional approach that can bridge theoretical understanding with lived experiences. By adopting this integrated epistemological framework, the study harnesses the complementary strengths of both constructivism and interpretivism. This approach allows for a critical examination of the socially and politically constructed nature of regional Australia, while simultaneously interpreting migrants' experiences within this broader context. Such a perspective is crucial for understanding the complex dynamics at play in regional migration and liveability.

The chapter first presents this epistemological approach, explaining how it informs and shapes the research methodology. While a brief overview of the methodological approaches will be presented here, more specific methodological details pertaining to individual research components will be discussed in their respective chapters. Through this framework, the study offers insights that connect macro-level societal constructs with micro-level individual narratives, providing a holistic understanding of regional migration and liveability in the Australian context.

3.1 Constructivism and Interpretivism

Central to this study's epistemological approach is the integration of two complementary paradigms: constructivism and interpretivism. These paradigms work in tandem to provide a comprehensive lens through which to examine the complex phenomena of migration and liveability in regional Australia. By combining these perspectives, this research delves into both the socially constructed nature of regional spaces and the individual interpretations of those who inhabit them.

The constructivist paradigm posits that social reality is constructed through human interaction and interpretation (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Kamal, 2019). This perspective allows for a critical examination of how the concept of 'regional Australia' is constructed and maintained in various discourses. By problematising the notion of 'region', the study can move beyond monolithic representations to uncover the diverse and possibly contradictory ways in which 'regional' is defined and experienced. This approach enables the exploration of how social, political, and cultural narratives collectively shape the regional identity, adding layers of complexity to its understanding (Allen & Davey, 2018).

Building on this foundation, an interpretivist approach explores the subjective experiences of migrants in regional areas. Interpretivism acknowledges the existence of multiple realities and emphasises the importance of understanding phenomena through the perspectives of those involved (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). This paradigm posits that social reality is inherently subjective and can only be fully comprehended through the lens of individual experiences and meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By rejecting the notion of a single, objective truth, interpretivism recognises that knowledge is socially constructed and context dependent, offering a framework that values the nuanced and personal dimensions of human experience.

The interpretivist paradigm is particularly suited to this study as its emphasis on contextual understanding allows for a deep exploration of how migrants interpret and navigate their new environments. It acknowledges that the concept of 'liveability' in regional areas is not a fixed, universal construct, but rather a fluid notion shaped by personal histories, cultural backgrounds, and individual aspirations. This perspective reveals how migrants engage in continuous sense-making processes to align their expectations with their lived realities. By examining the interaction between individual and collective experiences, the study aims to uncover the dynamic interplay between migrants' pre-existing frameworks of understanding and their evolving perceptions of place and belonging in regional Australia.

Contemporary scholarship continues to expand the boundaries of constructivism and interpretivism. Recent works, such as William (2024), emphasise the importance of these paradigms to explore the fluid and socially constructed nature of social phenomena. While constructivism provides a critical lens for analysing broader societal constructs of regionality, interpretivism offers insights into individual experiences and perceptions within these constructed frameworks. This integrated approach bridges macro and micro perspectives, connecting larger societal discourses with individual narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Hoey, 2014). It facilitates an exploration of the dialectical relationship between structure and agency in the context of regional migration, revealing how migrants both adapt to and transform their new environments.

To operationalise this integrated epistemological approach, the study employs a methodology that includes a range of qualitative, participatory, and quantitative methods. These methods are carefully selected to capture the complexities of migrant experiences and perceptions within a socially and politically constructed context. The research design reflects this integrated epistemological approach, progressing from constructivist analysis to interpretivist exploration.

3.2 Methodological Approaches

The study employs an integrated methodological approach that reflects its epistemological foundation in constructivism and interpretivism. Rather than strictly sequential phases, these paradigms inform and interact with each other throughout the research process. The constructivist lens is applied to critically examine how 'region' and 'liveability' are understood and constructed in the Australian context, involving analysis of policy documents, media representations, and academic literature. Also, interpretivist methods are employed to explore individual migrant experiences, prioritising the subjective meanings attributed to migration experiences and perceptions of liveability. This approach allows for an examination of how broader societal constructs intersect with and shape individual interpretations, and vice versa.

The methodology incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. Document analysis, narrative interviews, and participatory mapping techniques are complemented by demographic data analysis and GIS. This mixed-methods approach enables triangulation of findings and a more in-depth exploration of the complex interplay between socially constructed concepts and lived experiences. These methods allow me to better understand how amenity migrants construct their understandings and interpret their experiences within a tropical urban setting. Among these methods, qualitative GIS can be a particularly powerful tool.

Qualitative GIS (qual-GIS) integrates spatial and narrative data to provide a more holistic understanding of social phenomena (Elwood & Cope, 2009; Kwan & Ding, 2008). This methodology merges the analytical capabilities of GIS with the depth and richness of qualitative data (Jung & Elwood, 2010). Integrating qual-GIS into the research methodology, allows for a more spatially informed understanding of regional migration and liveability, aligning with both constructivist and interpretivist paradigms. From a constructivist perspective, it visually deconstructs the concept of 'regionality' by revealing diverse spatial realities. Interpretively, it provides a means to spatially contextualise individual narratives.

These narratives were captured through episodic narrative interviews, a powerful qualitative method for capturing the 'small stories' and everyday experiences that are often overlooked in traditional migration research (Bamberg, 2006; Eastmond, 2007; Georgakopoulou, 2006). In this thesis, episodic narrative interviews are used to explore the lived experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns, focusing on their journey from arrival to settlement and beyond, and their perceptions and experiences of liveability. This approach aligns with the interpretivist aspect of the research paradigm, allowing for a deep dive into individual interpretations and meanings attributed to the

migration experience. By focusing on personal stories, these interviews provide a counterpoint to the broader constructivist analysis of 'regionality', offering insights into how migrants experience these regional contexts. This holistic understanding bridges the gap between a socially constructed concept and lived realities within it.

While qual-GIS and episodic narrative interviews offer rich qualitative insights, a comprehensive understanding of amenity migration and liveability in Cairns also requires quantitative data. This mixed-methods approach aligns with the growing recognition in migration studies of the value of combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies to provide a more holistic understanding of complex phenomena (Castles, 2012). To address this need, the research incorporates surveys and Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) as complementary methods. Surveys serve as a fundamental tool for collecting structured data from a sample of amenity migrants, while IPA offers a powerful analytical tool for interpreting this data.

In this study, IPA serves not only as a tool for data interpretation but also as a strategic means to uncover the key factors shaping liveability perceptions among amenity migrants. By mapping various attributes based on their perceived importance and performance, IPA provides a clear visual representation of areas requiring attention and improvement. This method proves particularly valuable in this research context, as it effectively bridges the gap between qualitative insights and quantitative rigor, yielding actionable insights into the priorities and satisfaction levels within the migrant population. A more detailed discussion of the research methods will be provided in chapters five and six.

3.3 Rationales and Ethical considerations

As I argued earlier, the complexity and diversity of migrant experiences demand a multifaceted methodological approach. This study employs a combination of methods to capture the varied stories of migrants. Given the sensitive and personal nature of these narratives, ethical considerations are paramount in the research design and execution. Prior to data collection, I obtained ethics approval (H8382) from James Cook University, ensuring the study adhered to rigorous ethical standards. Throughout the research process, I prioritised participants' informed consent, confidentiality, and well-being, following strict ethical protocols at every stage.

As a researcher with a migrant background, I recognise the potential influence of my personal experiences and perspectives on this study. This positionality, coupled with an awareness of the complex power dynamics inherent in migration research, necessitated a reflexive approach. To address this, I openly disclosed my migrant status at the beginning of each interview. This

transparency served a dual purpose: it helped establish trust with participants and provided essential context for our discussions. By acknowledging my position, I aimed to enhance the integrity of the research process and the authenticity of the data collected, ultimately strengthening the credibility of the findings. These methodological and ethical considerations form the foundation of my research approach. They ensure that the study not only captures the rich tapestry of migrant experiences but does so in a manner that is respectful, ethical, and cognizant of the complexities involved in migration research.

Chapter Four: Understanding the 'Region'

This chapter addresses the first research question of this thesis. It investigates where the concept of regional Australia, and where Cairns fits within this conceptual and geographic landscape. By critically examining the various ways in which 'regional' is defined, classified, and operationalised in the Australian context, this chapter lays the foundation for a more contextualised understanding of region and its implications for migration patterns, liveability metrics, and socio-economic development trajectories. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from human geography, spatial economics, and critical regionalism studies, this chapter problematises the very notion of 'region' as a fixed, objective category. It argues that regions are not merely administrative units or geographic designations, but socially constructed spaces imbued with cultural meanings, economic functions, and political significance (Paasi, 2020; Jessop et al., 2008). By adopting a relational approach to space and place (Massey, 2005), the chapter explores how different scalar conceptualisations of 'regional' Australia are constructed, contested, and reconfigured through various discursive and material practices.

Using Cairns as a focal point for analysis, this chapter situates the city within the broader context of regional migration in Australia, highlighting its distinctive features as a cosmopolitan, urban centre that defies simplistic urban-rural dichotomies. Through a multi-scalar analysis, it examines how Cairns simultaneously embodies characteristics of a regional hub, a tourist destination, and an emerging economy, thus challenging monolithic understandings of regional identity and function. The chapter conducts a critical analysis of various classification systems, including the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS), Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Area (RRMA), and Modified Monash Model (MMM). By deconstructing the assumptions of these taxonomies, it demonstrates how different definitions and classifications of 'regional' are constructed to address specific political, social, and economic agendas. This analysis reveals the power dynamics inherent in spatial categorisation and how these classifications shape resource allocation, policy formulation, and public perceptions of regional areas.

Furthermore, the chapter argues that these rigid classification systems often fail to capture the dynamism and heterogeneity of regional migration patterns and lived experiences, particularly in the context of COVID-19-induced mobility. By employing a mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006), it explores how the pandemic has disrupted traditional understandings of urban-regional divides, necessitating a more fluid and interconnected conceptualisation of spatial relations. This chapter contributes to theoretical debates on the social and political construction of regions and regional identities, drawing on insights from geography, regional studies, and migration literature.

By challenging essentialist notions of 'regional Australia' and highlighting the diversity of regional contexts, it advances a more relational and processual understanding of regions as historically contingent, multiply scaled, and shaped by complex power dynamics (Paasi, 2020; Allen & Cochrane, 2007).

This following has been published as a research paper titled **"Understanding the 'region' in COVID-19-induced regional migration: mapping Cairns across classification systems"** in the Australian Geographer journal: Dadpour, R., & Law, L. (2022). Understanding the 'region' in COVID-19-induced regional migration: mapping Cairns across classification systems. Australian Geographer, 53(4), 425–443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2022.2059128>

4.1 Introduction

This article is a critical reflection on a broader national conversation regarding internal migration from capital cities to regional Australia in a context of COVID-19. A dominant discourse in media and government as well as grey literature published by political or professional bodies, reports, essentialises and conflates 'regional' with 'remote' and 'rural' despite the possibility that migrants might be moving to regional places in commuting distance to capital cities, many of which are highly urban. We are interested in how a dominant discourse essentialises 'regional' as a knowable, not-urban entity—a tendency also found in the counter-urbanisation literature. Of course, the concept of counter-urbanisation is not homogenous, with Halfacree (1994) labeling it a chaotic concept and Mitchell (2004) criticising inconsistency in its scope and definition some time ago. From the early days of its inception, however, scholars such as Berry (1980) described counterurbanisation as the antithesis to urbanisation, and a process of population decentralisation away from urban areas. Most of the literature on counter-urbanisation focuses on characteristics such as pro-rural lifestyle choices, upward-class aspirations and issues related to ageing populations in regional areas (Bijker & Haartsen, 2012; Gkartzios, 2013; Guran-Nica & Sofer, 2012; White, 2018). We think the current context, including the economic recession due to COVID-19, might offer new insights and approaches to conceptualising counter-urbanisation.

This paper represents a first step in understanding the issues from our vantage point in Cairns, Queensland, a small, cosmopolitan regional city with an international airport. COVID-19 initiated a 'tenancy crisis' in the city, with industry representatives pointing to migration/relocations from southern states as well as owners returning from around Australia and overseas and re-taking possession of previous investment properties (TropicNow, 2021). In the context of COVID-19, we might interpret the 'crisis' through the prism of counter-urbanisation from capital cities. But given

the longer-term international and inter-regional migration history to Cairns, we also suspect other forces at play that are silenced by a dominant counter-urban narrative. Cairns lost its international migrants with national borders closed, for example, and likely held onto potential capital city migrants during the pandemic—possibly young migrants worried about heading to capital cities in lockdown. Moreover, Cairns does not represent the ‘rural idyll’ portrayed in the media when referring to COVID-19 regional migration, although the city is esteemed for its position between two World Heritage listed areas: the Wet Tropics Rainforest and the Great Barrier Reef.

Cairns city is a commercial centre and major transport hub for Far North Queensland, and stretches 52 km from north to south. The city is 1,700 km north of Brisbane, and 350 km north of Townsville, and its closest capital city is Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, 845 km to the north. There are 168,449 people living in the Cairns Regional Council’s boundary (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020), and the top 5 employment industries are health care and social assistance, accommodation and food, construction, retail trade and education and training (.id 2021). Also worth mentioning is that 34.3% of resident workers (i.e. 24,865 people) had a tertiary education qualification in the 2016 Census, and women account for 51.9% of the total workforce in all industries compared to 48.1% for men (ibid). The Cairns Gross Regional Product (GRP) grew 2.64% over 2020/21 to AU \$10,591 million, accounting for 2.75% of Queensland’s Gross State Product (ibid). More- over, with reliable digital infrastructure, excellent air and marine ports and competitive market access Cairns is promoted as an exceptional base and platform for entrepreneur- ship and businesses growth and development.

Despite having a well-established agriculture sector—mainly sugarcane and large- scale vegetable production—Cairns is much more than an agriculture and farming centre. Agriculture is not among the top 10 employer sectors in Cairns. The most productive industry in Cairns, Health Care and Social Assistance, generated an estimated AU\$1,228 million in 2020/21 compared to the AU\$142.3 million by agriculture, forestry and fishery all together (.id 2021). This sophisticated economic and social profile of Cairns highlights the need for a more customised understanding of ‘region’ in the migration debate—one which acknowledges a range of different places outside metropolitan areas compared to the male-dominated, agri-centred, remote image of regional Australia in the popular media. Indeed, we see the need to deconstruct the idea of ‘region’ mobilised in the Australian COVID-19 context, revealing the limits of its explanatory power and its cultural construction in the Australian milieu.

To address these issues and themes we have organised the paper as follows. First, we explore the unique way that ‘regional’ is understood in Australia, particularly how it is deployed in

popular discourse around COVID-19 and migration. We draw on cultural critiques to suggest an ‘othering’ of regional Australia, negatively constructing it as ‘not metropolitan’. Second, we glean insights from discussions in geography and regional studies that help unpack the idea of ‘region’. These scholars argue regions are not onto- logical realities and instead are constituted in distinct socio-cultural and political con- texts: insights that are helpful for our exploration of how ‘regional’ is constructed as a knowable category in Australia. It is in this context that we explore how the terminology of ‘regional’ is deployed in different official geographical classification systems in the Australian context. As Cairns does not fit neatly into these categories, the final part of the paper explores how we might insert Cairns into a more diverse understanding of region—one able to differentiate it from regional cities in Australia’s sprawling metropolitan zones. Throughout we use publicly available datasets published by federal, state and/ or local governments and organisations or other information outlets such as news media. Our conclusions explore the possibility of using a more variegated framework for under- standing migration to/in Far North Queensland.

4.2 Culturally constructing the ‘region’

In contemporary political and media discourses [rural and regional are] often defined by what [they are] not; that is, it is not metropolitan Australia. This form of definition says nothing about what rural and regional Australia is, or about the difference between rural and regional. It also associates regions with non-metropolitan areas, thereby ignoring relationships between cities and regions.

—McManus and Pritchard (2000, 383)

Since the early 2020s COVID-19 has dominated the Australian media, as everywhere. The media plays an important role in shaping and manipulating meaning and influencing public perceptions (O’Keefe 2011, 206; Eberl et al. 2018, 207; Eveland & Scheufele 2000, 209). An intuitive sense of a highly specific ‘regional’ being propagated in the media inspired us to do a cursory desktop search of online articles published on the ABC News broadcast platform (<https://www.abc.net.au>) in 2020 and 2021. Our search terms were ‘regional migration’, ‘treechange’ and ‘seachange’, and we only included articles with explicit focus on migration from capital cities to regional areas. We found 41 articles specifically focusing on such moves with many of these corresponding to campaigns initiated by local councils and think tanks such as the Regional Australia Institute (RAI) (i.e. organisations with vested interests in COVID-19-induced migration during lockdowns in big cities). We deliberately did not include articles focusing on housing market booms, local responses to in-migration or job vacancies and employment opportunities in regional

areas post COVID-19. Instead, the broader theme of migration from capital cities to regional towns and cities set the parameters of the search.

All articles deployed ideas/constructs such as ‘beach life’, ‘farm life’, ‘simple life’, ‘regional affordability’, ‘lack of commuting’ and ‘lifestyle advantages’ in regional areas (e.g. Kelly, 2020; Pollard, 2021; Schwartz & Lloyd, 2020; Terzon, 2021a; 2021b; Winter, 2020; Morris, 2021). Common and repeated words reinforcing dominant perceptions of migration from capital cities to regional areas included: ‘the great escape’, ‘city exodus’, ‘fleeing’ or ‘ditching’ cities for regions (Terzon, 2021a; 2021b; Hynninen, 2021). In other words, the authors suggest (and in some cases even encourage) a shift to less urban living and emphasise the ‘highest records of regional migration’ (Pollard, 2021). Such portrayal does not capture those moving to places with decent infrastructure, airports, modern architecture and building design, or places in commuting distance to capital cities. In Far North Queensland where we live, we question whether the reported exodus from capital cities like Brisbane includes those moving north to more remote, non-urban parts of Queensland or if the Brisbane exodus simply reflects people moving to the nearby Gold Coast or Sunshine Coast—places that could be defined as ‘urban’ if we consider population size, land area, population density and economic and social structure (Weeks & Jürgens, 2010). These regional places have infrastructures and services that hardly represent a ‘rural idyll’ or a ‘move to the bush’—and bear more resemblance to what are now being called e-change locations (Guaralda et al., 2020). These proximate places provide new opportunities for commuting into Brisbane for work on an ad hoc basis—a flexible work environment enabled by COVID-19.

In their analysis of regional Australia, set in a context of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation politics and regional disparity, McManus and Pritchard (2000) propose an ‘othering’ of rural and regional in Australia we think is relevant here. As their introductory quote to this section implies, in the Australian popular imagination the region is profoundly shaped by what it is not/its negative identity presenting challenges for the geographical, social and/or political analyses of these areas. Although the COVID-19 pandemic context is different to the one shaping McManus and Pritchard’s analysis two decades ago, this historical construction of regional Australia as ‘not metropolitan’ persists and often implies ‘rural’ or ‘not urban’—an outcome of cultural habits of thinking about areas outside of capital cities (ibid:383; see also Lockie, 2000). We think this ‘non-metropolitan’ othering is also relevant in the dominant discourse of COVID-19 migration—mapping onto larger fears about the spread of the virus in dense urban contexts—with a focus on people fleeing the big cities for the regions. Metropolitan areas are densely populated urban cores surrounded by less-populated areas (urban and/or rural exurban) that share industries, infrastructures, travel networks and housing (Squires, 2002). Although areas that are not in a metropolitan area can be deemed ‘non-

metropolitan' (Hall et al., 2006), it is important to note that metropolitan vs. non-metropolitan is not a synonym for urban vs. rural. It is a cultural construction of regional Australia that portrays these areas as agriculture-based and unpopulated.

As we will discuss in more detail below, the region in this sense is not a material manifestation of rural or regional culture or remoteness in Australia. Definitions of regional include or exclude, depending on context; for example, those focusing on agriculture tend to exclude peri-urban, coastal and lifestyle regions (McManus & Pritchard, 2000:383). Thus, in addition to cultural constructions, political/policy constructions of areas outside the boundaries of capital cities also help shape the image (and reality) of regional Australia. The region is a highly constructed political territory in Australia, not only by think tanks such as the Regional Australia Institute but also through political processes and policies aimed at fostering development, inclusion or some other wider agenda in non-metropolitan areas. It is this constructed notion of the region to which we now turn.

4.3 Politically constructing the 'region'

To explore the political construction of the 'region' being deployed in dominant discourse, this section draws on debates that understand spatial categories like 'region' as socially and politically constructed, and as an outcome of policies and processes, rather than an existing object of analysis (cf Fricke & Gualini, 2018). We do not see regions as having a series of 'traits' that can somehow be uncovered and better understood; instead, we focus on 'processes' that generate regions as seemingly knowable geographies (Law & Goss, 2010). In other words, we assume no ontological reality of 'region' in the migration debate. We see the emergence of 'regional Australia' during the COVID-19 pandemic as an outcome of various discourses, practices and representations that make it visible, and as being forged through a complex 'lattice of articulations' (Allen et al., 2012; Goodwin, 2013).

There are many different and sometimes contradictory definitions of the region in the literature, with 'region' equally referring to geographical spaces, economic interactions, governmental jurisdictions or social and cultural characteristics (Van Langenhove, 2013). Moreover, different academic disciplines focus their research on various aspects of regions and regionalism including governance, integration and trade arrangements (ibid). The concept of region is nevertheless taken for granted in much scholarship, even though a wider body of literature understands 'regions' as historically contingent and constructed in social practice and in wider constellations of power. As Paasi (2011) argues, 'relatively little attention has been paid to such major questions as what is a region, how it 'becomes', how diverging regions exist and how social

power is involved in region-building processes.’ Paasi (ibid) goes so far as to say there have been little achieved in terms of the conceptual development of ‘the region’.

One of the key issues Carter and Pasquier (2010) identify in their analysis of regions as spaces for politics is the extent to which regions are constructed as ‘objects’ or ‘subjects’ of political change. They review research critiquing the ‘territorial politics’ approach in regional studies—an approach where the bounded territory is equated with region—arguing it fails to capture global complexities of twenty-first-century society, culture and governance. Regional borders are routinely crossed, the culture of so-called regions is shaped by constant fluxes of mobile subjects, and global connectedness has changed the way goods and even policies cross borders. Scholars such as Allen et al. (2012), Amin (2004) and Amin and Thrift (2002) have advocated more ‘relational’ ways of understanding regions that theorise these geographies of connection and the porosity of territorial borders. The post-modern extreme of this conversation seeks to ‘write territory out’ of regional studies altogether, although some scholars suggest such border-less geography is unhelpful in a world where ballot boxes and political jurisdictions continue to matter in important ways (Carter & Pasquier, 2010: 283). Mediating these diverse views, and perhaps most relevant to our own thinking here, Carter and Pasquier (ibid:284) suggest we ponder ‘the question of ‘how’ and ‘when’ territory matters in the construction of connected regions’—a field that remains under-theorised. Their own interest is in constructing the region as a site of politics, and how ‘shared social and political representations, cultural values, territorial discourses and regional practices all become stabilised and legitimised as representative of the region’ (ibid:287). Their particular formulation displaces notions of regions as territorial ‘objects’ and instead regions become ‘subjects’ of change.

To tease out this idea a little more, we now explore how the terminology of ‘regional’ is used in different geographical classification systems in the Australian context. Table 1 provides an overview of a selection of these classification systems, all of which are used by various government bodies and organisations. We include classifications that are actively in use regardless of scope or purpose.

It should be noted that Table 1 does not include Remoteness Area (RA) indices such as the Australian Standard Geographical Classification RA (ASGC-RA) and the Australian Statistical Geography Standard RA (ASGS-RA). These remoteness classifications originated from the Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) to determine relative access to services. The ARIA is produced, maintained and updated by the Hugo Centre for Population and Migration Studies, The University of Adelaide, with its latest version (ARIA++) produced in 2016 (Australian Centre for Housing Research, n.d.).

Classification System	Classification's Scale							
ARIA Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia	HIGHLY ACCESSIBLE	ACCESSIBLE	MODERATELY ACCESSIBLE*			REMOTE	VERY REMOTE	
ASGC Australian Standard Geographical Classification	MAJOR CITIES		REGIONAL			REMOTE	VERY REMOTE	
			inner regional	outer regional*				
RRMA Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas	METROPOLITAN		RURAL			REMOTE		
	capital city	other metropolitan areas	large rural centres*	small rural centres	other rural areas	remote centres	other remote areas	
LGA Local Government Areas	CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICTS	METROPOLITAN SUBURBS	PERI-URBAN AREAS	REGIONAL CITIES*		RURAL AREAS		
MMM Modified Monash Model	METROPOLITAN		REGIONAL*	RURAL			REMOTE	VERY REMOTE
				large	medium	small		

* denotes where Cairns is placed in each classification

Figure 4-1 Regional Australia Classifications/how 'regional' is constructed in Australia.

In geographical terms remoteness can be interpreted as 'access to a range of services, some of which are available in smaller and others in larger centres: the remoteness of a location can thus be measured in terms of how far one has to travel to centres of various sizes' (DHAC & GISCA 2001). However, Remoteness Area (RA) indices are not as simple. ARIA, and all its enhanced versions, combines a locality's road distance to nearest service centres of various sizes to classify the locality into one of the categories of accessibility and remoteness. There are five categories of remoteness in ARIA+/++: highly accessible, accessible, moderately accessible, remote, very remote (Australian Centre for Housing Research, n.d.) compared to four categories in ARIA (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004).

ARIA is widely used in Australia as a 'nationally consistent measure of geographic remoteness' according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Bureau Of Statistics, 2021a). Government agencies and the private sector use remoteness indices such as ARIA or ASGS-RA for different purposes including classifying Census Collection Districts (CDs) which share common characteristics for census purposes. These CDs are then categorised into broad geographical regions called Remoteness Areas (RAs) (Australian Bureau Of Statistics, 2006a). For example, the Australian Department of Health (2021) uses the ARIA remoteness classification in combination with General

Practitioner (GP) isolation for their Rural Retention Program (McGrail & Humphreys, 2009b). This program –Rural Retention Program: Central Payments System Guidelines– aims to retain long-serving GPs in non-metropolitan areas by location-based payment systems.

Most of the classification systems in Table 1 are based on remoteness indices that focus only on relative access to services. These remoteness indices do not include other helpful criteria such as levels of urbanisation and/or population density in determining what might constitute regional in non-metropolitan spaces (Smailes et al., 2002). The RRMA system is the only one that incorporates a personal distance index (the average distance between residents within a given spatial data unit) in its methodology (AHWC, 2004). According to 2020 Estimated Resident Population (ERP), Regional Australia has a gross population density of 1.08 persons per square kilometre (Australian Bureau Of Statistics, 2006b; .id, 2021). Such extreme low density is regarded as ‘rural’ in most international gross population density spectrums. However, the density variable in the geography of ‘regional Australia’ is complicated due to the highly dispersed population; hence, population density varies widely.

Even though remoteness plays a substantial role in defining ‘regional’ or ‘rural’ in different classification systems, a remoteness index cannot necessarily be considered a stand-alone classification system for geographical localities as it takes into account only one aspect, i.e. distance to services, and ignores other measures such as socioeconomic status, Indigenous status or local town size. As our aim is to unpack the ‘region’ in geographical classification systems, Table 1 only includes those that go beyond access and include a more integrated approach.

Different geographical classification systems can help policy makers and the public to understand complex differences between areas, but it also poses the question of possible effects on communities and people who live in specific geographical locations (Pateman, 2011). Some classifications shape the provision of government services; others are used as a tool in policy development, implementation and/or evaluation to better target programs in different parts of Australia. Taxation offices, healthcare workforce allocation systems, immigration point-based processes, regional arts funding and regional universities all use different classification systems for their specific purposes. The use of various classification systems can lead to confusion and inequity in the distribution of resources (Bennett et al., 2019). Here we detail the structure and explain some examples for each classification system to illustrate this point.

4.3.1 ASGC

The Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) is a hierarchical geographical classification system developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) for the collection and

dissemination of statistical data. The ABS's goal for developing ASGC classification was to have a framework that enables the production of comparable and spatially integrated data (Australian Bureau Of Statistics, 2021b).

ASGC is based on an enhanced measure of remoteness (ARIA+) developed by The National Key Centre for Social Applications of Geographical Information Systems (GISCA). Both ARIA and its enhanced version, ARIA+, index values of localities are calculated in a similar manner. They both calculate distances from populated localities to service centres based on minimum road distance (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004).

ASGC was last updated in 2006 (ABS 2006a) but it is still being used by different government departments for varying purposes. For example, international medical graduates can reduce the 10-year period of working in a Distribution Priority Area (areas with insufficient access to medical services) through a program called Moratorium Scaling Credits, which are based on the ASGC classification system (Department of Health, 2021).

ASGS: In 2011 the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) replaced ASGC with a new—albeit very similar looking—classification called the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) (Australian Bureau Of Statistics, 2021b). The ASGS is a social geography classification which reflects the location of people and communities. It is updated every 5 years to account for changes in Australia's population, economy, infrastructure and other social, geographical and economic elements (Australian Bureau Of Statistics, 2021a).

The ASGS was last updated in July 2021 and will be referred to as ASGS Edition 3. It comes in two parts: ABS and Non-ABS Structure. The ABS Structure includes geographies that the ABS designs specifically for the release and analysis of statistics while the Non-ABS Structure refers to administrative regions which are not defined or maintained by the Australian Bureau Of Statistics.

Currently ASGS is used, for example, to determine the regional status of domestic students in Australia. It is used to calculate the number of students from a metropolitan, regional or remote area. A regional student can be either from an Inner Regional or Outer Regional area as defined under the ASGS (Tertiary Collection of Students Information, n.d.). It is also being used in the Destination Australia Scholarship, an Australian government initiative to encourage domestic and international students to study in regional universities. This initiative uses ASGS to determine eligibility for funding under Destination Australia Scholarship (Destination Australia, 2021).

Although it is believed that ASGS provides a more comprehensive way of defining statistical geography in Australia compared to the ASGC (Australian Bureau Of Statistics, 2021a), Brokensha,

Taylor, and Carson (2014) argue the change from ASGC to ASGS predominately benefits research in densely populated urban areas while limiting the scope of possible research in regional areas. They argue that the change from ASGC to ASGS in 2011 has reduced the 'localness' of data (i.e. the ability to discern local demographic trends) in the Northern Territory (NT) and several other remote areas. Moreover, this change resulted in the loss of 30 statistical local areas for the NT. All lost statistical local areas were mapped to discrete Indigenous communities in sparsely populated areas of the NT. Brokensha, Taylor, and Carson (2014) argue these changes reduced the capacity of researchers and policy makers to examine and understand demographic and social trends at local level.

4.3.2 MMM

The Modified Monash Model (MMM) is another product of the Department of Health developed in 2015 and last updated in July 2019 to better target incentive payments for rural doctors and is based on studies at Monash University (McGrail & Humphreys, 2009b; Humphreys et al., 2012). The MMM categorises metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas according to geographical remoteness based on ASGS-RA in conjunction with city/town sizes. In this classification a location can be defined in one of the seven categories from MMM1 to MMM7.

Several Government health and mental health programmes determine clients' eligibility for specific services using the MMM. For example, for patients to receive Medicare rebates on telehealth psychology they need to be in a MMM4 to MMM7 area at the time of service (Australian Psychological Society, n.d.). According to the Australian Government Department of Health (n.d) the MMM is used to determine eligibility for a range of health workforce programs, such as Rural Bulk Billing Incentives, Workforce Incentive Programs, and health workforce Distribution Priority Areas (DPA). Also, The Regional Arts Fund (RAF) uses the MMM classification system to determine the geographical class of a location receiving funding, for example. Regional Arts Fund applicants must be based in a location outside MMM1 to be eligible to apply for and receive funding from RAF (Flying ARTS Alliance INC., 2021).

4.3.3 RRMA

The oldest classification, developed by the Department of Health in 1994, is the Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Area (RRMA) system (AHWC, 2004). RRMA classifies Australia into 3 zones (metropolitan, rural and remote) and 7 classes (RRMA1 to RRMA7) within those 3 zones. RRMA allocates each Statistical Local Area (SLA) within capital cities and metropolitan centres (having a population of 100,000 or more) to the Metropolitan zone and other SLAs are allocated to either the Rural or Remote zone. SLAs are based on the administrative areas of local government where these exist. The SLA is the base spatial unit used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to collect and

disseminate statistics other than those collected in Population Censuses (Australian Bureau Of Statistics, 2003b).

The above-mentioned allocations are based on SLA's score on an 'Index of Remoteness' which is calculated by combining a 'personal distance index (relating to the SLA's population density) and distance indices (relating to the distance of the centroid of an SLA to the nearest urban centres in each of four categories)' (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004:2). The allocated class within these zones is based on the population of the urban centre within the SLA (DPIE & DSHS, 1991). The term urban centre here refers to a population cluster of 1,000 or more people with boundaries based on Census Collection District (CD) (Australian Bureau Of Statistics, 2006a).

RRMA has been used for research purposes and to allocate funding to areas (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004). For example, the Department of Health rural loadings, which range from 15% to 50% in the Practice Incentives Program (PIP), are based on RRMA categories (McGrail & Humphreys, 2009b). As another example, the Rural Alliance in Nuclear Scintigraphy (REINS) apply RRMA in order to determine the eligibility of nuclear medicine professional for its membership schemes (2022).

Classification systems are by no means limited to ASGC, ASGS, RRMA and MMM. It is a common practice among government bodies and private institutions to develop their own systems of classification. The Department of Home Affairs (2021) has its own classification of Designated Regional Areas and offers additional incentives to skilled migrants and international graduates who decide to live and work regionally under the Designated Regional Areas Plan. For example, international graduates with a bachelor's degree or higher qualification can access an additional 1 or 2 years in Australia on a post-study work visa if they study at a regional campus of a registered institution (Regional migration: Designated Regional Areas, 2021). Also, skilled migrants have access to an additional 5 points under the Skilled Migration Points Test if they nominate to live and work in a designated regional area. Interestingly, cities like Perth, Adelaide, the Gold Coast, the Sunshine Coast, Canberra, Newcastle, Wollongong and Hobart all have access to such regional incentives under Designated Regional Areas Plan (ibid).

In another example, to create policies and programs that distribute the healthcare workforce more evenly, the Department of Health combines other data such as Medicare billing, population, and social data with the geographical classification to map out the areas of need for the health workforce (Health workforce classifications, 2019). The Department of Health is also an example of how different classification systems can be used for different purposes even within the same organisation. The Department uses the ARIA classification for the Rural Retention Program,

while the Practice Incentives Program (PIP) are based on RRMA categories (McGrail & Humphreys, 2009a; 2009b).

There are also examples of organisations that change the system of classification they use over time, or even develop their own classification system to serve specific needs. For example, the Department of Health provides incentive payments to doctors based on the geographic area in which they work through the Workforce Incentive Program (WIP). The greater the relative remoteness of the area, the greater the incentive payment received. The Department used to apply the RRMA classification, but since 2010 have used ASGS to assess eligibility for different funding or programs in various geographic areas or MMM to estimate the amount that doctors can receive under the Doctor Stream of WIP program. Relocation grants under WIP can vary from \$15,000 to \$120,000 depending on the location (Services Australia, 2024). This shows the importance and complexity of designation in accessing resources, funding, work- force, etc. in the Australian context. Regional Australia classification systems have varied over time depending on the government and the issue at hand however they have real tangible consequences for those living in non-metropolitan areas.

An example of this is the Gold Coast and Brisbane M1 upgrades between 2016 and 2018, a project of \$1 billion value. The project was dismissed because of a political debate over the regionality of Gold Coast (Murray, 2018). The federal government insisted that funding for upgrades between Brisbane and the Gold Coast should be split 50:50 as it is the norm for metropolitan areas, whereas the state government suggested the Commonwealth should pay more at 80:20 as it is the norm for regional areas. Interestingly, despite being classified as regional for immigration purposes, under the federal government's own documents (National Land Transport Network), Gold Coast is classified as an outside metropolitan area. The negative impact of such contradictory classifications for the same place among various government departments is undeniable.

4.4 Situating Cairns in diverse regional geographies

It is with this highly constructed notion of 'region' (culturally and politically) that we return to Cairns, a small city touted as a destination for COVID-19 migrants from capital cities. Cairns is a commercial centre and major transport hub for Far North Queensland and, as highlighted in Table 1, is variously classified as a moderately accessible, regional and rural city/centre—there is no consistent or standard approach to position the city. In the MMM Cairns belongs to the Regional category; in the RRMA system it is zoned as Rural. These designations do not capture the sophisticated and evolving urbanism of Cairns (Law & Musso, 2020), a city with an international airport, seaport, galleries, museums, convention centres and other unique tropical urban design

features—and where agriculture is not the dominant economic activity. Cairns highlights the need for a more diverse understanding of ‘region’; one that can acknowledge a range of different forces operating in places outside metropolitan centres. Current common definitions and classifications of regionality ignore the diversity of demographics, resources and needs present in these areas. The Regional Australia Institute (RAI) has gone some way to do this, deliberately reframing ‘regional’ in positive terms.

Figure 2 is an infographic drawn from the RAI website which includes some positive assertions about the size and value of regional Australia. The RAI defines regional Australia as including all the towns, small cities and areas that lie beyond the major capital cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, and Canberra and illuminates the regions as a well-populated part of the country, with more than 9 million people or 36% of the total population and a powerful economic base (contributing 1/3 of national economic output). For the purposes of our discussion here, it is significant that the RAI also proposes a more diverse typology of regions: one that differentiates metro capitals from regional cities, connected lifestyle regions, industry and service hubs and heartland regions. In this more variegated understanding Cairns becomes visible as urban/as a regional city with a diverse economy.

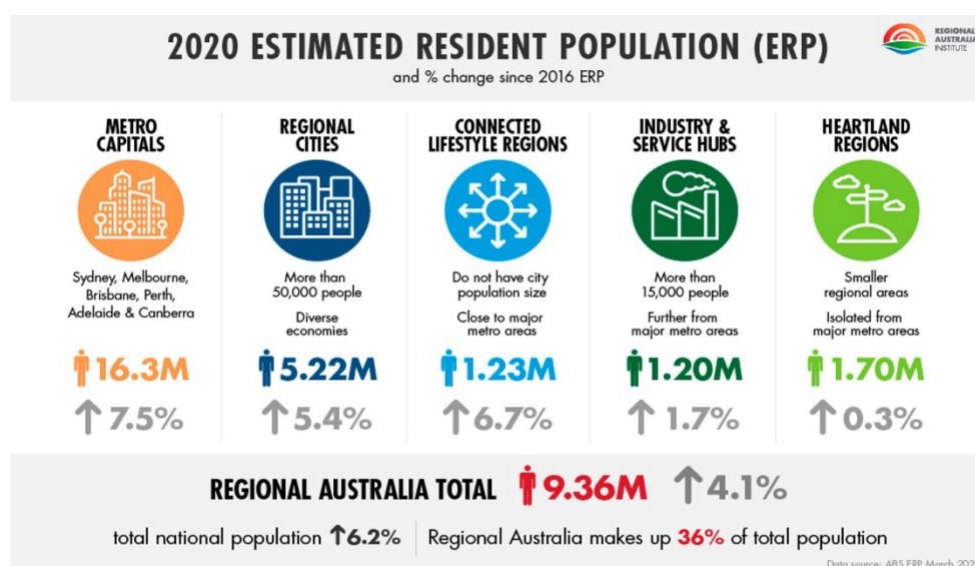


Figure 4-2 Broadening the category of ‘regional’ Source: <http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/home/what-is-regional-australia/>

Although the RAI provides a more nuanced understanding of the differences across regional Australia, it is important to note that the Regional Cities category is the only one that is not defined by context/geography/proximity to metro areas. Cairns is therefore presented as equivalent to

places such as the Gold Coast or Sunshine Coast, places in close proximity to Brisbane. Interestingly, in the latest Australia's Federal Budget 2021, for the first time in Medicare policy there was a distinction between large regional, rural and remote settings. Recently the Federal Government recognised a distinction between rural and remote communities (MMM 3-7 in Modified Monash Model) and regional cities (MMM 2 in Modified Monash Model) when allocating measures to support rural healthcare and patients. An additional \$65.8 million in Medicare funding was allocated to increase the Rural Bulk Billing Incentive for MMM3-7 (Rural Doctors Association of Australia 2021). It is expected that such recognition would support the viability of healthcare in rural areas and provide rural doctors with better access to Medicare rebates when bulk-billing patients (ibid).

In the context of COVID-19-induced counter-urbanisation, we are interested in these differences, and the extent to which proximity to metro capitals plays a role in regional migration trends and policy priorities. A recent report by Bloomberg CityLab (Patino et al., 2021) investigated similar issues in the U.S.A., concluding that many American regional cities that saw spikes in their population during the pandemic were already destinations pre-pandemic. Others were simply near major capital cities. Closer to home, a recent opinion piece in Adelaide's InDaily newspaper proposes the 'peri-metropolitan' as a focal point for COVID-19 migration: 'a curious mix of urban- ity-cum-suburbia and rurality-cum-remoteness' where nature and outdoor activities co-exist with urban features, and where people can work from home and still commute in to work on a semi-regular basis (de la Fuente, 2021). Indeed, a more sophisticated language of migrant destinations for the COVID-19 moment is required.

Many scholars have researched population growth in peri-metropolitan areas in the Australian context. According to Burnley and Murphy (1995), the peri-metropolitan includes outer suburban, peri-urban, and an exurban residential settings—in other words the area between the outer edge of metropolitan cities to the outer edge of the commuting zone. Census data for the period 1996--2001 showed that population growth predominantly occurred in peri-metropolitan areas (Australian Bureau Of Statistics, 2003a; 2003b), with researchers suggesting their attractiveness to both low-income and high-income groups (Murphy, 2006) as well as internal migrants seeking particular lifestyles and proximity to capital cities (e.g., Argent et al., 2010; 2014; Bohnet & Moore, 2010; Gurran & Blakely, 2007). Indeed, Murphy (2006) introduced the terminology of metro proximals— towns within striking distance of metropolitan areas with strong economies—as the winners of future population growth. These areas benefit most from non-metropolitan growth and spillovers (Argent et al., 2010). Although these discussions are dated it should be noted that Cairns, by definition, is not a peri-metropolitan migration destination. This also raises questions about COVID-19 driven population growth.

According to RAI's recent publication *The big movers: Understanding population mobility in regional Australia* (Bourne et al., 2020), between 2012 and 2016 regional Australia gained a net of 65,204 people. The RAI analysed this growth based on different 'types' of regional areas, and suggesting that lifestyle regions close to major metropolitan places enjoyed the highest level of growth. In contrast, isolated regions far from major cities and towns witnessed the lowest growth. These findings for 2012-2016 remain relevant to recent counter-urbanisation moves in the context of COVID-19. An Ethos Urban (2020) report, commissioned by ME Bank and titled *Australia's best regional towns for first home buyers*, similarly uncovers Australia's top 20 towns for city dwellers to escape to for housing affordability and a 'lifestyle boost' after the COVID-19 pandemic. The vast majority of these top 20 treechange and seachange destinations 'are within the orbit of capital cities and readily commutable' (ibid:9). This too suggests some important considerations for theorising counter-urbanisation in a post-COVID context.

According to data extracted from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021b), Cairns, a regional city in RAI's classification, acts as a destination for migrants from many different areas including metropolitan, peri-metropolitan and non-metropolitan zones, with 7,861 out of the total 12,869 internal migrants (61%) to Cairns in 2019-2020 being from regional areas (i.e. anywhere in Australia outside the capital cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and Canberra based on RAI classification). Interestingly, 7,811 of 13,376 total internal migrants who left Cairns (58.4%) in 2019-2020 chose another regional area as their new home. In other words, in 2019-2020, 7,861 people moved to Cairns from regional areas, while 7,811 Cairns residents moved out to other regional places. With these data in mind, we can claim that the regional city of Cairns is a destination for regional migrants as well as an origin for migrants to regional Australia.

By way of contrast, the Gold Coast, another regional city based on RAI's classification, was the destination for 28,112 internal migrants in 2019--2020—more than double the number of migrants to Cairns. Of these 28,112 migrants, 40% were from other parts of regional Australia. Moreover, from the 34,826 people who moved out of Gold Coast only 39.4% chose other regional areas as their new home. These statistics highlight the differences between cities within the same category (i.e. regional cities) as they can act as regional migration destinations, origins or both—making the counter-urbanisation debate in the context of regional migration very complex. The peri-metropolitan migration debate can provide a lens here through which the proximity to metro capitals comes into play; a factor that is absent from the regional cities category of RAI classification. These nuances are crucial in understanding COVID-19-induced migration to Cairns.

4.5 Conclusion

Our concerns surrounding internal migration in a context of COVID-19 parallel our concerns with counter-urbanisation literature that presents a rural idyll image of migration to regional Australia. Dominant discourses essentialise 'regional' and conflate it with 'remote' and 'rural' despite the fact that migrants are moving to a diverse range of regional places: some in commuting distance to capital cities, many of which are highly urban; others are simply lifestyle places that were already destinations for migrants pre-pandemic. From our vantage point in Cairns, we appreciate the limits to this discourse and how national and state conversations fail to recognise the dynamics of city spaces when removed from Australia's sprawling metropolitan zones. In Cairns we witness 'regional' as a socially, culturally and politically constructed concept.

Our anti-essentialist analysis helps unpack the notion of 'region' in the current internal migration debate. Through focusing on the cultural and political construction of 'region', and not the dominant discourses presenting regional migration as a shift to rural and remote places, we ask different questions about where precisely Australians are moving from/to, and how a highly urban place like Cairns fits into the conversation. Analysing different hierarchical geographical classification systems, but also how Cairns defies easy categorisation, impels us to consider other factors such as density, urbanisation level and proximity to metropolitan centres as key variables in any conversation about COVID-19 (or any other) migration.

Cairns, a cosmopolitan urban city with a low density and distant from capital cities but hardly isolated as it is accessible via a well-connected road network and international airport, provides an excellent example of a geographical locality that does not fit neatly into current classifications of 'region'. The RAI classification offers some possibilities for unpacking the idea of the region by differentiating between regional cities, connected lifestyle regions, industry and service hubs and heartland regions. But it is not yet a comprehensive typology to interpret internal migration trends in the light of COVID-19. Cairns and Gold Coast are two very different regional cities, for example, with proximity to Brisbane having a considerable impact on regional population dynamics. We think this proximity plays an important role in attracting more migrants in the context of COVID-19 as they can commute to Brisbane intermittently while working from home.

We hope our analysis forms part of a more nuanced understanding of the complicated data on regional migration dynamics in the context of counter-urbanisation in Australia. We are not arguing for an all-encompassing geographical classification system that can capture all ideas of all regions in all places; instead we ask questions about when and what kind of territory matters, and how the 'region' itself enters the migration debate. Key factors such as urbanisation, density and

proximity to metropolitan centres are crucial dynamics that can be vital to the discussion, but are invisible when dominant representations, values and discourses present the 'region' as a stable object of analysis. Perhaps it is time to separate regional migration from counter-urbanisation debate and the idea of rural idyll and invite scholars and practitioners to acknowledge the situatedness of the region as the first step in analysing migration trends.

Chapter Five: Mapping Migrants' Narratives

This chapter addresses the second research question: How liveable is Cairns to new migrants? Through the innovative application of qualitative Geographic Information Systems (GIS), participatory mapping, and episodic narrative interviews, this paper captures the subjective, experiential, and emotional dimensions of liveability in Cairns, revealing the complex ways in which migrants navigate, interpret, and co-construct their new urban environment.

Theoretically, this chapter is grounded in the intersection of critical GIS (Kwan, 2002; Elwood, 2006b), emotional geography (Davidson et al., 2005), and migrant studies (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015). It conceptualises liveability not as an objective set of indicators, but as a socially and culturally mediated experience that is deeply embedded in place and shaped by individual and collective narratives. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how migrants' pre-migration experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personal aspirations interact with the physical and social fabric of Cairns to produce diverse liveability outcomes.

Methodologically, the paper advances the field of qualitative GIS by developing a novel approach that integrates spatial analysis with narrative inquiry and participatory methods. Drawing on the work of Kwan and Ding (2008) on geo-narratives, and extending it through participatory techniques (Elwood, 2006a) and surveys, the study creates a rich, multi-layered representation of migrant experiences. By integrating spatial and narrative data, the chapter provides a more holistic and contextual understanding of liveability in Cairns, capturing the complex interplay between physical, social, and emotional dimensions of place. It explores how the map transcends its role as a mere analytical instrument or memory aide, and evolves into a platform for migrants to articulate their individual experiences and emotional ties to the city. Using this methodology, the chapter demonstrates how migrants navigate and make sense of their new urban environment, highlighting the importance of factors such as housing, social connectedness, and sense of community in shaping their perceptions of liveability. Moreover, it reveals how these factors are experienced and valued differently, challenging homogenising narratives of migrant experience and liveability.

Furthermore, the paper engages with critical debates on the politics of representation in GIS and cartography (Crampton, 2001). It reflects on the ethical implications of mapping migrant experiences and the potential for such practices to both empower and potentially expose vulnerable communities. By adopting this approach to data collection and representation, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about responsible and ethical uses of geospatial technologies in research. It

highlights the need for more participatory and inclusive approaches that prioritise the voices and experiences of diverse migrant communities.

By demonstrating the value of qualitative GIS in capturing the subjective and experiential dimensions of liveability, this thesis advances methodological and theoretical debates in urban studies, migration research, and GIScience. It advocates for the integration of qualitative and participatory methods in urban planning and policy-making processes. By demonstrating the power of integrating qualitative GIS with narrative approaches, it opens new avenues for research that can capture the complexity, diversity, and emotional richness of urban life in an increasingly mobile and multicultural world.

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5.1 Introduction

Liveability is a multifaceted concept extensively studied across various disciplines. The term often encompasses access to public services, environmental quality, affordability, safety, and cultural amenities (Van Kamp et al., 2003) and generally refers to the quality of life in an area. The traditional measures of liveability have largely been objective, focusing on quantifiable indicators (Marans, 2012). However, there is growing recognition of the importance of subjective measures that capture personal experiences and values (Lowe et al., 2015).).

In recent scholarship, there has been a shift towards incorporating subjective experiences into liveability analysis that integrates qualitative data within geographic information system (GIS) frameworks, enabling researchers and others to explore the subjective and intangible aspects of urban life (Cope & Elwood, 2009; Knigge & Cope, 2006). Our study builds upon foundational work by Badland et al. (2014), who reviewed liveability indicators to better connect to health and well-being. They discerned 11 key domains: crime and safety; education; employment and income; health and social services; housing; leisure and culture; local food and other goods; natural environment; public open space; transport; and social cohesion and local democracy. We use those domains as a baseline to understand liveability in Cairns, Australia, and do so by exploring how recent migrants from other cities in Australia gain experiences of and perspectives on the city.

Cairns is a regional city in tropical/northern Australia, characterised by its proximity to the Great Barrier Reef, rainforests, and a mix of urban and natural amenities. Migration patterns to Cairns are influenced by lifestyle preferences, economic opportunities, demographic trends, and regional attributes (Dadpour & Law, 2022). Factors such as the climate, outdoor activities, economic growth, and cost of living contribute to Cairns' appeal as a migration destination (Cárdenas-Vélez et al., 2023; Chaiechi et al., 2020). Despite increasing appeal, research on the city's urban liveability is limited to news items about national surveys and/or local government reports on quantitative surveys. This gap has prompted the use of qual-GIS as a novel tool to better understand the subjective aspects of urban life in Cairns and the city's liveability.

Thus, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on subjective experiences of urban environments by introducing a novel qual-GIS methodology that combines qualitative insights with spatial analysis to understand how migrants to Cairns view urban liveability. By integrating narrative interviews with participatory mapping, the approach enables a more nuanced understanding of the spatial dimensions of liveability, revealing the complex interplay between individual experiences and the urban fabric. Although our focus is on key issues in liveability debates, we position the analysis at the intersection between liveability and migration research.

The paper is organised to first detail some key trends in the liveability literature before exploring liveability in migration. We explain Cairns' specific regional significance and trends and emphasise the importance of the subjective perspectives of migrants in the process. Subsequent sections elaborate the methodology and analysis, detailing the participatory mapping process and how the qualitative data was integrated in ArcGIS. The interviews and mapping reveal how the natural and built environment of Cairns shapes migration patterns and liveability. We chart the unique spatial dynamics that influence migrant experiences, while also showing how the participatory mapping informed their perceptions of liveability. Reflecting on these findings and their implications, the paper then discusses the implications of these insights for urban planning and policy. We conclude with suggestions for future research.

5.2 Unpacking Liveability

Liveability is a complex concept that includes tangible elements related to infrastructure, services, and facilities, as well as intangible elements such as ambience and lifestyle, with community history and heritage playing significant roles (Wheeler & Laing, 2008). The degree to which a place meets requirements for human habitation is often used as a benchmark for defining liveability, although there are calls to understand liveability as a subjective term that varies based on stakeholder perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds (Holdsworth et al., 2018). Most liveability

research overlooks subjective interpretations of lived experiences (Paul & Sen, 2020). Understanding liveability as a set of numerical indicators can present cities in ways that do not resonate with many residents' lived experiences and that put in doubt its relevance and applicability (McArthur & Robin, 2019). However, as Vine (2012) suggests, liveability is subject to generational reinterpretations about what is deemed a desirable urban environment. Exploring lived experiences can also help contextualise and enrich findings from quantitative liveability studies, providing rounded pictures of urban life and of how liveability is perceived and experienced.

Research on liveability has relied on quantitative methodologies that use objective indicators to construct comparative assessments of cities (for examples, see Khorrami et al., 2021; Marans, 2012; Van Kamp et al., 2003). Objective quantifiable measures that can be used to assess the quality of urban areas usually include housing, transportation, environmental conditions, and access to services. Valcárcel-Aguilar and Murias (2018) add the importance of geographical location, population, and functional hierarchy in determining liveability, suggesting that quantitative approaches can be used to differentiate between areas based on these variables. However, this quantitative dominance often obscures the rich tapestry of individual experiences and the social characteristics of specific locales.

The limitations of quantitative approaches have been acknowledged, with critiques highlighting that reliance on objective measures fails to represent the multifaceted characteristics of liveability. Some argue that there is a risk of marginalising diverse perspectives and perpetuating structural inequities (Boschmann & Cubbon, 2014; Elwood, 2006), while others point out that people's experiences of liveability are not expressed solely through numbers (Nastar et al., 2019). Capitano (2018) argues that the objective appraisal of quality of life is challenging because of the influence of local characteristics and value systems. Indeed, liveability rankings based on objective measures, while popular, are relative and reflect the perspectives of those who create them. They fail to capture the spectrum of quality-of-life perceptions and experiences in diverse places, leading to calls for deeper understandings of the social constructs of liveability (Lloyd et al., 2016) and for more critical understandings of liveability that recognise both its heterogeneity and the variability of contexts that produce it (Sochacka et al., 2021).

Evidence-based liveability indices can benefit from being linked with health and wellbeing data that correlate to individual satisfaction in relation to liveability (Badland et al., 2014). Vladislavljević and Mentus (2019) argue that life satisfaction correlates more with material living conditions such as income, unemployment, and housing, while affective well-being is tied to non-material qualities such as perceived health, personal security, and social connections. If we recognise

liveability as a construct influenced by shifting values and aspirations, we can develop localised and more inclusive approaches to grasp the essence of a city's liveability.

The integration of subjective well-being into liveability research is an acknowledgement of the limitations of traditional approaches and the importance of qualitative insights and points to the need for new methodological tools. Qualitative GIS (qual-GIS) has emerged as a multifaceted approach in urban research, offering new insights into the socio-spatial dynamics of cities (for example, Preston & Wilson, 2014). As a concept with multiple meanings across scales, qual-GIS enables researchers to engage with social processes from diverse perspectives and foster theoretical innovation in urban studies. It offers a methodological innovation that integrates qualitative data into spatial analysis, potentially providing more nuanced understandings of liveability. Qualitative data can powerfully augment quantitative methodologies (Jervis & Drake, 2014), and we argue that qual-GIS could enhance the depth of liveability studies. Choosing the appropriate method to measure urban liveability is important, and qual-GIS could offer a structured yet flexible approach to accommodate different research needs.

The qual-GIS methodology represents a significant shift within the realm of GIS research, moving away from a purely numerical focus to a more integrated understanding of the interplay between environments and human behaviours (Knigge & Cope, 2006). This idea is exemplified in work by Caitlin Buckle, who uses emergent geospatial technologies to perform and represent migrant stories in a novel way. Buckle's (2020) critical and reflexive evaluation of using Google Earth within biographical interviews shows how digital mapping can add mobile, tactile, and visual dimensions to narratives produced through traditional methods, altering the performance and representation of migrants' experiences. This work aligns with our approach, which considers qualitative aspects of spatial phenomena encompassing elements such as human emotions, experiences, and attitudes.

Unlike conventional GIS, which focuses on statistical spatial analysis and hard data, qual-GIS enables incorporating subjective experiences through interviews, maps, photos, video recordings, and other qualitative data to enrich understandings of people-place interactions (Buckle, 2018; Mugerauer, 2000). By contextualising narratives within spatial contexts, qual-GIS provides nuance often missed in statistical analyses, overcoming their limitations (Buckle, 2020; Pavlovskaya, 2006). Such methodology is particularly beneficial where a nuanced understanding of the relationship between people and their environment is required (Knigge & Cope, 2006). It can also be empowering to marginalised and understudied groups by including their voices in research processes (Boschmann & Cubbon, 2014; Dennis, 2006).

Internal migrants are an understudied group in liveability literature, yet their experiences can reveal the subjective nature of liveability and the importance of recognising diverse voices in liveability research (Buckle, 2020; Jakimów, 2014). Unlike international migrants, internal migrants move within national boundaries, are often driven to do so by life course events, and embody a wide range of experiences and motivations (Vidal & Lutz, 2018). This distinction is critical; while international migrants navigate the complexities of adapting to entirely new cultural and societal frameworks, internal migrants offer perspectives on liveability within the same national context. They are poised to provide comparative insights into the nuances of liveability because they can tap into direct experiences of and perspectives on different regions or cities within the same country. Such insights are invaluable, as they can spotlight regional disparities and local nuances in liveability that might otherwise be overlooked. This outcome makes including internal migrants' perspectives crucial in developing better understandings of liveability.

There is little in the liveability literature on lived experiences and perspectives among newly arrived internal migrants who have relocated largely because of liveability factors. By focusing on them, we offer a way to affirm, complicate, or reframe current conceptions of what makes a city truly liveable. Migrants' experiences can enrich and potentially challenge established notions of liveability because their decisions to relocate are influenced by their ideas about what constitutes a better quality of life and opportunities in destination cities (King & Skeldon, 2010). Examining what draws them to regional cities such as Cairns, which has seen shifting migration patterns recently (Dadpour & Law, 2022), can provide valuable insights applicable to other contexts where liveability is a driver of population mobility.

5.3 Cairns' Migration Trends and Urban Appeal

Cairns attracts a diverse range of inhabitants, from transient tourists to long-term residents. Cairns Regional Council estimated the population of Cairns at 175,398 in June 2023 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022–2023). The city experienced the highest average annual growth rate in regional Queensland, with an increase of 1.1% per year over the period from 2011 to 2021 (Queensland Government Statistician's Office, 2022c), the sources of which are multifaceted. From 2016 to 2021, Cairns grew by 10,042 people (6.4%), equating to an average yearly growth rate of 1.25%. However, Cairns has generally experienced internal migration population loss, which has been offset by gains in overseas migrants and natural increase since 2016 (Cairns Regional Council, 2021). Despite these challenges, the city has a demographic profile younger than that for regional Queensland. The city's relatively young median age of 39 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021)

reflects its appeal to younger migrants, particularly those aged 25–34 who have contributed to the city's net migration gains in recent years (Cairns Regional Council, 2021).

Cairns' attractiveness to migrants is shaped by a combination of economic, lifestyle, and safety factors. The city's low unemployment rate compared with the national average reflects a healthy job market, with primary sectors of employment such as healthcare, social assistance, tourism, retail trade, and construction offering ample career opportunities (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024; Queensland Government Statistician's Office, 2024). Housing affordability is another central economic driver (Dadpour et al., 2024a, 2024b). Additionally, the cost of living in Cairns remains relatively low compared with other major Australian cities, further enhancing its attractiveness to migrants.

Lifestyle factors enhance Cairns' appeal for many, with its tropical climate, diverse outdoor recreational facilities, and blend of natural and urban amenities—referred to as tropical urbanism (Law, 2019; Law & Musso, 2020). It attracts individuals seeking an active, outdoor-centred lifestyle (Dadpour & Law, 2022). However, despite a slight overall decline in offences between 2019 and 2022, a rise in property crimes in certain areas documented by the Queensland Government Statistician's Office (2022a) has affected perceptions of safety and community well-being, which are critical considerations for migrants (Dadpour et al., 2024a, 2024b). The interplay of these economic, lifestyle, and safety factors creates a complex mosaic that shapes Cairns' liveability and migration patterns. Hence our aim to explore those patterns by reference to the experiences and perspectives of recent migrants drawn to the city's lifestyle attractions and sense of community and understand what makes Cairns liveable and attractive to newcomers from varied backgrounds and diverse reasons for relocating. This approach allows us to explore factors that contribute to Cairns' liveability without limiting the focus to any specific drawcards.

5.4 Methodology

We employed a mixed-methods approach. Following ethics clearances, qualitative insights were first gained in audio-recorded, semi-structured episodic narrative interviews that captured personal migration stories and took in a mapping exercise. Twenty-seven participants were recruited between April and August 2021 by advertising the study on Facebook, Instagram, and local radio station ABC Far North, and in emails to community organisations. Participants had moved to Cairns between 2016 and 2021 and were selected using combined purposive and snowball sampling. An understanding of varied subjective viewpoints was enabled by the sample's diversity in terms of age, sex, and background (see Table 5-1).

	Percentages
Gender	
Female	63%
Male	33%
Other	4%
Age Group	
26-35 years	30%
36-45 years	52%
+45 years	18%
Education	
Tertiary Education (university or college)	63%
High School Certificate (HSC)	37%
Employment	
Employed	67%
Unemployed	33%

Table 5-1 Participants' Demographics

Compared with available Census data, in terms of gender, our sample consisted of 63% females, 33% males, and 4% who identified as other, while the 2016 Census data indicated that 52.3% of movers to Cairns were female and 47.7% were male (Profile.id, 2021). Although there is a difference in gender distribution, our study aimed to capture a diverse range of experiences and perspectives, and the higher proportion of females in our sample may reflect the willingness of this group to participate in the research. The age distribution of our sample aligns well with the Census data, with 30% of our participants belonging to the 26–35 years age group, which corresponds to the 25–34 years age group that had the highest net migration to Cairns in 2021 (Profile.id, 2021). Our sample also included 52% of participants in the 36–45 years age group and 18% over 45 years, providing valuable insights into the experiences of a significant proportion of movers to Cairns across different age groups.

While the insights garnered from this study are valuable, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The sample size, though diverse, is relatively small and confined to a single regional city, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Moreover, the use of qual-GIS presents several challenges, including the need for specialised software and skills and difficulties in integrating

diverse data sources. Additionally, potential issues with data quality and accuracy may arise (Pavlovskaya, 2006). Qual-GIS requires specialised expertise in both GIS technology and qualitative research methods, potentially limiting its accessibility for researchers who are not well-versed in either. Moreover, subscriptions of potentially high fees for GIS software packages can limit its accessibility.

5.4.1 *Episodic narrative interviews*

Episodic narrative interviews focus on uncovering small stories—vignettes and anecdotes that offer profound insights into experiences, values, and identities (Mueller, 2019). They encourage participants to share stories and reveal unique perspectives and insights.

For this research, participants were asked to discuss their migration journeys, including where they moved from, their perceptions of liveability in previous locations and in Cairns, and their understandings of the concept of liveability. Additional unplanned questions were sometimes asked (Robson, 2011). At the 30-minute mark, participants were provided with a hard-copy map highlighting local infrastructure, amenities, and services. Hard-copy maps have proven useful in qual-GIS research to tease out interviews' spatial dimensions (Brennan-Horley & Gibson, 2009). The map created for this research was based on another, publicly available map produced by Cairns Tour Advice and Booking Centre. It was a simple amenity map and featured items considered beneficial or desirable for quality of life, among them parks, markets, schools, hospitals, healthcare facilities, restaurants, airports, and public transport facilities. The map was predicated on prior research indicating the significance of such amenities in shaping urban liveability perceptions (Parker & Simpson, 2018). Participants were asked to reflect on their daily routines and the influence of various amenities and services on their lives and to annotate their maps accordingly with the aid of markers and sticky notes (Figure 5-1).

captures experiences of liveability in Cairns. The consolidated digital map revealed striking spatial patterns and “hotspots” of liveability consistently significant across participants’ diverse narratives and map annotations. Key areas such as the Cairns Esplanade, the Botanical Gardens, and the northern beaches emerged as such “hotspots,” underscoring their importance as shared spaces of emotional attachment and community interaction. By engaging with the geospatial data—zooming in, searching, and navigating through the map—new perspectives and enhanced details about migrants’ experiences and perceptions of liveability emerged.

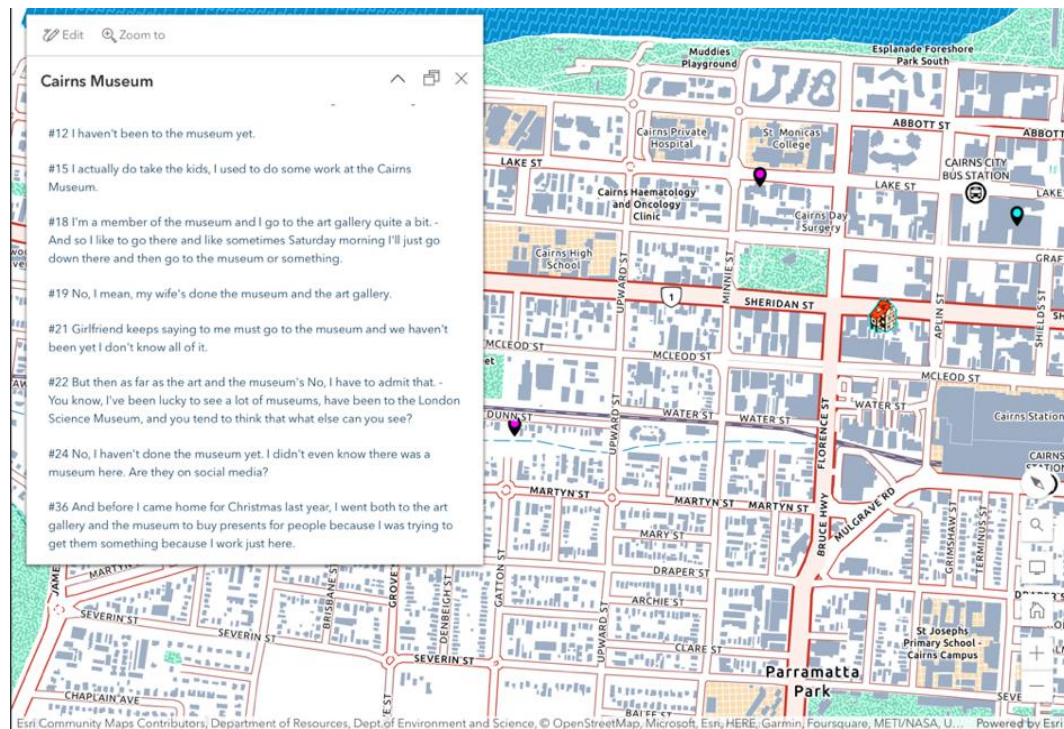


Figure 5-2 Interactive web map of Cairns in ArcGIS

To measure correlations between participants’ active engagement in mapping processes and their subjective perceptions of liveability, we integrated a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative insights with quantitative data. Our own qualitative observations of participants’ interactions with the maps were quantified into distinct levels of engagement, ranging from passive observation to active annotation. Liveability scores were constructed by evaluating the performance rankings of liveability indicators from the end of the interview, which were weighted by their importance as perceived by the participants. This approach captured the availability or quality of various amenities and services and showed how these aspects are critical to participants’ overall satisfaction with and perceptions of the city. We applied Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient to assess the strength and direction of the association between the two sets of quantified data. This

non-parametric test was chosen because of the ordinal nature of the data and the non-linear relationship anticipated between engagement levels and liveability perceptions.

5.5 Participatory Mapping: Engagement and Scope

Our findings revealed a significant positive correlation (Spearman's $\rho = 0.76$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher levels of engagement with mapping processes corresponded with more positive perceptions of urban liveability (Figure 5-3). We had offered all participants an amenity map of Cairns to use during our sessions, and their reliance on and engagement with the map varied such that participants who engaged more deeply with the maps reported a greater sense of liveability in Cairns.

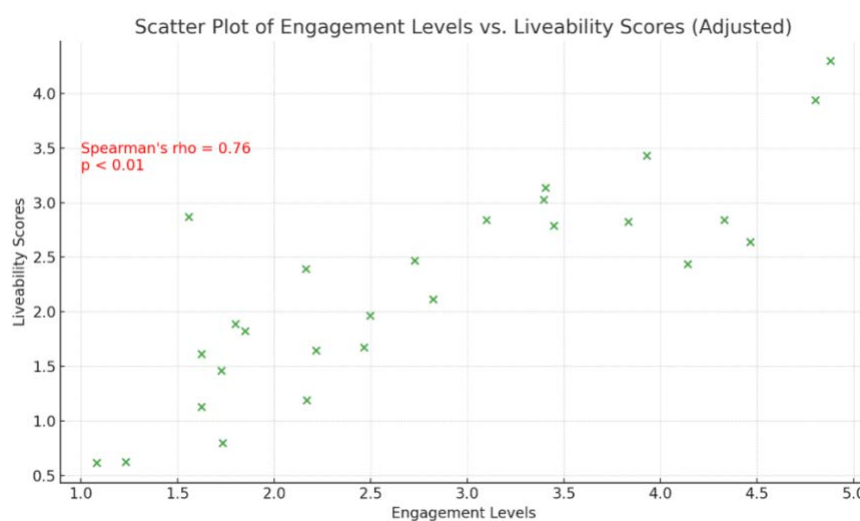


Figure 5-3 The scatter plot displaying the relationship between participants' engagement levels with the mapping process and their subjective liveability scores

For some participants, viewing mapped locations provided prompts to expand on their existing knowledge of the city. They provided rich narratives of their experiences in the city without needing to reference the map. However, the maps notably increased awareness of Cairns for other participants. Some chose not to mark the maps, preferring to speak about Cairns in abstract terms or only by pointing to the map. Others enthusiastically picked up the provided sticky notes and markers to annotate maps, sketching next to favourite venues or circling locations they loved to explore. A few took care to neatly label key sites that held meaning for them, while others scrawled messy arrows in excitement.

Varied engagement with the participatory mapping process reveals that tactile interaction with maps is more than a methodological tool; it represents a nuanced medium through which participants' familiarity and connection with Cairns are manifested and potentially transformed. For

those participants who engaged actively with maps, annotating enabled records of individual perceptions of liveability and reinforced a sense of belonging and attachment to the city. For example, Lola (a 26-year-old female) initially expressed uncertainty about her sense of belonging within the city. However, as she began to annotate her map, marking favourite parks, routes to work, and a favourite local café, her narrative shifted. When mapping, she recounted stories of weekend picnics, evening walks, and chance encounters with neighbours, gradually painting a picture of a lived experience deeply intertwined with Cairns' urban fabric. This tactile engagement with the map facilitated a richer understanding of Cairns' liveability from her perspective and appeared to catalyse a more profound personal connection to the city.

Conversely, minimal engagement among some participants, characterised by reluctance to physically interact with maps, suggests a more tentative or nascent relationship with the city. This variance in engagement underscores the map's role as a dynamic tool that, like the city itself, comes alive in different ways for each participant. Julie (a 41-year-old female) engaged with her map primarily in verbal discussion, pointing out areas of interest but refraining from making any physical marks. Less tactile than others, Julie still provided valuable insights, but her reflections were more general and less personalised than participants who annotated their maps. This variance in participation can be attributed to (1) personal comfort and interaction styles, where individuals may prefer verbal communication over expressive activities due to comfort levels or interaction preferences; (2) familiarity with the concept of mapping, as those less accustomed to using mapping as a tool for expression may find verbal discussion a more accessible form of participation; and (3) the perceived relevance of mapping to personal experience, where the degree to which participants connect the activity with their lived experiences of liveability influences their engagement levels. While Lola used the map as a canvas to express and perhaps even discover her place within the Cairns urban fabric, Julie treated it only as a reference point for conversation.

Diversity in engagement levels underscores the importance of designing research methodologies that accommodate a range of participatory preferences. While participatory mapping can be a powerful tool for eliciting rich, spatially grounded insights and incorporating them into urban liveability, researchers should consider complementary methods to ensure inclusivity (Weyer et al., 2019). Some methods could involve integrating verbal narrative techniques more systematically into mapping processes or employing digital mapping tools that offer different and widely appealing modes of interaction. Moreover, the observed correlation between mapping engagement and perceptions of liveability invites further investigation into causal mechanisms at play. It raises intriguing questions about the extent to which participatory mapping reflects and

actively shapes individuals' perceptions of their urban environments. The correlation also suggests the existence of a potential feedback loop where engagement with the mapping process enhances spatial awareness and appreciation for urban amenities, which in turn could lead to more positive evaluations of liveability.

The complex interplay between methodological choices and participant responses is further exemplified by the ways in which the spatial scope of maps influenced participants' focus and engagement. The maps prompted some participants to shift focus towards leisure daytrips through the Cairns region. For them, maps triggered memories of recreation and adventures in the broader region rather than reflections on their connections to Cairns' urban fabric. This insight suggests the maps' spatial scope expanded participants' conceptualisation of place beyond city limits. Initially, they were drawn to more extraordinary rather than ordinary places—possibly because the base map bore resemblance to tourist maps. Indeed, some scholars suggest maps can shape participants' perceptions, potentially emphasising certain aspects of liveability at the expense of others (see Hátlová & Hanuš, 2020). There is much scope for more research in this area.

The observed shifts in the turn to mapping during the research nonetheless highlight the significant role maps play in shaping spatial perception. This map-mediated perception of place suggests that the design and content of a map influence the viewer's attention and understanding of space. When maps intentionally or unintentionally emphasise certain features or areas, they can skew perception towards those highlighted elements. This tendency suggests that maps serve as navigational tools and as influential mediums that can expand or constrain our conceptualisation of place.

5.6 Mapping as a Transformative Tool

The map provided a tangible reference point that allowed participants to articulate their needs, desires, and experiences in relation to specific locations and urban features in Cairns. For example, Lola pointed at the map's bus sign and expressed her dissatisfaction with public transport: "The traffic of this part of [the] Captain Cook [Highway] is bad, I wish they had more connecting buses." She elaborated on the inefficiencies of the traffic system: "we need to improve the speed at the traffic lights ... I was sitting behind a red light for so long coming up here, saying oh my god there's no one on the road and I'm sitting here anyway. Really surprised about how long it takes all these people to drive to work for example because it seems like it's a bit dysfunctional."

Echoing this sentiment, Borhan (a 22-year-old male) offered a comparative insight that enriches the discourse on urban mobility in Cairns: “In Melbourne we can catch the train, we can catch the bus, or we can walk—there’s something for everyone. We can ride or bike, there’s all those options. Riding my bike in Cairns, parking or chaining up at work is ok, but there’s not a lot of areas that you can just leave your bike securely.” He identified a lack of comprehensive transportation options in Cairns compared with Melbourne, emphasising the limitations faced by residents and highlighting the need for enhanced infrastructure. Lola’s and Borhan’s perspectives reflect broader concerns expressed by 74% of participants regarding transportation and traffic issues. This finding underscores the importance of policy adjustments and urban planning initiatives focused on improving transportation systems to meet the needs and expectations of recent arrivals and established residents alike.

Borhan also highlighted the precarious nature of housing for those without financial security. Pointing at the centre of the map, he said, “Housing is pretty scary here for people that haven’t got any savings. I’ve had three female friends who were asked to leave their rentals, because the landlords were selling.” This sentiment, while unique in its details, mirrors broader concerns among participants, underscoring the need for policies and initiatives to address housing affordability and stability (Dadpour et al., 2024b).

Mapping processes also revealed how public spaces enhance liveability. Participants expressed their appreciation for local amenities such as the Botanical Gardens, parks, and waterfronts, recognising the value of these spaces for relaxation, leisure, and community engagement. A compelling example comes from Kate (59-year-old female), who, when discussing the Botanical Garden, said, “I always tell people to go see it because it’s really [nice]. I’m not that much into like flowers, but I can respect the amount of work that has gone into that area.” This sentiment underscores the value placed on well-curated public spaces. The Botanical Gardens, with their rich tropical flora, serve as a leisure spot and hub for educational and cultural events, reflecting the community’s investment in such areas (see Payer & Prideaux, 2015). Kate’s acknowledgment of the effort poured into such spaces reveals a broader recognition of their importance for community well-being and city liveability (Parker & Simpson, 2018).

Through mapping, participants’ narratives explored Cairns’ urban fabric, offering rich insights into migrant experiences. Their stories and interactions with the maps provided layered understandings of liveability, integrating aspects such as transportation, housing, and public space. These elements are pivotal in shaping daily life and liveability, and revealing them shows the

methodological strength of qual-GIS in capturing the complex interplay between individual experiences and the wider urban context.

5.7 Emotional Geographies

The mapping activities revealed that liveability extends beyond the physical aspects of a city into the intangible realm of emotions, personal connections, and the construction of meaning. Participants' interactions with maps unveiled emotional geographies in which places were imbued with deep sentiments, attachments, and profound experiences (Davidson & Milligan, 2004). The maps helped participants express emotional connections to specific locations.

Amanda (a 38-year-old female) provided a narrative about the Botanical Gardens that exemplifies this dynamic. She recounted her immediate sense of belonging and the feeling of "coming home" upon visiting the gardens: "I just fell in love. I remember thinking, this feels like home. I just had this lightbulb moment. And I thought this is weird. I feel like I've come home to something." The map served as her visual aid, helping to emphasise the strong sense of satisfaction and attachment she felt in the gardens. Amanda's journey also touches on the broader social narrative, as she defended Cairns against criticisms of danger, contrasting it with her own positive experiences and highlighting the city's misunderstood qualities: "I hate the negativity sometimes from people. I really don't like them saying how dangerous Cairns is and I just think, well, there's danger when it comes to Melbourne ... a friend's child got stabbed in Melbourne. Yes, there's stuff going on here but it's actually a really lovely city." The transition in her narrative underscores a multifaceted emotional connection to Cairns—one that is deeply personal and affectionate, yet acutely aware of and resistant to the broader societal narratives of danger.

Jason (a 64-year-old male) also articulated his emotional bond with Cairns, especially its beaches: "it's just stunning here." His story reveals challenges of and adaptations to the local environment, such as the caution required because of the presence of crocodiles. He elaborated on the complex layers of connection migrants form with their new surroundings: "I love taking my dog for a walk on the beach here. It is different, though, here with water. We just need to be very careful of crocodiles. In summer, my dog is miserable ... I don't like the summer here, either." This reflection illustrates both an adaptation to environmental challenges and empathy with his pet. Such personal experiences of adjusting to local conditions are crucial in forging a sense of place and belonging. Mapping helped bring these narratives to the forefront, underscoring how the emotional ties and

daily interactions within specific places are central to the ongoing process of making those places meaningful and liveable.

The mapping sessions also elucidated intricate relationships between physical spaces and individual well-being. Over 80% of participants sought out green spaces for leisure and relaxation, emphasising the value of such amenities for enhancing liveability. Safety and accessibility were also key themes, with many participants highlighting the importance of well-lit pathways and pedestrian-friendly areas. They were aware that their active engagements with the urban environment shape their experiences of liveability and that the physical landscape directly influences their emotional well-being and social connectivity.

By sharing personal routines, participants such as Kate underscored the value of various urban and green spaces to the local community. “Most weekends we go to the Botanic Gardens and do the Red Arrow and then walk in the garden and visit The Tanks. We love it and also eating there and just walking around the garden,” she explained. This personal testimony highlights the integral role the Botanic Gardens and the Red Arrow walking path play in the lives of Cairns’ residents, serving as sites and mobilising pathways for recreation, fitness, and leisure, thereby enhancing the city’s liveability.

During our sessions, mapping served as a way to personalise space, individuals superimposing their personal narratives and feelings onto [representations of] physical spaces. This personalisation of space, as Sletto (2009) argues, can foster stronger emotional attachments to an area, influencing perceptions of liveability. Through mapping, individuals such as Borhan who are new to Cairns can navigate their environments in unique ways imbued with personal significance. Borhan’s habitual visits to the old Cairns’ Cemetery became an unexpected avenue for establishing a connection to Cairns. During one of his regular walks, he met another individual, sparking a connection that would have been unlikely in a different setting and culminating in an unexpected friendship. The old cemetery, rich in history, intrigued Borhan, turning it into a space of personal significance and curiosity. His fascination with the cemetery’s history and architecture underscored the importance of such personalisation of space in fostering a sense of belonging and identity. Borhan’s narrative underscores the capacity of places to foster community and connection, even in locations traditionally associated with solitude (Francis et al., 2005). Such emotional geographies

underpinned participants' narratives, revealing how emotional well-being, social connectivity, and the physical landscape intertwine to make a city liveable.

5.8 Mapping Challenges and Opportunities

While the participatory mapping process illuminated many positive dimensions of Cairns as experienced by migrant residents, it also revealed significant challenges that affect urban liveability. Ranging from feelings of isolation to concerns over safety and accessibility, these challenges paint a complex picture of urban liveability. Recognising these difficulties is essential for a comprehensive understanding of migrants' experiences and for paving the way for discussions about the realities that shape their daily lives and interactions within the urban fabric. Monique (a 37-year-old female) used the map to trace the paths she often walked, hoping for spontaneous interactions that never materialised. Her finger slowly moved along the streets of Cairns as she shared, "I love things like just walking and talking to someone for no reason ... but it was not happening ... that was sort of a bit off-putting." Her movements on the map illustrated the routes of her unmet expectations for social connections.

Similarly, Jasper (a 43-year-old male) expressed his struggles with belonging in Cairns by drawing isolated dots on the map, each representing places he frequented but felt disconnected from. "After a couple of years living here, I found it sort of backwards. There isn't much to do in the city. It's a bit tricky to find friends, people have their own circle of people. Public transport is really bad ... Tradies are much more laid back so there's delayed road work, for example here. There isn't much for a young person ... to do like stuff for fun. Night walk is pretty much all you can really do at night because most things close pretty early. That's a real issue here. It's been hard to really feel like a part of the community," he said, his dots scattered and separate, visually depicting his sense of isolation within the city.

Despite challenges, mapping processes also prompted participants to reflect on hitherto unexplored opportunities within Cairns, potentially enriching their perception of the city's liveability. Hakan (a 24-year-old male) discovered new possibilities by interacting with his map, expressing a newfound intention: "we must go to the museum, we haven't been yet, I don't know all of it, but it seems interesting." Over 50% of participants discovered the Cairns Museum through mapping, which shows how such engagements can unveil elements previously unknown to residents, potentially enhancing their satisfaction (see Leung et al., 2015). Similarly, Claire (a 39-year-old female) was inspired by the mangrove area near Cairns' airport, a place she discovered through images shared on a community Facebook page. She recounted, "I've seen a couple of photos of this place some guys put on Cairns' Facebook community page. Actually, I might get in touch with them

and see if I can learn more.” Claire’s proactive stance highlights that mapping goes beyond documenting existing perceptions, encouraging an active engagement with one’s surroundings. These revelations underscore perceived liveability as continually shaped by personal experiences, emotions, and discoveries (Paul & Sen, 2020).

This narrative journey from challenges to opportunities underscores the power of mapping as a catalyst for recognising the intricacies of urban liveability and initiating personal and communal exploration. As participants annotated maps, they engaged in processes of active reflection about qualities that contribute to or detract from liveability. Such reflections transformed an implicit feeling into an explicit acknowledgment, solidifying and sometimes enhancing perceptions of place. It revealed various aspects of Cairns’ liveability and encouraged more complex place narratives (Lung-Amam & Dawkins, 2019).

Maps go beyond mere instruments of navigation or spatial depiction; they are dynamic entities deeply engaged in the construction and perception of space and place. This perspective challenges traditional views of maps as objective, static representations, highlighting instead their role as evolving through embodied practices and interactions. Maps thus become influential actors within socio-spatial constructs, shaped by creators’ and users’ intentions and contexts. That effect invites us to critically examine the power dynamics inherent in map-making and map usage, moving beyond cartographic objectivity to more nuanced understandings of spatial cognition (Harley, 1989; Kitchin & Dodge, 2007).

5.9 Conclusion

This paper has considered the utility of a novel qual-GIS methodology used to map experiences of Cairns among internal migrants—those residents who had moved to the city from other parts of Australia. By integrating narrative interviews with participatory mapping, we have moved beyond traditional methods of liveability research to embrace a more nuanced, subjective, and experiential approach. Our methodology allowed for a spatially informed narrative of liveability in Cairns that bridges the gap between numbers and stories. Participatory mappings extend beyond mere data points, encapsulating the rich tapestry of migrants’ experiences, and they have practical implications for urban planning and community development. Mappings can also serve as barometers for migrants’ emotions, highlighting areas that are cherished and those that may require intervention to improve liveability.

The study’s findings show the intimate connections between migrants’ engagements in mapping activities and their perceptions of a city’s liveability, suggesting that mapping itself may influence perceptions by fostering a deeper connection and awareness of urban surroundings. The

varied levels of participant engagement with the mapping activity revealed important insights into the dynamics of participatory mapping as a research method. They highlight the need for methodological flexibility to accommodate diverse participant interactions. As we move forward, exploring the reasons behind minimal engagement and experimenting with methods to foster more inclusive and meaningful participation will be crucial for leveraging the full potential of participatory mapping in urban studies and beyond.

Ultimately, then, the study affirms the value of the novel qual-GIS methodology to unravel the complexities of liveability. Our findings suggest that mapping is a powerful tool for deconstructing and reconstructing notions of liveability, revealing its multifaceted nature shaped by tangible and intangible elements of urban life. Our participants revealed how liveability is dynamically constructed through experiences and by recognising spaces that contribute to well-being. In terms of urban liveability research, we advocate for the inclusion of participatory mapping for more refined understandings of liveability beyond standard metrics. Qual-GIS methodologies could even actively facilitate urban liveability, leveraging community engagement as a core component. The process not only illuminates areas to which residents are profoundly attached but also guides both the conservation of these cherished spaces and the inception of new developments that honour these emotional connections. By providing a tangible connection between migrants' feelings of (dis)satisfaction and the physical spaces they value, mapping has illuminated not only challenges but also various opportunities in nurturing a sense of belonging and inclusion within the Cairns community. Through this lens, a future where urban liveability is co-created can be imagined.

New research should aim to refine this methodology in varied contexts to bolster its robustness and extend its applicability. Such efforts will enhance our understanding of the multifaceted nature of liveability and ensure that urban environments cater to the diverse needs and experiences of their inhabitants. As cities continue to evolve, the integration of qual-GIS methodologies can serve as a powerful tool in crafting urban spaces that are not only liveable by standard measures but also deeply resonant with the diverse tapestry of human experience.

Chapter Six: Expected versus Experienced Liveability

This chapter examines the complex interplay between the idealised perceptions of Cairns as a tropical paradise and the lived experiences of migrants, focusing on the challenges they face in housing, employment, social inclusion, and community belonging. By employing the methodological approach explained in the previous sections, this chapter provides a nuanced understanding of the expectation-experience gap in amenity migration. Theoretically, this chapter explores how the mobility of populations, and the circulation of place images create complex, often contradictory relationships between migrants and their chosen destinations. By focusing on the tropical imaginary of Cairns, the chapter engages with critiques of rural idyll (Krivokapic-Skoko & Collins, 2016) and examines how these narratives shape migration decisions and subsequent experiences.

Methodologically, the chapter explores how the use of episodic narrative interviews allows for a deep exploration of migrants' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes, capturing the temporal and spatial dimensions of their migration journeys. This approach is complemented by the application of Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA), a quantitative technique introduced by Martilla and James (1977), and more commonly used in marketing and tourism studies. By adapting IPA to the context of migration and liveability studies, the chapter demonstrates its potential as a powerful tool for identifying and visualising gaps between expectations and experiences across multiple dimensions of urban life.

By examining the motivations and aspirations of amenity migrants, the chapter provides insights into the factors that shape migration decision-making processes. It explores how individuals project their desires and aspirations onto particular places, often based on limited or idealised information. By highlighting the discrepancies between migrant expectations and experiences, the chapter challenges romanticised notions of regional migration and sheds light on the complex realities of settling in a new environment. It then explores how migrants negotiate this gap between their pre-migration imaginaries and post-migration realities.

This chapter makes valuable contributions to debates on amenity migration and regional development, highlighting the need for more critical and complex understandings of the factors that shape migrant experiences and outcomes in regional contexts. By examining the discrepancies between migrant expectations and experiences in Cairns, the chapter challenges stereotypical narratives of regional migration as a panacea for urban problems and highlights the complex challenges and opportunities associated with amenity-led growth (Burnley & Murphy, 2004).

Furthermore, by identifying the key amenity characteristics that attract migrants to Cairns, the paper provides valuable insights for regional authorities and stakeholders seeking to enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of their areas in the global economy. It contributes to ongoing discussions about place-branding and place-making strategies in regional development, highlighting the need for more authentic and sustainable approaches that balance the needs of migrants, long-term residents, and the local environment. By combining rich qualitative insights with quantitative analysis, this chapter offers a more holistic understanding of the complexities of amenity migration and provides a transferable framework for examining expectation-experience gaps in other contexts.

The following has been published in Urban Policy and Research, as a paper titled **Expected versus Experienced Liveability for Amenity Migrants in Cairns, Australia: The grass is not always greener in the Tropics**, Dadpour, R., Law, L., & Osbaldiston, N. (2024). Expected Versus Experienced Liveability for Amenity Migrants in Cairns, Australia: The Grass is not Always Greener in the Tropics. Urban Policy and Research, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08111146.2024.2372288> .

6.1 Introduction

The allure of tropical landscapes and the return to nature in times of crisis are both rooted in historic perceptions of places with natural amenities as ‘refuge’ (Hilmi & Burbi, 2016; Arnold, 2000). This fascination with the tropics can be traced back to European colonialism and the Age of Exploration, when early European explorers often described tropical regions in hyperbolic terms, depicting them as abundant Edens overflowing with natural riches (Grove, 1996). This trope was further solidified in art, literature, and travel writing of the 17th-19th centuries, which commonly portrayed tropical areas as exotic utopias epitomising natural splendour and primal innocence (Nixon, 2011). The legacy of this tropical idealisation has made tropical regions attractive destinations for amenity migrants seeking an enhanced quality of life in a warm and seemingly pristine natural setting (see Glorioso & Moss, 2012; Gosnell & Abrams, 2011).

Amenity migrants, drawn by the allure of natural or cultural amenities (Moss, 2006), often hold idealised perceptions of tropical regions that may not align with reality (Baldacchino, 2019; Law, 2019). These perceptions reflect a broader nostalgia and yearning for a different future (Halfacree & Boyle, 1993), a form of counterurbanisation or escape from life in intensely urbanising and suburbanising areas (Buckle & Osbaldiston, 2022). Local authorities often valorise and market tropical landscapes and lifestyles for their idyllic or exotic qualities (see Short, 2006; Wilke, 2015),

shaping the expectations of amenity migrants. These imagined futures and perceived amenities create a dynamic interplay between images of urban and regional/rural spaces (Argent et al., 2010), influencing the decision-making process of potential migrants. Researchers have explored amenity migration through concepts such as the 'rural idyll', which romanticises migrant destinations as simpler and happier, and by examining various 'pull factors' like lower costs of living (Bjelland et al., 2006; Kearney, 2006). However, there remains a gap in understanding how these pre-migration perceptions align with the actual experiences of amenity migrants after relocation.

In the Australian context, amenity migration has reached its zenith since 2018, with net migration to regional areas surging (Commonwealth Bank of Australia & Regional Australia Institute, 2023). This trend is often popularised by media-friendly labels such as 'sea change' (see Curry et al., 2001; Osbaldiston, 2012) or 'tree change' (see Ragusa, 2010), which describe the movement of Australian amenity migrants from the hustle and bustle of big cities to 'high amenity coastal areas' (Gurran & Blakely, 2007) or regional areas with better access to nature. These destinations, often far from metropolitan cities (Burnley & Murphy, 2004), usually promise superior untouched amenities, both natural and cultural (Moss et al., 2009), as well as attractive housing and lifestyle options (Burnley & Murphy, 2004). These promised superior amenities can shape potential migrants' expectations of a place.

One way to enhance our understanding of the expectations of amenity migrants and their post-migration experiences is through a more nuanced understanding of liveability. According to the Major Cities Unit (2010), 'liveable cities are socially inclusive, affordable, accessible, healthy, safe, and resilient to the impacts of climate change. They have attractive built and natural environments. Liveable cities provide choice and opportunity for people to live their lives and raise their families to their fullest potential.' However, the concept of liveability remains underexplored in amenity migration literature despite its crucial role in shaping migrants' experiences. By integrating liveability into amenity migration studies, we aim to better understand the discrepancies between migrants' pre-relocation expectations and post-migration experiences. This approach helps us address the inconsistencies between expected and experienced liveability among amenity migrants in Cairns.

Following the introduction, a literature review synthesises existing research on amenity migration and liveability. After an overview of Cairns as a tropical destination, the methodology section details the research design and data collection methods. The analysis section utilises Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA), a strategic tool used to assess the importance and performance of various attributes across different fields, to map divergences in liveability, covering critical issues such as housing and safety. IPA has never been used in migration or liveability studies.

The discussion outlines research implications and provides policy and planning suggestions to address the findings. The conclusion proposes avenues for future research and summarises key insights.

6.2 Liveability in the Context of Amenity Migration

Amenity migration refers to the movement of people to places perceived to offer a higher quality of life, often driven by natural or cultural amenities (Moss, 2009). The search for a better lifestyle and improved well-being is at the core of this phenomenon. Cost of living is frequently cited as the primary facilitator for many amenity migrants (Burnley & Murphy, 2004; Cebula, 2005; Moss, 2009), while other influential factors such as economic opportunities (Glorioso & Moss, 2012) and perceived climate change threats (Osbaldiston et al., 2020) also play a role. Interestingly, these factors align with key issues raised in liveability literature.

Liveability, a multi-faceted concept encompassing social, physical, and economic characteristics, contributes to quality of life and well-being at both individual and community levels (Baldwin & Stafford, 2019). Liveability indicators are measurable attributes used to assess and compare the quality of life and well-being in different locations. These indicators include factors such as crime rates, access to public transportation, housing affordability, job opportunities, safety, health services accessibility, air quality, mobility, walkability, open public spaces, diverse food and alcohol environments, social cohesion, and local democracy (Arundel et al., 2017; Badland et al., 2014; Lowe et al., 2015). In Australia, liveability is often seen as a competitive advantage among cities, conceptualised as the extent to which a locale fosters quality of life, health, and well-being. Australian cities, known for their high amenities, accessibility, and environmental sustainability, are often depicted as epitomes of liveability, offering a combination of safety, affordability, and aesthetic appeal that attracts amenity migrants.

The literature paints a picture of liveability as a multifaceted concept intricately interwoven with a range of social, physical, and economic characteristics that collectively contribute to the quality of life in a location (Howley et al., 2009). These characteristics play a crucial role in determining the liveability of a place and promoting healthy, safe, and harmonious living environments. Overall, liveability is a complex and multidimensional concept that requires careful consideration of various factors to create attractive and desirable living spaces.

Despite the growing body of research on amenity migration and liveability, discussions on these topics often occur in parallel rather than in dialogue. This disconnect may stem from the fact that amenity migration literature traditionally focuses on movement towards regional or rural areas, whereas liveability factors are typically considered in the context of urban environments. There is a

significant gap in understanding how these two concepts intersect, particularly in the context of non-metropolitan urban areas, small towns, and rural areas. This gap calls for a more integrated approach that considers liveability in relation to amenity migration, especially in light of the discrepancies between migrants' expectations and lived experiences in such destinations, including Cairns.

6.3 Cairns as Tropical Destination

Cairns is a tropical city located in Far North Queensland, Australia. Surrounded by world heritage-listed reefs and rainforests, Cairns has a distinctive regional identity shaped by its isolation, small size, and abundance of natural amenities. Cairns' proximity to the Great Barrier Reef and tropical rainforest hinterland has made tourism the backbone of its economy and multicultural social fabric since its founding in the 1870s (Prideaux et al., 2008). Today, Cairns is popularly known for its youthful, transient population and relaxed tropical lifestyle. Interestingly, many of the migrants interviewed for this research had initially experienced Cairns as tourists, which subsequently influenced their decision to relocate, highlighting the city's dual appeal as both a tourist destination and a potential home.

Cairns has experienced steady population growth over the past two decades, with an estimated resident population of 172,272 as of June 2022 (Cairns Regional Council, n.d.). Between 2016 and 2021, the population increased by 10,042 (6.4%), representing an average annual growth rate of 1.25%. The age profile of Cairns is young when compared to the broader Regional Queensland area, with higher proportions of children, teenagers, and young adults. The migration patterns show the largest net gains are from interstate, especially New South Wales and Victoria. The 25-to 34-year-old age group had the highest net migration gain between 2016-2021, indicating the appeal of Cairns to young workforce entrants and those establishing families (Cairns Regional Council, 2021).

Cairns is usually portrayed as an idyllic holiday haven defined by the Great Barrier Reef, secluded beaches, and exotic rainforests. Tourism marketing focuses on outdoor adventures and showcases the region's natural splendour (Figure 6-1). The combination of large natural attractions, such as the Great Barrier Reef and UNESCO-listed rainforests, alongside urban facilities enhance the city's desirability as a destination that integrates the natural and urban (referred to as 'tropical urbanism', see Law & Musso, 2020). Moreover, Cairns is a modern small city with a growing art scene and new infrastructure projects that are reshaping the urban landscape (Dadpour & Law, 2022). This cosmopolitan dimension enhances the image of Cairns as a gateway to the reef and tropical hinterlands, improving its liveability.



Figure 6-1 Tourism Tropical North Queensland. (2023). Cairns destination brochures

Despite the natural amenities that enhance Cairns' liveability, the city faces challenges related to its small size and geographic isolation, such as socioeconomic disadvantage, housing stress, and petty crime rates surpassing those in major Australian cities (Queensland Government Statistician's Office, 2022). The city's heavy reliance on tourism also limits its economic diversity, although Cairns offers high-quality infrastructure, services, cultural institutions, and lifestyle offerings comparable to larger urban centres. The influx of amenity migrants to small, tropical cities like Cairns, known for their natural beauty but strained by the incoming population's demands, highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how liveability factors shape the expectations and experiences of amenity migrants in non-metropolitan settings. Addressing this gap would provide valuable insights for policymakers and planners seeking to create liveable communities that meet the needs and aspirations of both long-term residents and amenity migrants.

6.4 Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative data from episodic narrative interviews with 27 recent migrants to Cairns and quantitative data from participants ranking the importance and performance of 32 liveability indicators derived from the literature. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling through local Cairns groups on social media, the local radio station, and the James Cook University website and newsletter, as well as snowball sampling to identify additional participants. The James Cook University ethics committee granted research ethics approval, and participant anonymity was maintained by removing personal identifiers during analysis and reporting and replacing real names with pseudonyms.

To capture the perspectives of recent amenity migrants, specific inclusion criteria were established. Only those who had relocated to Cairns from elsewhere in Australia within the past 5 years (between 2016-2021), predominantly for natural and lifestyle-related amenities (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017), were included in the sample. This focus on recent migrants allowed for a targeted exploration of the expectations and experiences of those who had recently made the decision to move to Cairns, with experiences still fresh in their minds. The 5-year timeframe provided a large enough pool of potential participants while ensuring a relatively recent transition, as long-term residents may have difficulty accurately recalling their initial motivation and expectations, and recent migrants are best able to highlight current gaps between expectations and on-the-ground realities. By concentrating on migration within Australia, the study controlled for certain variables, as all participants were familiar with Australian cities, culture, and norms, in contrast to international migrants who may face additional adaptation challenges due to cultural and linguistic differences. These inclusion criteria aimed to obtain a more homogeneous sample, reducing the influence of confounding factors and enabling a clearer understanding of the liveability perceptions and experiences of recent Australian amenity migrants in Cairns.

The sample included a diverse range of ages and backgrounds. Over 90% had previously relocated to other Australian cities and were drawn to Cairns for its natural amenities, perceived idyllic lifestyle, or employment opportunities. As shown in Table 6-2, most participants were between 26-45 years old, highly educated, and employed either full- or part-time. Specifically, 63% were female, 33% male, and 4% other. About 30% were in the 26–35 age group, and over half were 26-45 years old. Additionally, 63% had attained a university degree, with 41% holding a master’s degree or higher. Finally, 67% were employed either full-time or part-time.

	Sample Percentages
Gender	
Female	63%
Male	33%
Other	4%
Age Group	
26-35 years	30%
36-45 years	52%
+45 years	18%
Education	
Tertiary Education (university or college)	63%
High School Certificate (HSC)	37%

Employment	
Employed	67%
Unemployed	33%

Table 6-1 Participants' Demographics

A mixed-method approach was used to examine discrepancies between participants' pre-migration image of Cairns and their post-migration experiential image. Episodic narrative interviews (ENI) were employed to gather these experiential insights, focusing on extracting specific migration narratives and spatial stories while respecting participants' subjective meanings (Mueller, 2019). ENI uses open-ended questions and a flexible semi-structured interview guide to allow participants to tell stories on their own terms, emphasising the elicitation of 'small stories' (Georgakopoulou, 2006) – vignettes, anecdotes, and episodes that provide insight into participants' experiences, relationships, values, and identity. Participants were prompted to describe their migration experience, detailing their place of origin, perceptions of liveability in both their previous location and Cairns, and their understanding of the concept of liveability. Amenity maps of Cairns were provided during interviews to help contextualise narratives and offer insights into how people perceive, engage with, and form attachments to their surroundings.

At the conclusion of each interview participants were asked to rank the importance and performance of 32 liveability indicators –Access to Professional Business Services, Access to Support Services, Art & Culture, Career Development, Childcare, Density, Dine & Wine, Diversity, Education, Employment, Health, Housing, Inclusion, Information Access, Internet and Mobile Connection, Urban Landscape, Lifestyle, Living Cost, Natural Environment, Parks & Open Spaces, Physical Activities, Public Transport, Recreation & Entertainment, Road Infrastructure, Safety & Crime, Sense of Belonging, Shopping, Sustainability, Training, Volunteering, Walkability, Workplace Collaboration. These indicators were derived from existing literature and assessed via a Likert-scale survey. Participants ranked these indicators based on their perceived importance to their own circumstances and their experiences of everyday life in Cairns post-migration.

6.4.1 Data Analysis

An inductive approach was employed to identify key themes emerging from the interview transcripts, allowing the data to drive the analysis rather than imposing predetermined categories. This approach is particularly useful when exploring complex or understudied phenomena, as it enables the discovery of new insights and ideas that may not have been anticipated by the researcher. The process began with open coding, where meaningful segments of text were identified and assigned codes or labels that captured their essence or meaning. As the coding progressed,

patterns and relationships among the codes were recognised, leading to the categorisation of similar codes into sub-themes that represented broader concepts or ideas. NVivo Pro (QSR) TM 11.0 was used to facilitate the thematic coding process as its ability to create nodes, apply codes, and visualise relationships between themes aided in uncovering patterns in how participants discussed their expectations and experiences of liveability in Cairns (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

After identifying the key themes, they were compared to the 32 liveability indicators derived from the existing literature on amenity migration and liveability. These indicators were assessed via a Likert-scale survey, which provided a quantitative measure of the participants' expectations and experiences. The comparison between the inductively derived themes and the literature-based indicators served to ensure consistency and alignment between the qualitative and quantitative components of the study. This process helped to validate the choice of indicators used in the survey and demonstrated the relevance of the identified themes to the broader academic discourse on amenity migration and liveability. SPSS (IBM)TM version 24 was then used to inform an Importance-Performance Analysis to assess liveability expectations and experiences among participants.

Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) is a versatile tool that has been adapted and applied across various fields to understand needs and preferences and prioritise provision strategies (Riviezzo et al., 2009; Sever, 2015). Its applications span diverse sectors, including tourism and hospitality (*e.g.*, Boley et al., 2017), health care (*e.g.*, Lee et al., 2015), education (*e.g.*, McLeay et al., 2017), ecosystem services (*e.g.*, Hua & Chen, 2019), protected area management (*e.g.*, Tonge & Moore, 2007), leisure and recreation (*e.g.*, Oh, 2001), water conservation (*e.g.*, Warner et al., 2016), and government services (*e.g.*, Seng Wong et al., 2011). Urban scholars have employed Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) to assess various aspects of urban life, including city vitality and viability (Riviezzo et al., 2009), dwellers' satisfaction with urban services (Das et al., 2022), sustainability in cities (Lee & Xue, 2021), quality of life among public housing residents (Vialita & Rahmawati, 2020), and intervention priorities for improving urban and peri-urban socio-ecohydrological systems (Danielaini et al., 2019). Adapting IPA in this study provides a novel approach to understanding disparities between liveability expectations and experiences among amenity migrants in Cairns.

In the IPA analysis for this study, all ranking lists produced by participants were combined using the TopKLists R package. This process generated a final aggregated ranking of 32 liveability indicators, considering both their importance and performance. The aggregation was performed using the rank aggregation (RA) method (Li et al., 2019), which ensures a robust and reliable representation of the collective preferences and experiences of the participants. To visualise the results, the means of importance and performance for each indicator were plotted on an IPA matrix

using an XY Scatter Chart, as shown in Figure 6-2. The matrix is divided into four quadrants, each representing a different combination of importance and performance levels (Azzopardi & Nash, 2013), allowing for a clear understanding of the areas where resources should be allocated to maximise satisfaction and retention of amenity migrants.

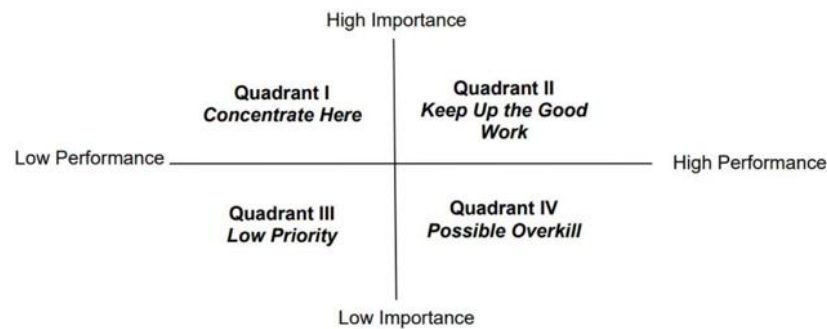


Figure 6-2 IPA Traditional Matrix

6.5 Findings: Key Liveability Concerns

Our ENI findings show that participants largely held positive perceptions of Cairns as an idyllic tropical destination with abundant natural amenities, outdoor recreation, and a relaxing lifestyle. One participant expressed their love for the city, saying, "I love Cairns. I do love the climate because I don't really like the cold weather. And I love the beauty of the place. I love plants. Plants are my thing and I love all the tropical plants. You know, we've got the Botanic Gardens, and we're living between the mountains and the sea. And there's all these bushwalks everywhere. And it's just beautiful to look at, isn't it?" These initial impressions of Cairns as a beautiful and serene place were common among many participants.

Many were drawn by the idealised image of Cairns as a tropical paradise. Some imagined integrating into a cohesive local community. One participant shared their experience of visiting Cairns from Sydney: "We travelled to Cairns from Sydney for a long weekend, and I just fell in love [...] I remember thinking, this feels like home. I just had this lightbulb moment. And I thought this is weird. I feel like I've come home to something." The sense of belonging and connection to Cairns was a strong motivator for many participants to make the move.

However, for many, the reality of life in Cairns did not match the imagination of a tropical paradise. One participant reflected on their initial impression and subsequent experience: "I appreciated the peaceful lifestyle of the area when we first visited Cairns for a holiday [...] but after living here for a few years, I can now say that it's a bit backwards." After relocating, participants encountered unanticipated challenges such as finding affordable housing, securing stable

employment, feeling socially included, and managing costs of living. Crime and safety concerns also emerged during interviews. As one participant notes: “my impression was housing is cheaper here compared to bigger cities, but probably the biggest thing is just lack of housing at the moment” These narratives highlight the discrepancy between the idealised expectations and the lived experiences of liveability in Cairns. The IPA findings confirm the disparities between the idyllic imagery of Cairns as a tropical paradise and the everyday experiences of amenity migrants in the city. Table 6-2 shows the positioning of the 32 liveability factors in the IPA matrix based on the expectations and experiences of our participants.

Q1 liveability indicators	Q2 liveability indicators	Q3 liveability indicators	Q4 liveability indicators
Employment	Dine & Wine	Career Development	Art & Culture
Housing	Diversity	Childcare	Information Access
Living Costs	Health Services	Density	Internet Connection
Safety & Crime	Lifestyle	Inclusion	Landscape
Sense of Belonging	Natural Environment	Professional Business Services	Open Spaces
Education	Physical Activities	Public Transport	
Walkability	Recreation/ Entertainment	Road Infrastructure	
		Shopping	
		Support Services	
		Sustainability	
		Training	
		Volunteering	
		Workplace Collaboration	

Table 6-2 The 32 liveability indicators and their IPA Quadrant

Table 6-2 is sorted into different IPA Quadrants that are graphically presented in the IPA matrix (Figure 6-3). This matrix helps to map key gaps between liveability expectations and experiences, offering insights into areas where Cairns may underperform concerning quality of life indicators that newcomers value. Quadrant I of the matrix identifies areas with high importance but low performance. Quadrant II, on the other hand, consists of indicators with both high importance and high performance, which present opportunities for Cairns to maintain or enhance its competitive advantage. These strengths include the natural environment, lifestyle, diversity, health services, and a vibrant dining scene, which attract amenity migrants from across Australia. Quadrant III includes low-priority indicators that exhibit low performance, representing minor weaknesses that do not necessitate additional effort. In Cairns, these factors are volunteering opportunities, shopping, and public transport. Lastly, Quadrant IV contains indicators characterised by low importance and high performance, suggesting that further allocation of resources to these areas would be excessive and better utilised elsewhere.

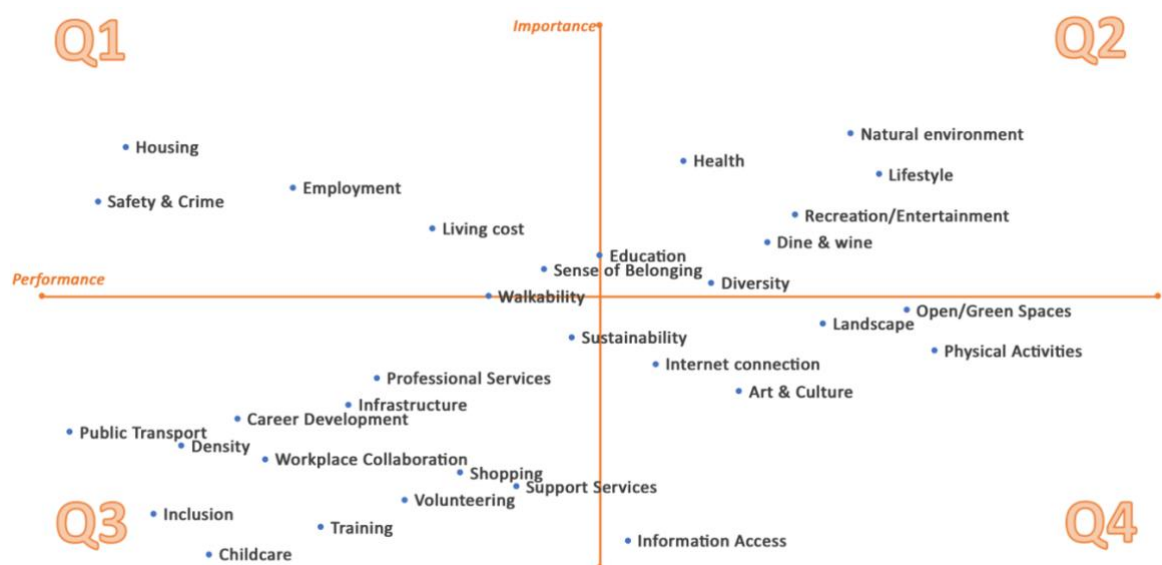


Figure 6-3 Importance-Performance Analysis of Cairns' Liveability Indicators

Some indicators, such as employment, living costs, and education, were expected to rank high in importance, given their frequent mention in prior studies as critical factors influencing migration decisions and the perceived liveability of a location. However, high importance of some other indicators, like sense of belonging, emerged as more surprising. While often overlooked in traditional liveability studies (Khorrami et al., 2021), the prominence of sense of belonging in our findings underscores the importance of social and

emotional ties in migrants' perceptions of a place. It suggests that beyond tangible amenities and services, the intangible feelings of acceptance, integration, and community connection play a pivotal role in shaping the liveability experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns.

6.6 Discussion

In this study, we focus our discussion on the five indicators that fell into Quadrant I of the IPA matrix, representing areas of high importance but very low performance: housing, employment, safety and crime, living costs, and a sense of belonging. These indicators are critical in shaping the liveability experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns, and their underperformance highlights significant gaps between expectations and reality. Housing and living costs are fundamental considerations for migrants when choosing a destination, and their poor performance in Cairns can significantly impact the attractiveness of the city to potential newcomers. Similarly, employment opportunities and safety are crucial factors that influence the decision to migrate and the overall quality of life in the new location. The prominence of sense of belonging in Quadrant I underscores the importance of social and emotional ties in migrants' perceptions of a place, suggesting that beyond tangible amenities and services, the intangible feelings of acceptance, integration, and community connection play a pivotal role in shaping the liveability experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns. While often overlooked in traditional liveability studies (Khorrami et al., 2021), our findings highlight the essential role of sense of belonging for the successful integration of migrants into the local community and their long-term retention in the area. By focusing on these five indicators that performed poorly despite their high importance, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the most pressing liveability challenges faced by amenity migrants in Cairns and offer targeted recommendations for improving the city's performance in these critical areas.

6.6.1 *Housing affordability and availability*

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of housing affordability and availability in shaping the experiences and decision-making processes of migrants in Cairns. Consistent with previous research (Zheng et al., 2020), securing affordable and stable housing emerged as a fundamental prerequisite for migrants to establish themselves, access employment and services, and integrate into the community. The narratives from the interviews underscore the disparity between migrants' expectations and experiences regarding housing costs and availability in Cairns, mirroring the challenges faced by migrants in other Australian contexts such as Sydney, Melbourne, and amenity destinations like Castlemaine (Birrell & Healy, 2015; Costello, 2009).

Cairns' housing market presented unanticipated obstacles for many participants, despite their initial hopes and dreams. One participant expressed their original intention, stating, "Our goal was to buy property and everything, that's what attracted us to Cairns: property prices." However, the allure of affordable housing quickly faded as they faced the harsh realities of steep rental prices and a scarcity of available properties. The acute housing shortage in Cairns, particularly in terms of housing diversity (Gibson & Law, 2022), poses significant barriers for migrants seeking to actualise their aspirations for home ownership or secure rental homes within their budgets.

Numerous migrants encounter difficulties when trying to enter Cairns' housing market, frequently having to resort to short-term housing solutions until they can secure a permanent place to call home. One participant, along with their young family, had to reside in a caravan park within the city for several weeks before eventually moving into a villa. As evidenced by the participants' accounts, unaffordable and scarce housing options create major hardships, exposing migrants to risks of homelessness, overcrowded housing, excessive living costs, and disconnection from the community. These findings align with the broader literature on the impact of housing affordability and availability on migrant settlement and well-being (Teixeira & Li, 2015; Ziersch et al., 2017).

The sizable housing gap in Cairns, as identified in the IPA, has profound implications for migrant retention and the city's ability to attract and sustain a diverse population. Without adequate and affordable housing options, migrants may be compelled to leave the city in search of more favourable living conditions, potentially undermining the social and economic benefits of amenity migration for the local community (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011). As one participant put it: "So we thought well, you know, we can sit here and wait for things to get better, or we go somewhere else". As such, addressing the housing challenges faced by migrants should be a key priority for policymakers and community stakeholders in Cairns. Innovative housing solutions, such as community-led housing initiatives or collaborative housing models (Czischke & Huisman, 2018) may offer more affordable and diverse housing options for migrants in Cairns and other regional destinations.

6.6.2 *Neighbourhood safety and crime rates*

Our findings reveal that neighbourhood safety and crime rates in Cairns vary significantly, with some areas of the city perceived as less safe than others. Participants' narratives highlight the uneven distribution of safety across the city, largely dependent on the specific neighbourhood. This aligns with previous research on the varied nature of safety perceptions in various contexts (George, 2003). The lived experiences of crime and safety in Cairns present a more complex picture than the idealised image of an idyllic tropical paradise. Certain areas of Cairns, particularly the city centre,

provoke continuous concern and feelings of insecurity among participants, especially after dark. This sentiment echoes prior research on violence and crime hotspots in Cairns (Botterill et al., 2013). The absence of safety has a profound impact on migrants' overall experiences, influencing their daily routines, neighbourhood selection, and overall sense of security, well-being and quality of life (Lorenc et al., 2012).

The conflicting experiences and perceptions of safety among participants reflect Cairns' fragmentation and deep socio-spatial division. Participants' avoidance of suburbs "starting with M or W," which are well-known multicultural suburbs with poor socio-economic outcomes, highlights the clear social boundaries that demarcate 'safe' and 'unsafe' areas. This territorial stigmatisation marginalises entire neighbourhoods, despite most having both safe and unsafe pockets, aligning with research on the spatial concentration of disadvantage and its impact on residents' experiences and perceptions of safety (Leerkes & Bernasco, 2010). The uneven geography of safety in Cairns shapes the urban landscape and reveals the complex interplay between space, power, and inequality in shaping liveability in this supposedly idyllic tropical setting. Balancing amenity richness and accessibility with density and land use diversity can promote safer and healthier communities (Zandiatashbar & Laurito, 2023).

6.6.3 *Employment opportunities and career prospects*

Our findings highlight the significant challenges faced by amenity migrants in Cairns regarding employment opportunities and career prospects. The participants' narratives reveal a stark contrast between their initial expectations and the realities of the local labour market. The limited availability of stable, full-time positions and the prevalence of casual employment create a precarious situation for migrants seeking to establish themselves in their new community. "As soon as you're in the market, it's casual, you know, it's not seen as, as stable as like a full-time job" one participant explained, reflecting a broader trend of underemployment and job insecurity among migrants in Cairns.

While some studies have found that tourism employment acts as a pull factor for the in-migration of highly skilled and well-paid individuals (Thulemark et al., 2014), other research highlights the vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers in Australia, particularly in regions heavily dependent on tourism (Boese & Moran, 2021). Participants often experienced a disparity between their imagined employment prospects and their actual experiences due to factors such as lack of local networks, limited knowledge of the local job market, and competition with established residents. Furthermore, the casualisation of the workforce and the seasonal nature of many jobs in Cairns' tourism industry left some trapped in a cycle of precarious employment. This precarity

hindered their ability to achieve economic stability and social integration, exacerbating the challenges they face in their new environment. As a result, while tourism employment may initially attract migrants, the realities of the industry can lead to ongoing struggles and limitations for those seeking to establish themselves in their new communities.

Employment is a crucial avenue for social integration, as it provides opportunities for interaction with the local community and a sense of belonging (Ager & Strang, 2008). Without access to secure and meaningful employment, amenity migrants may struggle to establish social networks, leading to feelings of isolation and marginalisation. Policymakers must address the structural barriers that hinder migrants' access to stable employment opportunities in Cairns. This may include initiatives to provide targeted skills training, support local job search assistance programs, and encourage the diversification of the local economy to reduce the overreliance on tourism (Froy, 2006).

6.6.4 *The cost of living*

The IPA revealed a stark contrast between participants initial expectations of affordability and the realities of living in Cairns. The narratives confirmed that unexpectedly high expenses for everyday necessities, such as groceries, electricity, and house insurance, place a significant burden on migrants' budgets and overall quality of life. "I think we thought it would be a lot cheaper to live up here, but like our [house] insurance is dear, I guess because of cyclones. We find that electricity is dear because there's no competitors. We find that groceries are more expensive probably they've got extra freight" one participant explained. This collective sentiment reflects a broader trend of rising living costs in regional Australia (Yue et al., 2014). The high costs of essentials in Cairns can be attributed to various factors, including the city's regional location, limited market competition, and additional freight costs for goods and services. These factors contribute to the financial strain experienced by amenity migrants, who may have relocated to Cairns with the expectation of a more affordable lifestyle compared to metropolitan cities.

The persistent financial strain experienced by migrants in Cairns can have far-reaching consequences beyond immediate economic concerns. Over time, these pressures may deteriorate the overall living experience and quality of life, potentially influencing migrants' decisions to stay in or leave Cairns. This, in turn, can have significant implications for the city's ability to attract and retain a diverse and skilled workforce, which is crucial for its long-term economic and social sustainability. Policymakers must address the structural factors contributing to the high cost of living in Cairns and implement measures to alleviate the financial burdens faced by migrants and other

residents. This may include initiatives to promote market competition and regulate essential services.

6.6.5 *Building a sense of belonging*

The findings of this study highlight the challenges faced by amenity migrants in building a sense of belonging and integrating into the Cairns community. The participant's narrative highlights the difficulties in establishing social connections and meeting people, which can lead to feelings of isolation and exclusion. One participant shared: "I don't know anyone here. I've moved to Cairns by myself. I found that people are very cliquey and I did find it hard to meet people socially. I love things like just walking and talking to someone for no reason, you know [...] but it is not happening, I don't know why probably because of too many tourists I think. It has been a sort of off-putting". These narratives shared by participants find parallels in the broader literature about migrants' struggles of integrating into new communities (Baldwin & Stafford, 2019).

The observation that the high number of tourists in Cairns may contribute to the difficulty in forming social connections suggests that the transient nature of the population can hinder the development of stable, long-lasting relationships. Moreover, experiences of finding people "cliquey" and the struggle to meet people socially indicates the presence of social barriers that can further impede the integration process. This is consistent with previous research that highlights the importance of social networks and support systems in facilitating migrants' adaptation to new environments (Ryan, 2011). The presence of social tension and the challenges faced by newcomers in building relationships can have far-reaching consequences for their overall well-being and long-term commitment to the area.

Feeling part of a community is crucial for migrants' social interactions, mental health, and sense of belonging (de Haan et al., 2014), and the challenges faced by amenity migrants underscore the need for targeted interventions and support systems. Policymakers and community organisations should prioritise the development and implementation of inclusive community programs and spaces that promote social interaction, cultural exchange, and a sense of belonging (see Phillimore, 2021). These initiatives can include regular community events, multicultural festivals, and mentorship programs that connect newcomers with established residents. Additionally, local authorities should work towards creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment for migrants by promoting cultural sensitivity, combating discrimination, and ensuring equal access to resources and services (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Investing in initiatives that foster social cohesion and support the integration of amenity migrants is not only crucial for their individual well-being but also for the long-term sustainability

and resilience of the Cairns community. By addressing the social challenges faced by migrants and promoting a sense of belonging, policymakers can encourage the retention of skilled individuals, and contribute to its overall social and economic development. In conclusion, the experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns regarding liveability highlight the need for targeted policies and initiatives that promote inclusivity, affordability, and resilience. By prioritising these issues, policymakers can create a more welcoming environment that enables migrants to establish roots, form meaningful connections, and contribute to the region's long-term prosperity.

The study's limitations, such as the small, non-random sample and reliance on cross-sectional self-report data, should be acknowledged. These limitations may affect the generalisability of the findings and introduce biases. However, the methodology employed contributes to a broader understanding of amenity migration trends and highlights the importance of context-specific strategies to enhance liveability. Future studies should consider utilising larger, randomly selected samples across multiple time points and locations to allow for more robust causal inferences. Despite these limitations, the present study provides valuable insights into the expectations and experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns and can serve as a foundation for further research.

6.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shed light on the complex dynamics of amenity migration and the challenges faced by migrants in Cairns, Australia. By illuminating the contradictions between imagined tropical Edens and the lived experiences of amenity migrants, this research highlights the importance of addressing the disjuncture between expectations and post-relocation experiences regarding housing, employment, safety, costs, and belonging. The findings of this study, derived from the systematic mapping of liveability gaps through Importance–Performance Analysis, underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and policies that enhance the quality of life across multiple domains. Bridging the gap between migrant expectations and on-the-ground realities is crucial for the sustainability of amenity destinations and the long-term retention of newcomers who can contribute to the revitalisation of regional communities. The findings underscore the need for a more holistic approach, ensuring that future studies and policies are attuned to the lived experiences of migrants in search of their envisioned paradises. As global connectivity and the pursuit of idyllic lifestyles continue to drive amenity migration, it is imperative that researchers, policymakers, and community stakeholders collaborate to develop evidence-based strategies that promote sustainable, liveable, and inclusive regional communities. By prioritising the needs and experiences of amenity migrants and addressing the challenges they face, we can work towards creating vibrant, resilient, and welcoming destinations that benefit both newcomers and long-term residents alike.

Chapter Seven: The Interplay of Housing, Community, and Re-Migration

Building upon the foundations laid in the preceding chapters, this study delves deeper into the lived experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns, with a specific focus on housing insecurity. The previous chapters have established the broader context of regional Australia and Cairns' position within it (Chapter four), explored the overall liveability perceptions of migrants through qualitative GIS methods (Chapter five), and examined the gap between pre-migration expectations and post-migration realities (Chapter six). This chapter extends these insights by honing in on one of the most critical aspects of migrant experiences: housing. By doing so, it responds to one of the key issues identified in the previous chapter—the significant gap between migrants' housing expectations and their actual experiences in Cairns.

The study is situated within the growing body of literature on housing precarity (Desmond, 2016; Rolnik, 2019) and extends these insights to the context of amenity migration. By doing so, it challenges the often-romanticised narratives of this type of migration (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009) and reveals the vulnerabilities that amenity migrants face in their quest for the 'good life'. This approach aligns with recent calls for a more critical examination of migration for the pursuit of 'a better way of life' that considers its broader socio-economic and political contexts (Benson & Osbaldiston, 2016).

By focusing on episodic narratives interviews, this chapter illuminates the complex nature of housing insecurity and its cumulative impacts on migrants' sense of place and belonging. It reveals that many amenity migrants in Cairns face significant challenges in navigating the rental housing market, which negatively impacts their sense of belonging and overall life satisfaction. Importantly, the study reveals that housing insecurity can prompt amenity migrants to consider re-migration as a coping strategy, as they seek more stable and affordable housing options elsewhere. This finding contributes to debates on the sustainability of amenity-led growth in regional areas (Argent et al., 2016) and challenges simplistic notions of linear migration pathways.

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7.1 Introduction

Amenity migration, the movement of people to regions with desirable natural, cultural, and/or recreational resources to enhance their quality of life, has emerged as a significant trend in recent decades (Gurran, 2008; Moss, 1994). Driven by a desire for a better quality of life and a connection with nature (Jones & Woods, 2013; Williams & Hall, 2000), this phenomenon has

manifested in diverse locations, from the US Mountain West and coastal North Carolina (Crawford et al., 2011) to mountain resort communities in British Columbia, Canada (Moore et al., 2006) and the Patagonian Andes in Argentina (Otero et al., 2006). Amenity migration is characterised by individuals' pursuit of lifestyle improvements and emphasises personal fulfillment and well-being (Brehm, 2003). However, it is important to recognise that amenity migration is a perceived and relative concept, and the factors that attract some individuals to a particular location may also drive others to leave (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011).

Amenity migration has been particularly pronounced in regional areas offering unique natural landscapes and lifestyle opportunities, such as Cairns, a tropical tourist city in north Queensland, Australia (Buckle & Osbaldiston, 2022). The city's appeal, rooted in its 'tropical urbanism' (Law & Musso, 2020), attracts a diverse population, ranging from transient tourists to long-term residents. The city's proximity to the Great Barrier Reef and the Daintree Rainforest, coupled with its relative affordability compared to larger cities, has made it a popular destination for amenity migrants seeking to improve their quality of life (Dadpour & Law, 2022).

Regional cities like Cairns often struggle to accommodate the rapid changes in their housing markets caused by population growth driven by factors such as amenity migration, leading to declining affordability and various social problems (Osbaldiston & Picken 2014; Rowley & McKenzie 2012). These changes can result in a higher risk of displacement for amenity migrants due to rising rents or property sales, exacerbating housing insecurity (Hulse & Milligan 2014)— i.e. 'the loss of, threat to, or uncertainty of a safe, stable, and affordable home environment' (DeLuca & Rosen, 2022). This insecurity can significantly impact migrants' well-being, sense of belonging, and overall quality of life (Easthope, 2014). The impacts are particularly pronounced in non-metropolitan areas, such as Cairns, where community integration plays a vital role in life satisfaction (Beggs et al., 2010).

Compared to long-term residents, amenity migrants often have different housing needs and preferences, such as a desire for flexible and adaptable housing (Glumac & Caballe Fabra, 2018). However, the literature remains scarce in this regard. Moreover, given the traditional focus of migration research on large metropolitan areas (*e.g.* Buch et al., 2014; Vasilieva et al., 2017), there is a dearth of insights into the housing experiences of amenity migrants in regional cities, which face unique challenges and opportunities. Our study aims to bridge these gaps at the intersection of migration and housing studies by exploring the experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns, specifically in relation to renting, and how these experiences influence their decisions to either stay in Cairns or re-migrate to another location.

Through episodic narrative interviews conducted within a framework informed by spatial epistemology, we delve into the stories of amenity migrants to understand the nuance of rental housing for amenity migrants. Our findings shed light on how rental (in)security influences amenity migrants' quality of life and further decisions to undertake re-migration, a topic that, to our knowledge, has not been explored in the context of amenity migration before. Re-migration, in this study, refers to the phenomenon of amenity migrants to Cairns considering or deciding to leave in search of better life prospects, often due to housing challenges and unmet expectations.

Situated at the interplay of housing and migration research, the paper is structured as follows: following this introduction, we present a literature review to contextualise housing within amenity migration discourses, focusing on insecurity in the rental sector. We then provide a description of the methodology, and its relevance to the research objectives. The results section presents the findings from the interviews, highlighting the challenges faced by amenity migrants in securing suitable and affordable rentals. The discussion integrates these findings into the wider context of amenity migration and housing, followed by relevant planning insights. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the study's contributions to migration and housing literature.

7.2 Amenity Migration and Housing in Regional Cities

There is a substantial body of research that examines the impacts of dynamic housing markets on migrant population in general. These studies have explored how housing availability, affordability, and suitability can shape the experiences of migrants in various contexts (*e.g.* Withers et al., 2008; Phillimore & Goodson, 2008). Issues such as housing discrimination, overcrowding, and poor housing conditions have been identified as significant challenges faced by migrants, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Crawford et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2023). Moreover, research has highlighted how housing can serve as a crucial determinant of migrants' social integration, economic mobility, and overall well-being in their host communities (Liu et al., 2017; Zheng et al., 2020). However, there is a notable lack of studies that specifically focus on the housing experiences of amenity migrants in regional areas like Cairns, Australia.

Amenity migration refers to the process of people relocating to regions with desirable natural, cultural, or recreational resources (Moss, 1994; Moss et al., 2004). It is usually driven by non-economic factors, such as the desire for a better lifestyle, a sense of community, and a connection to nature (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011). Amenity migrants are typically well-educated and mobile individuals who have the flexibility to choose where they live based on their preferences (Glorioso & Moss, 2007). They often seek out places that offer a slower pace of life, access to outdoor activities, and a strong sense of community (Osbaldeston, 2010). Several factors contribute

to the growth of amenity migration, including technological advancements enabling remote work (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011), growing environmental awareness and desire for a more sustainable lifestyle (Moss, 2006), and the desire to escape urban stress by moving to smaller communities (Osbaldiston, 2010).

Amenity migrants have distinct housing needs and preferences, prioritising proximity to natural amenities, scenic views, privacy, and access to open spaces (Crawford et al., 2011; Moss, 2006; Gosnell & Abrams, 2011; Glorioso & Moss, 2007). These priorities differ from those of long-term residents, who often emphasise proximity to employment and established social networks (Li et al., 2021). While amenity migrants may be willing to accept higher housing costs for perceived quality of life improvements (Oviedo et al., 2022), regional cities welcoming them face challenges such as limited housing diversity, aging infrastructure, and resource constraints for new development (Costello, 2009; Gurran, 2008), creating a complex and understudied dynamic that can significantly impact the quality of life and well-being of this population (Argent et al., 2016).

Regional housing markets, once considered affordable alternatives to major metropolitan areas (Randolph & Tice, 2014), are now facing the risk of replicating the difficulties experienced in capital cities due to growth, leading to escalating socioeconomic disparities (Guaralda et al., 2020). With its estimated residential population of 169,312 in 2021 (Cairns Regional Council, 2022), Cairns presents a microcosm of the housing affordability crisis that is gripping many parts of Australia. Between 1993 and 2018, housing prices in Cairns fluctuated by an average of 4.9% annually, with a notable surge since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Aussie and CoreLogic, 2018). The city's declining housing affordability advantage, exacerbated by recent population growth, further compounds the escalating costs.

The availability, affordability, and suitability of housing are key factors influencing the experiences of amenity migrants (Withers et al., 2008). These factors can either facilitate or hinder the integration of migrants, impacting their access to employment, education, and social networks (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008). Moreover, housing has significant impacts on both mental and physical health, shaping daily experiences and long-term outcomes for migrants (Liu et al., 2017; Zheng et al., 2020).

7.2.1 Regional Rental Market

Housing can be particularly challenging in the rental market of high-amenity areas like Cairns. Rental housing in high-amenity areas can be scarce, as property owners often prefer to rent to tourists for short-term stays rather than to long-term residents (Laitos & Ruckriegle, 2013). This scarcity can lead to higher rental prices and limited housing options for amenity migrants (Loeffler &

Steinicke, 2007). The median weekly rent in Cairns, standing at \$440, mirrors that of Brisbane and underscores a significant 7.3% annual increase (ABS, 2021; ABS, 2022). This figure, while seemingly moderate in comparison to larger Australian cities, belies the nuanced challenges faced by amenity migrants in Cairns. Moreover, seasonal fluctuations in rental availability and prices due to the influx of tourists and/or students can create additional challenges for amenity migrants seeking suitable and stable rentals (Morris et al., 2021; Sanchis-Guarner, 2017). These challenges highlight the importance of renter security for amenity migrants in regional cities like Cairns.

Renter security, which refers to the degree of stability, affordability, and protection that tenants experience in their rental housing (Hulse & Haffner, 2014), is important because it provides tenants with a sense of home, belonging, and control over their living situation, which are essential for overall well-being and quality of life (Easthope, 2014). Moreover, secure rental housing allows tenants to participate fully in their communities, form social connections, and pursue their personal and professional goals without the constant threat of displacement (Minnery et al., 2003; Stone et al., 2013). Housing is central to life satisfaction (Coates et al., 2015), and in the context of amenity migration, renter security can play a crucial role in the successful integration of newcomers into regional communities and their ability to contribute to local economic and social development.

Inadequate renter security can have serious consequences for individuals, families, and communities. At the individual level, insecure rental housing can lead to stress, anxiety, and poor mental health outcomes, as tenants constantly worry about their ability to maintain their home (Easthope, 2014). This insecurity can also disrupt employment, education, and social networks, as tenants may be forced to move frequently or live far from their workplaces, schools, or support systems (Stone et al., 2013). At the family level, inadequate renter security can strain relationships, limit access to essential services and amenities, and negatively impact children's development and well-being (Hulse & Haffner, 2014). At the community level, high levels of renter insecurity can lead to neighbourhood instability, reduced social cohesion, and increased demand for public services and assistance (Minnery et al., 2003). It can also negatively impact amenity migrants' settlement in their new destination.

Migrants' settlement decision-making is a multifaceted process influenced by a variety of factors including individual expectations, social networks, and environmental conditions (Rijnks et al., 2018). The complex interplay of these factors shapes migrants' experiences and perceptions of their new environment, which in turn affects their decision to stay or move again (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018). When these expectations remain unmet due to challenges such as social isolation, material hardships, or housing difficulties, some migrants may choose to engage in subsequent

migrations, a phenomenon we refer to as re-migration. Housing factors such as availability, affordability, tenure structures, market conditions, and quality play a significant role in influencing migration patterns, with effects on residential mobility, quality of life, and re-migration (Hamnett, 1991; Mulder, 2006; Seo, & Kim, 2020).

Re-migration refers to the patterns and processes involved when migrants move again after settling in a new location (*see* Kleist, 2020). Re-migration is often used in the context of immigrants returning to their original country (Kleist, 2020). But here we use it to refer to the phenomenon when amenity migrants decide/contemplate to engage in subsequent migrations due to various reasons. When the realities of amenity destinations do not align with migrants' expectations, the subsequent dissatisfaction can lead to considering re-migration (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017).

While existing research provides valuable insights into various aspects of housing, renter security, and migration, there remains a gap in understanding the specific experiences of amenity migrants in regional contexts. Studies on amenity migration and housing have traditionally focused on the changes in housing prices and availability because of amenity migration (*e.g.* Waltert & Schläpfer, 2010; Cooke & Lane, 2015). However, these studies do not delve into the unique housing challenges and preferences of amenity migrants themselves. Similarly, research on renter security (*e.g.* Hulse & Haffner, 2014; Easthope, 2014; Minnery et al., 2003; Stone et al., 2013) provides a solid foundation for understanding the importance of secure rental housing, but these studies do not specifically address the experiences of amenity migrants in regional contexts. Furthermore, while research on the housing experiences of migrants (*e.g.* Withers et al., 2007; Phillimore & Goodson, 2008) offers valuable insights, these studies focus on different types of migrants, such as refugees or economic migrants, and may not fully capture the specific challenges faced by amenity migrants who are often motivated by lifestyle factors. These gaps may exist because amenity migrants are often depicted as affluent (*e.g.* Glorioso & Moss, 2007), whereas housing challenges and insecurity are typically associated with the lives of the poor (DeLuca & Rosen, 2022). To address the gap, this paper, at the intersection of housing and migration studies, explores the experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns' rental market.

7.3 Methodology

This paper is part of a larger study on amenity migration and liveability in Cairns, which employed a qualitative research design, utilising episodic narrative interviews (ENI) to delve into the lived experiences of amenity migrants. The ENI method is recognised for its effectiveness in capturing the depth and complexity of personal experiences within their social contexts (Mueller, 2019). It operates on the premise that reality is socially constructed and most comprehensively

understood from the viewpoint of those living it (Creswell & Poth, 2017). ENI excels at revealing the intricate connections between individual narratives and larger societal forces (Chase, 2018). It facilitates a thorough examination of housing challenges and its impacts among migrants as it is conducive to eliciting ‘small stories’—personal, everyday narratives that, while often overlooked, provide significant insights into individual lived experiences (Georgakopoulou, 2006).

This paper focuses on the rental housing experiences of the participants and the possible challenges they faced in navigating the rental market in Cairns. All participants had experiences in navigating the rental market, either when they first arrived in Cairns, later on, or throughout their stay. Although some participants eventually became homeowners, they had to rent before buying, thus gaining valuable insights into the rental market. Participants were selected based on their relocation to Cairns between 2016 and 2021, with a focus on those whose move was primarily motivated by amenity factors such as lifestyle improvements, access to natural resources, and a desire for a better quality of life. The five-year period criteria aligned with the study’s focus on contemporary housing market dynamics and migration trends. Recruitment was achieved through purposive and snowball sampling methods, which ensured the inclusion of rich and diverse narratives. The sample’s demographic composition was intentionally varied across age, gender, educational attainment, and employment status to enrich the representativeness and analytical depth of the study (Weller et al., 2018).

We explored the lived experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns, focusing on the challenges they face in securing affordable and suitable rental housing. Through in-depth interviews, we aimed to capture their diverse narratives, uncovering common themes and patterns in their housing experiences. By understanding the nuances of their stories, we sought to shed light on the complexities of navigating the rental market in Cairns and how these experiences shape their overall well-being and sense of belonging in the community. Ultimately, our research aimed to give voice to the unique perspectives of amenity migrants and contribute to informed policies and initiatives that address their housing needs and foster a more inclusive community.

Ethical considerations were integral to the research methodology. Confidentiality and the option to withdraw without consequence were guaranteed to all participants. Informed consent was secured before conducting interviews, and sensitivity was exercised to prevent participant discomfort during the sharing of personal narratives. The research adhered to the ethical standards specific to narrative inquiry, which prioritise respect for the storyteller, their narrative, and the context of the narrative (Josselson, 2007). These ethical practices, including using pseudonyms in

this paper for anonymity purposes, were upheld to respect the participants' trust and preserve the integrity of the research process.

As these narratives should, we set our selection criteria to reflect a broad spectrum of the amenity migrant's community in Cairns, aimed at capturing a variety of experiences. The study's participant demographics, summarised in Table 7-1, reveal that the majority were between 26-45 years old, well-educated, and employed either full-time or part-time. The gender distribution was 63% female, 33% male, and 4% other genders. A significant portion (63%) held a university degree, with 41% possessing a master's degree or higher, and 67% were engaged in full-time or part-time employment.

	Sample Percentages
Gender	
Female	63%
Male	33%
Other	4%
Age Group	
26-35 years	30%
36-45 years	52%
+45 years	18%
Education	
Tertiary Education (university or college)	63%
High School Certificate (HSC)	37%
Employment	
Employed	67%
Unemployed	33%

Table 7-1 Participants' Demographics

Compared to the available Census data, our sample had a higher proportion of females (63%) than the 2016 Census data for movers to Cairns, which indicated 52.3% female and 47.7% male (Profile.id., 2021). Despite this difference, our study aimed to capture diverse experiences and perspectives, and the higher female participation may reflect their willingness to engage in the research. The age distribution of our sample aligns well with the Census data, with 30% of participants in the 26-35 years age group, corresponding to the 25-34 years age group that had the highest net migration to Cairns in 2021 (Profile.id., 2021). Our sample also included 52% of

participants aged 36-45 years and 18% over 45 years, providing valuable insights into the experiences of a significant proportion of movers to Cairns across different age groups.

ENI allowed participants to share their experiences through a combination of narrative and semi-structured questioning, providing a rich understanding of their lived experiences (Mueller, 2019). These narratives illuminate the hopes and struggles of migrants as they navigate their new social and spatial landscapes (Dennison, 2021; Kordel & Pohle, 2018). They reflect not only migrants' perceptions of housing market but also the broader socio-economic and cultural contexts that shape their stories (Gómez-Estern & de la Mata Benítez, 2013). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. The software facilitates the systematic coding and categorisation of data, enabling the identification of key themes and patterns (Frieze, 2019). The use of ATLAS.ti enhances the transparency and rigor of the analysis process, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' narratives (Paulus & Lester, 2016). However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of the analysis relies on the researcher's interpretative skills and the depth of engagement with the data (Frieze, 2019).

7.4 Findings

Our findings highlight Cairns as a prime example of a regional city where rental availability, suitability and affordability emerges as a key challenge for amenity migrants. Our participants shared their experiences with finding suitable rentals, dealing with real estate agents, and the challenges of high rents. There are stories of struggles in securing a rental property, especially when pets are involved, and issues with the quality of housing in certain areas. They painted a vivid picture of the challenges faced by amenity migrants, voicing their frustrations at the Cairns' housing market. Many stories concluded with personal reflections on their current living situation and aspirations for future housing. This included desires to move to different areas, upgrade their living situation, or find a home that better suits their lifestyle preferences and needs.

Reflecting broader trends observed (*e.g.* see Burns et al., 2021; Stawarz et al., 2021), despite being traditionally more affordable (*see* Beer et al., 2007; Gurran & Phibbs, 2015), our findings show that Cairns has experienced a tightening of its housing market. Merriana a retired woman for example was particularly concerned. Her sentiment, 'I do know at the moment... the [rental] market is iffy' captures the growing and common uncertainty in the rental market among the migrants. The variety of experiences we recorded emphasises the important role of housing experiences in shaping amenity migration outcome, and migrants' ongoing satisfaction and quality of life in the new location. This is particularly evident in the narratives of those who found themselves struggling to

secure rentals that meet their needs and expectations, leading to a sense of disillusionment and, in some cases, prompting considerations of leaving Cairns for other destinations.

7.5 Housing Experiences of Amenity Migrants in Cairns

The allure of Cairns has attracted a diverse array of migrants, including amenity migrants (see Dadpour & Law, 2022). However, not all migrants have the same experiences when navigating the rental market, as their individual circumstances and needs can vary significantly. James, having moved with his large family of six children and an additional friend who was assisting with administrative tasks for their office, found themselves in a somewhat privileged position in the Cairns' housing market. 'We were looking for something a little bit bigger and higher price range than your standard sort of three to four-bedroom family house,' James explains, highlighting how their needs diverged from the norm. Living in a large five-bedroom house, they were not constrained by the typical demands and limitations faced by those seeking standard family homes. James notes, 'So we actually had quite a lot of options, we were able to rent it quickly' Their ability to afford a larger and more expensive property made it easier for them to find suitable accommodation. This ease was further facilitated by their status as business owners opening a new office, which seemingly brought reliability and financial stability in the eyes of landlords and rental agencies. James recalls, 'Because we came up saying we're opening an office and we're business owners, you know, we're opening a new business office, they just assumed that we were good tenants. So yeah, so we actually got the first house, [...] I was really relieved,' James concludes, expressing the unexpected ease of their housing journey.

However, not all amenity migrants in Cairns have been as fortunate as James. Despite their aspirations, many soon discovered that Cairns' housing market presents unexpected challenges. Their initial excitement about affordable housing soon confronted the realities of high rents and limited availability. Rahul, a senior manager, explains, 'Our goal was to buy property and everything, that's what attracted us to Cairns: property prices.' However, the reality they encountered diverged from their expectations. Many migrants face challenges when entering Cairns' housing market, often resorting to temporary accommodations until they were able to secure a permanent residence. For example, Ohad, a navy officer, and his young family had to stay at a caravan park close to the city for a few weeks before they could finally rent a villa. These challenges are not just statistics but lived realities of migrants.

Gigi, a 40-year-old nurse who relocated from Brisbane to Cairns in 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, encounters the difficulties she faced finding long-term accommodation, due to limited availability. Gigi eventually had to settle for a shared rental without prior inspection.

She explains, 'I wanted to find a place first, didn't want to move up here and not have anywhere to stay. Because hotels were too expensive [...] So, I rang a real estate agent, and she was actually really nice and told me about a shared house. And she was like "give them a try. They are student and travellers."' So, I rang them up and they had only one room free. I took it while on the phone.' Shared accommodation was not a distant idea among amenity migrants to Cairns. 'I stayed in a shared accommodation for like two months and then during that two months, I was just looking for a place to rent' Bjorn encountered. Several participants experienced similar difficulties due to limited availability.

For a number of participants, navigating the Cairns' housing market meant facing even tougher choices. Clara, a housewife, and her family rented their house even before moving to Cairns from Melbourne. 'We were actually paying rent on the place, and we weren't living there for six weeks, but that was okay,' she explained, demonstrating a resilience often required in a competitive market. Despite the setback, Clara and her family chose to see it as a necessary step in securing the house that had caught their eye from the beginning. 'We ended up with the house that we'd already looked at online; we knew what it was like,' Clara noted, accepting the sacrifices made for a home that met their aspirations.

7.5.1 Lifestyle Tax and Housing Insecurity

While narratives like the above illustrate personal, family, and financial sacrifices, they also reflect a broader acceptance among amenity migrants of the costs associated with such a desirable location. This sentiment is captured in the concept of *lifestyle tax*, as described by Bjorn, a junior real estate agent. He argued, 'rent is higher than I expected but I think it's just the tax you pay to live here.' Amenity migrants like Bjorn rationalise the higher housing costs as a form of lifestyle tax, a price willingly paid for the benefits of living in an amenity-rich locale. The notion of a lifestyle tax suggests that amenity migrants are willing to endure or even expect higher housing costs in exchange for their desired quality of life.

Many migrants who choose to move to an amenity-rich locale, such as Cairns, often find themselves navigating a delicate balance between economic opportunities and quality of life (see Glorioso & Moss, 2007). This trade-off is particularly evident in the housing market, where the promise of better living conditions and a higher quality of life can be a significant draw for potential migrants. However, the very same housing market that attracts these individuals can also serve as a formidable barrier, with high costs and limited availability constraining their options and forcing them to make difficult choices (see Peng & Tsai, 2019; Birrell & Healy, 2003; Withers, 1998). For many amenity migrants, the decision to relocate to a place like Cairns is driven by a willingness to

accept higher housing prices as a trade-off for what they perceive to be a higher quality of life (*as explained by Oviedo, 2022*). This mindset adds a layer of complexity to discussions around migration and affordability, as it suggests that for some, the benefits of living in an amenity-rich area may outweigh the financial costs associated with housing.

However, this willingness to pay a premium for a perceived improvement in quality of life is not without its challenges. It can lead to a situation where amenity migrants find themselves struggling to secure suitable housing, as they compete with other migrants and local residents for a limited supply of affordable options. Elenore, a young teacher assistant, observe that the ‘lack of housing at the moment is a pressing issue’. This dynamic can be particularly difficult for those with lower incomes or fewer financial resources, who may find themselves priced out of the market entirely. Sindri, a 28-year-old Barista, humbly confessed, ‘It’s definitely a struggle to pay my rent some months’, providing a human dimension to this predicament. These sentiment echoes the experiences of migrants in other Australian cities as well (*see Birrell & Healy, 2018; Costello, 2009*). The acute housing shortage, particularly in terms of diversity (*see Gibson & Law 2022*), is a barrier to settlement and integration for many migrants. It can lead to increased housing insecurity and even homelessness (*Dutta et al., 2016; Stonehouse et al., 2015*).

The interdisciplinary body of literature on housing has predominantly characterised housing insecurity in terms of affordability (*DeLuca & Rosen, 2022*). However, our exploration revealed that it extends beyond affordability. Several participants faced initial challenges with high rents and scarce availability, which evolved into frustrations with housing design and planning. Their stories, seamlessly integrated into the larger narrative, illustrate how issues like poor design and unsuitable layouts contribute to the overall housing challenges in Cairns, what Jordan, a trainer and dog owner, refers to as a housing crisis. ‘I call it a housing crisis. [...] bad thing about the housing crisis is that [people] have no consideration of pets. The way they deal with that is shocking.’ Pet owners like Jordan face challenges in securing pet-friendly housing due to under-supply of pet-friendly rentals (*see Power, 2016*). Jordan explained, ‘We ended up looking at this house at [suburb]. And we’re just like will you let us have a dog? Yes! [...] But the house is one of those new houses [...] it’s got a really weird layout. I don’t know who designed these houses. [...] I just hate them.’ Jordan’s frustrations with the pet-unfriendly housing market and poorly designed homes underscore the complexities facing new residents in Cairns.

Housing design and planning significantly affect amenity migrants’ quality of life (*see Pathak & Bajracharya, 2022*). Mia, a senior artist, explains, ‘My daughter goes and sit on the balcony [...] She thinks it is crazy. She’s like “look at where we live it’s the fucking tropics, and we’re building these

shit houses”.’ Mia’s honest sentiment reflects a common frustration among migrants concerning the design and planning of housing in their new locales. Similarly Jordan explains, ‘The houses are all pretty much the same. When I take the dogs for a walk it can be disorienting [...] if it’s not designed for the tropics why would you build this shit?’ These narratives reveal a discrepancy between the expectations of the living environment and the reality of the available housing among amenity migrants.

It was not just the market forces or the housing design that were at play, but also the dynamics between landlords and tenants, which can exacerbate the sense of insecurity and dissatisfaction among amenity migrants, particularly for women. Annabelle’s story, with her candid remarks, provides a personal insight into the gendered challenges faced in securing suitable housing. She explains, ‘where I live is very cheap, because I’m a stripper and a saver. The place isn’t as aesthetically appealing, and you know, some [landlords] take advantage.’ Annabelle’s experience highlights the vulnerability that women, especially those in marginalised professions, may face in the rental market (see Lazarus et al., 2011). Her story, being distinct yet relatable, represents a wider range of migrant experiences and the intersectionality of gender, occupation, and housing challenges. It shows that housing challenges in Cairns encompass a spectrum of issues, from the physical aspects of housing to the financial and social dynamics involved in securing a suitable living space, with gender playing a significant role in shaping these experiences (see Harten, 2020).

The migrants’ stories collectively underline a common theme of housing insecurity affecting life satisfaction among Cairns’ amenity migrants. Housing insecurity is a significant stressor having profound psychological and emotional impacts on migrants who are often in vulnerable positions (see Bhat et al., 2020; Lee & Park, 2011; Tripathi et al., 2018). It exacerbates feelings of exclusion and marginalisation among them and impede their access to employment and educational opportunities (see Lima et al., 2020). The housing insecurity in Cairns can precipitate social isolation and mental health concerns (Easthope et al., 2018; Teariki, 2017; Ziersch et al., 2017) mirroring a national crisis in Australia (Stonehouse et al., 2015).

Gigi’s experience is a testament to this, as a vegan and someone with a spiritual outlook who struggled to connect with her housemates in the shared house she moved in without prior inspections. ‘I’m vegan in beliefs as well as diet. And I guess I’m a spiritual based, and you know I was finding that these people, the people I was living with, didn’t even know how to connect with me. And a lot of the ways that they would connect would be by making jokes about veganism [...] It made me a bit insecure, and I had to move out.’ For individuals like Gigi, housing transcends its role as a mere physical structure; it becomes a fundamental element of well-being, social integration, and

identity formation, highlighting a deep interconnection between housing experiences and overall quality of life, well-being and sense of belonging (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Amenity migrants, who may already be dealing with the psychological strain of adjustment and loss of social networks, find their challenges amplified by housing insecurity (see Bentley et al., 2019). The uncertainty surrounding housing undermines the sense of stability and belonging among them, which are crucial to their well-being and the cohesive fabric of communities (see Karamujic, 2015; Wessendorf, 2019). The psychological and social impacts of these housing insecurities are profound, as exemplified by Gigi's struggle to find accommodation that respects her lifestyle and beliefs and Jordan's difficulties in locating a pet-friendly rental. Their stories are not mere anecdotes but reflections of a widespread issue affecting many in Cairns, illustrating the broader effects of housing challenges on mental well-being and social integration.

7.5.2 Re-migration

The story of Tom, a construction worker, and his partner facing the stark challenges of Cairns' housing market, is an indicative of a broader pattern where the lack of affordable rentals is not just a local problem but a catalyst for wider demographic shifts. 'My girlfriend's father had enough space to allow us to rent a room from him, which helped us save money for our next place. It's 1% availability, it's almost insulting. [...] You go to inspections, there are 70 applications, on the very best day! It's not fair [...] as my girlfriend and I have realised, we have no other options but to leave Cairns.' Tom's experience echoes a common theme that transcends individual narratives, revealing how acute housing shortages not only force residents to the periphery (Li & Song, 2009), but also potentially drive them to consider leaving Cairns altogether.

The stories shared by the amenity migrants in our study revealed that many were considering leaving Cairns as a response to the persistent housing crisis in Cairns. In fact, for a significant 51.8% (14 out of 27) of the participants, housing insecurity was cited as a reason for them to contemplate leaving the city. Literature confirms that reliable housing is a key indicator for migrants to successfully settle in their new community (Huang & Chen, 2022). Our findings support this notion, suggesting that housing insecurity can disrupt the process of community integration and threaten migrants' settlement outcomes.

As new opportunities or difficulties emerge, the idea of re-migration gains traction, potentially altering the migrants' future plans (Scholl, 2013; Seebauer, 2017). Marcus, a mine worker, exemplifies this trend. His frequent thoughts on leaving Cairns often revolve around the

daily frustrations with the rental market. In his own words: 'It's like how much do I have to do to allow you to let me have a roof over my head. It needs to be some give and take with rental properties. [it] is a bit rough.' This sentiment reflects a broader issue faced by many migrants—a need for mutual flexibility and understanding in the housing sector, which is often lacking.

Marcus's experience is not an isolated one; it mirrors the sentiment of several others in our study who are willing to uproot once more, should the promise of a better quality of life and housing opportunities appear from elsewhere. 'If I find a good job somewhere else, we'll go,' Marcus adds, showcasing the readiness to embark on yet another migration journey, with his family and pets in tow, in search of a place that feels more like home. For people like Marcus, the struggle to find acceptable housing often forces them into poor living conditions. When migrants are forced to settle for less desirable housing, their quality of life will decrease, affecting their well-being and sense of community (see Baker et al., 2016; Coates et al., 2013), highlighting the complex nature of Cairns' housing issues that go well beyond the simple metrics of supply and demand.

For migrants like Romina, a young university student, such challenges plant seeds of doubt about her future in Cairns, potentially influencing her decisions about family life and long-term settlement. The added pressure of academic commitments and the desire for a vibrant community life sharpen the edges of an already challenging housing market for people like her. 'I'm not hugely optimistic [about the housing market in Cairns], If I were to have kids, I would be looking even more to move [...] I don't really want to move back home and move back in with my mom and dad [...] I don't know what do' says Romina, weighting her options to leave Cairns. Such sentiments highlight the dynamic nature of migrant life and the ongoing quest for a locale that provides a sense of belonging and community (see Olwig, 2012).

Nina's story provides a clear window into the complexities of re-migration as the interplay of market forces and social integration (see Wu, 2004; Zheng et al., 2020). As an accountant servicing major businesses across Australia, Nina's profession allows for remote work, yet the local economic conditions in Cairns have a direct impact on her quality of life and prompt considerations of relocation. Nina describes her dilemma, pointing out that the sense of community that once attracted her to the area has faded, influencing her decision to leave. 'It is my decision to leave [...] the closing of my business, the studio aspect of my business, I can't pay the rent.' Martin, a middle-aged tradesman who had moved to Cairns seeking a fresh start and new opportunities, also found himself disillusioned. 'I thought moving to Cairns would be a fresh start, but the housing situation is shit, prices are too high, we're moving again,' shared Martin, reflecting the sentiment of being caught between the desire for stability and the need for affordable living conditions. Sarah, a young

stay at home mother of a newborn, expressed her frustration more pointedly: 'We came here for the lifestyle, but we didn't sign up for this kind of [rental] stress [...] We're seriously thinking of moving to Mareeba, our money goes further there.' Sarah's experience underscores the trade-offs that migrants are forced to consider—between the allure of Cairns' lifestyle and the practicalities of housing costs.

It was evident in the narratives that decisions to engage in re-migration were not easy to be taken, as it involves additional upheaval and the emotional toll of re-establishing oneself yet again. 'It feels like we're giving up on our dream of living in Cairns, but what choice do we have when the rent eats up most of our money?' said James, an older IT assistant voicing his concerns about housing affordability as his lease renewal approaches. This sense of defeat and resignation can accompany the decision to move on, a sentiment that is echoed in the broader literature on international re-migration (*see* Cooke, 2011). For migrants like James, re-migration reflects a critical juncture in their life journey, where the quest for stability and community is weighed against economic realities. For them, the prospect of re-migration is a reluctant but necessary strategy to achieve stability.

As illustrated in the narratives, the decision to re-migrate is a response to a housing market that fails to meet the migrants' needs for stability and a sense of belonging. This process is not just a physical relocation but a significant life event that involves reassessing personal and family goals, often under the pressure of economic constraints and social uncertainties. However, it is important to acknowledge that our findings do not include the perspectives of those who have already left the city, which may limit the understanding of the full scope of re-migration dynamics.

Given the intricate personal stories and the multifaceted socio-economic elements at play, it is evident that housing for Cairns' amenity migrants is not merely a commodity. It is a pivotal element in the matrix of life satisfaction and belonging, with the potential to either anchor or unsettle the migrant spirit. These experiences call for a more compassionate and informed approach to urban planning and housing policy, one that recognises the diverse needs and aspirations of all residents. As cities like Cairns continue to grow and attract new residents, it becomes increasingly important to address these challenges, ensuring that the housing market is inclusive, responsive, and conducive to building a cohesive and vibrant community.

7.6 Urban Planning Perspective

To address the housing challenges faced by amenity migrants in Cairns, responsive urban planning is crucial. Planners can implement strategies such as increasing the supply of affordable housing, promoting mixed-income developments, and encouraging the construction of diverse housing types to cater to the varying needs of migrants and long-term residents alike (Gurran & Phibbs, 2017). Inclusionary zoning policies, which require developers to set aside a portion of new housing units for low- and moderate-income households, can help ensure that Cairns' new residents have access to affordable housing options (Schuetz et al., 2009). Gurran et al. (2018) found that inclusionary zoning policies in Sydney and Melbourne have helped to increase the supply of affordable housing and promote social mix in high-demand areas. Similarly, a report by the Queensland Department of Housing and Public Works (2017) highlighted the success of community land trusts in providing affordable housing options for low-income households in regional Queensland.

By developing diverse housing typologies and promoting innovative housing models, planners can better cater to the varied needs of amenity migrants and foster more inclusive communities. Furthermore, planners can collaborate with local organisations and community groups to develop programs that facilitate the integration of amenity migrants into the community (Teixeira, 2009). These initiatives may include cultural events, and mentorship programs that help new residents build social networks and navigate their new environment. By fostering a sense of belonging and social cohesion, planners can help mitigate the risk of re-migration and promote long-term community stability.

The findings of this study underscore the need for planners to adopt a proactive and inclusive approach to addressing the housing challenges faced by amenity migrants in regional cities like Cairns. Planners should actively engage with amenity migrants to understand their unique needs and aspirations, and involve them in the planning process to ensure that housing policies and strategies are responsive to their concerns. This collaborative approach can help build trust and foster a sense of belonging among amenity migrants, mitigating the risk of re-migration (Gurran & Phibbs, 2017).

Planners should also consider implementing a range of policy measures to support the provision of diverse and affordable rental housing options for amenity migrants. These may include incentives for developers to deliver a mix of housing types and tenures, such as density bonuses for projects that include affordable rental units (Gibson & Law, 2022; Schuetz et al., 2009). Streamlining planning approval processes for innovative housing models, such as co-housing and adaptive reuse

of existing buildings, can also help to increase the supply of suitable housing for amenity migrants (Gurran & Phibbs, 2017). Moreover, planners should work in collaboration with other stakeholders, such as community organisations and social service providers, to develop holistic support systems for amenity migrants. By taking a comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of amenity migrants, planners can contribute to the creation of more welcoming and sustainable communities in regional cities like Cairns.

Overall, the findings of this study have important implications for planners and policymakers in regional cities, as they seek to develop targeted strategies and interventions that promote the life satisfaction and well-being of amenity migrants. By understanding the factors that influence renter security and life satisfaction among this population, decision-makers can work towards creating more inclusive and equitable housing policies that cater to the needs of all residents, including amenity migrants. Ultimately, this study contributes to the development of sustainable growth strategies that enhance the quality of life for all residents in regional communities experiencing amenity migration.

7.7 Conclusion

This study has provided an exploration of how housing security affect amenity migrants in Cairns, a city representative of many experiencing rapid urban growth and housing challenges. The qualitative approach, centred on narratives, has offered insights into the lived experiences of these migrants, revealing the interconnections between housing stability, life quality, and re-migration. The findings of this study highlight the impact of housing security on the life satisfaction and possible settlement outcomes of amenity migrants in Cairns. While housing challenges are not unique to amenity migration, the specific needs and expectations of amenity migrants, such as a desire for lifestyle improvements and a sense of community, can exacerbate the consequences of housing insecurity in this context.

The implications of this study are far-reaching. Firstly, it underscores the need for a more empathetic and informed approach in urban planning and housing policy. The struggles of amenity migrants for stability, belonging, and integration within their new communities must be acknowledged and addressed in housing policy frameworks. This is particularly crucial in the context of competitive housing markets, where the quest for affordable and suitable housing can become a formidable barrier to achieving life satisfaction.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of considering the broader socio-economic impacts of housing insecurity for amenity migrants. The trend of re-migration not only affects individual migrants but also has broader implications for regional development, community

cohesion, and social integration. As such, addressing the housing needs of amenity migrants is not just a matter of individual well-being but is also integral to the overall sustainability of our regional cities.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the fields of migration studies and housing. It calls for a holistic understanding of the housing needs of amenity migrants and the development of inclusive and compassionate approaches that can mitigate the challenges of re-migration. By doing so, it aims to promote more inclusive environments where amenity migrants can find not just a place to live, but a place to thrive. The insights gained from this study can guide future efforts to ensure that cities like Cairns can effectively meet the diverse needs of their migrants, fostering communities where everyone can achieve a high quality of life.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

The exploration of regional migration and liveability in Cairns throughout this thesis revealed a complex tapestry of experiences, expectations, and realities that challenge simplistic notions of 'regional Australia' and amenity migration. Through a critical examination of the multilayered nature of migrant experiences in Cairns, this research has illuminated the intricate interplay between amenities, social dynamics, and individual aspirations. The innovative methodological approach employed in this study has enabled the capture of nuanced and often contradictory aspects of liveability as perceived and experienced by migrants in Cairns.

8.1 Synthesis of Key Findings

The study's findings contribute significantly to the discourse on regional migration by illuminating the interplay between regionality, amenity migration, and subjective experiences of liveability. The Cairns case study revealed disparities between migrant expectations and lived realities, challenging homogeneous portrayals of regional areas. Critical issues such as housing insecurity, and social integration and adaptation challenges intersect to shape migrant experiences. These insights contribute to debates about amenity migration and the role of place in shaping migrant trajectories. The findings support reconceptualising liveability as a dynamic, contextually dependent construct, rather than a static set of measurable attributes, with implications for understanding and measuring quality of life in regional areas.

8.1.1 *Reconceptualising Regional Australia*

A key contribution of this thesis is its advancement of the critical examination of 'regional' conceptualisations in Australia. By challenging homogeneous notions and interrogating the definition, classification, and operationalisation of regionality across various contexts, this research exposes the limitations of existing classification systems and underscores the necessity for an in-depth understanding of regional diversity. The study demonstrates that 'regional Australia' is not a fixed, objective category, but rather a dynamic, socially, and politically constructed notion that shifts according to context and purpose. This finding aligns with and extends recent scholarship on the diversity and complexity of non-metropolitan spaces (Connell & McManus, 2016; Jayne et al., 2010), offering new insights into the varied experiences and perceptions of regionality among amenity migrants in Australia. By doing so, this research contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of regional Australia, one that acknowledges its complexity and diversity, and challenges policymakers and researchers to move beyond simplistic categorisations in their approach to regional development and migration.

The analysis of various geographical classification systems, including the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC), Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS), Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Area (RRMA) classification, and Modified Monash Model (MMM), has revealed notable inconsistencies and limitations in how 'regional' is defined across various government bodies and organisations. The research has demonstrated that these classification systems often fall short to capture the complexity and dynamism of regional places, particularly in rapidly growing and evolving urban centres like Cairns. The study exposes how the essentialisation of 'regional' as a knowable, non-urban entity obscures the unique characteristics and challenges of different regional contexts, including tropical urban areas. Moreover, the thesis challenges the cultural construction of regional Australia as 'not metropolitan,' which often implies 'rural' or 'not urban.' This 'othering' of regional areas persists in popular discourse, particularly in the context of COVID-19-induced migration, mapping onto larger fears about the spread of the virus in dense urban contexts.

The implications of these findings for understanding Cairns within the regional context are significant. As a rapidly growing, cosmopolitan regional centre, Cairns defies easy categorisation within existing classification systems. The research demonstrated that Cairns' unique blend of urban amenities, lifestyle opportunities, and natural assets challenges dominant narratives of regional Australia as a space of decline, deprivation, and homogeneity. By situating Cairns within a more diverse understanding of 'region,' this study has highlighted the need for more flexible, adaptive, and responsive frameworks that can accommodate the dynamic and varied nature of regional places. The findings suggest that factors such as urbanisation levels, population density, and proximity and access to metropolitan centres should be considered alongside traditional measures of remoteness and access to services when conceptualising and classifying regional areas.

These insights underscore the importance of adopting place-based approaches to understanding regional migration and liveability. They call for a shift away from one-dimensional urban-rural dichotomies and one-size-fits-all frameworks towards more contextually sensitive approaches that can capture the diverse realities of regional Australia. By challenging homogeneous notions of 'region' and situating Cairns within this multilayered understanding, the thesis provides a foundation for more informed and effective approaches to research, regional policy, planning, and development. This reconceptualisation of regional Australia not only contributes to academic discourse but also has practical implications for how regional areas are understood, managed, and developed in the face of changing migration patterns and evolving socio-economic dynamics.

8.1.2 *Amenity Migration to Cairns*

This thesis has shed light on the complex dynamics of amenity migration to Cairns, revealing both the key attractions that draw migrants to this tropical city and the notable discrepancies between their expectations and lived experiences. Cairns' natural environment, particularly its proximity to the Great Barrier Reef and UNESCO-listed rainforests, emerged as a primary draw for migrants. The city's tropical climate and abundant outdoor recreational opportunities consistently ranked high among the factors attracting newcomers. Beyond its natural amenities, Cairns' promise of a relaxed, laid-back lifestyle appealed strongly to those seeking escape from the pressures of larger urban centres. The city's unique blend of natural and urban characteristics proved particularly alluring to migrants looking for a balance between nature and city life.

However, the research uncovered notable gaps between pre-migration expectations and post-relocation experiences. Many migrants were initially drawn by perceptions of affordability, particularly in housing, only to encounter a challenging real estate market marked by limited options and rising costs. Similarly, while economic opportunities in sectors like tourism and healthcare attracted some migrants, many faced unexpected difficulties in securing stable, full-time employment. The prevalence of casual and seasonal work often fell short of expectations for career advancement and financial stability. Cost of living emerged as another area of significant discrepancy, with many migrants finding everyday expenses in Cairns higher than anticipated, straining household budgets and challenging notions of an easier lifestyle.

The study also revealed disparities in perceptions of safety and social integration. The idyllic image of a peaceful tropical paradise often contrasted sharply with experiences of crime and safety issues in certain areas, leading to disappointment for some migrants. Furthermore, building a sense of belonging proved more challenging than expected for many newcomers, with the transient nature of Cairns' population, influenced by tourism and seasonal work, making it difficult to establish deep, lasting social connections. These findings highlight the complex nature of amenity migration to Cairns, where the allure of natural beauty and a relaxed lifestyle often collides with the realities of life in a developing regional centre. This research underscores the importance of managing expectations and addressing key liveability factors to ensure the long-term satisfaction and retention of amenity migrants in Cairns and similar destinations. By exposing these disparities, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of amenity migration, challenging idealised notions of regional lifestyle migration and highlighting the need for more comprehensive support systems for new migrants in regional areas.

8.1.3 *Liveability in Cairns for New Migrants*

This thesis has provided an in-depth exploration of liveability in Cairns from the perspective of new migrants, encompassing both subjective and objective dimensions. Through innovative methodologies such as qualitative GIS and Importance-Performance Analysis, the research has uncovered a better understanding of how migrants experience and perceive liveability in this tropical city. The study revealed that liveability in Cairns is shaped by a complex interplay of tangible and intangible factors, highlighting the need for a holistic approach to urban planning and development. The research findings underscore the multifaceted nature of liveability, which extends beyond traditional objective indicators. While measurable aspects such as housing affordability, employment opportunities, access to services, and quality of infrastructure provided a foundation for understanding the city's capacity to meet residents' basic needs, the study emphasized the critical importance of subjective dimensions. These personal experiences, emotional connections, and individual perceptions of place proved to be equally influential in shaping migrants' overall satisfaction with life in Cairns.

Migrants' subjective experiences of liveability were profoundly influenced by their sense of belonging, social connections, and the degree to which Cairns met their lifestyle expectations. Many migrants reported a strong emotional attachment to Cairns' natural environment, with the city's tropical setting and proximity to iconic landscapes like the Great Barrier Reef contributing significantly to their overall satisfaction. However, this positive association with the natural environment was often counterbalanced by challenges in other areas of urban life, revealing the complex nature of liveability perceptions.

The study identified several key factors that significantly influenced migrants' perceptions of liveability in Cairns. Housing emerged as a critical issue, with many migrants struggling to find affordable and suitable accommodation, which substantially affected their overall experience in the city. Employment opportunities and job security also played a pivotal role, as the reliance on casual and seasonal work in Cairns' tourism-dependent economy often fell short of migrants' expectations for stable careers. Safety and crime rates varied considerably across different areas of Cairns, impacting migrants' sense of security and their willingness to engage with certain parts of the city. This spatial variation in safety perceptions underscored the need to consider liveability at a neighbourhood level, rather than treating the city as a uniform whole.

Furthermore, the research highlighted the significance of social integration and community connections in shaping liveability perceptions. Many migrants reported challenges in building a sense of belonging, partly due to the transient nature of Cairns' population. This difficulty in establishing deep social roots emerged as a key factor influencing long-term satisfaction and the

decision to remain in or leave the city, emphasising the importance of fostering community cohesion and social support networks for new migrants.

Complementing these social dynamics, the study's findings revealed a temporal dimension to liveability perceptions among migrants in Cairns. Initial enthusiasm about the city's natural beauty and lifestyle potential often transformed into more complex feelings as migrants encountered the realities of life in Cairns, particularly in areas such as housing, employment, and social integration. This evolution of perceptions underscores the importance of providing ongoing support and engagement for new migrants to ensure their long-term satisfaction and successful integration into the community.

By shedding light on both the subjective and objective dimensions of liveability, along with the key factors shaping migrant perceptions over time, this research offers valuable insights for researchers, urban planners, policymakers, and community leaders. It emphasises the need for holistic approaches to enhancing liveability that address not only tangible infrastructure needs but also the less tangible aspects of community building and social inclusion. The multi-dimensional understanding of liveability in Cairns presented in this study provides a robust foundation for creating more welcoming, inclusive, and satisfying urban environments. This comprehensive approach benefits not only new migrants but also long-term residents, contributing to the overall vibrancy and sustainability of the city.

8.2 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis advances our understanding of regional migration, liveability, and emotional geographies by offering a multi-layered analysis of migrant experiences in Cairns, Australia. By prioritising the lived experiences and subjective perceptions of migrants, the research challenges prevailing assumptions and frameworks in these fields, paving the way for new theoretical knowledge and future inquiries.

8.2.1 Regionality

In the realm of regionality, this study makes significant strides in reshaping debates on regional classification and diversity. The research critically engages with the concept of 'regionality', disrupting the long-standing urban-rural binary that has traditionally framed migration and liveability studies. The findings unveil the intricate, diverse, and fluid nature of regional places, calling into question the efficacy of simplistic dichotomies and hierarchies in comprehending human settlements and mobilities.

The study's deconstruction of stereotypical notions of 'regional Australia' challenges the limitations of binary urban-rural categorisations prevalent in media, policy, and academic discourses. Cairns, with its unique blend of natural amenities, cultural diversity, and urban infrastructure, exemplifies a 'tropical urbanism' – as called by Law & Musso, 2020 – that transcends conventional urban-rural boundaries. This perspective contests the perception of regional places as mere residual or inferior counterparts to metropolitan centres, instead portraying them as dynamic and multifaceted spaces with distinct histories, identities, and potentials. By examining the diverse origins and backgrounds of migrants to Cairns, the research questions the concept of a singular, unidirectional migration flow from cities to rural areas. It reveals the complex, multi-scalar nature of regional mobility, demonstrating how migrants' motivations and experiences are shaped by a complicated interplay of economic, social, cultural, and environmental factors. This perspective reframes regional migration as an ongoing process of negotiation, adaptation, and transformation, where individuals and communities actively shape their trajectories and identities, defying reduction to a simple urban-rural divide.

Furthermore, this study advances a more dynamic and multi-scalar understanding of place and belonging, challenging static and essentialist notions of place's liveability. It unveils the fluid, diverse, and often contested nature of place identities and social connections in the context of regional migration. By promoting a more dynamic understanding of regions, the thesis contributes to a growing body of literature advocating for contextualised approaches to regional migration and development. It recognises the agency and heterogeneity of migrants and the multidimensional nature of regional change. This refined perspective on regionality opens up new possibilities for understanding and supporting regional migration and liveability in more inclusive and empowering ways. It aligns with contemporary scholarly efforts to move beyond reductive categorisations in regional studies. By acknowledging the unique characteristics of places like Cairns and the diverse experiences of their migrants, this research provides valuable insights to enhance the liveability of regional areas while respecting their distinct identities and potentials.

8.2.2 Liveability

This thesis enriches the study of regional migration by integrating the concept of 'liveability' into it and emphasising the subjective, experiential, and emotional dimensions of migrant well-being. The research offers a reconceptualisation of liveability, one that moves beyond the conventional understanding of liveability as a static set of objective indicators or attributes. Instead, the findings propose a more dynamic, contextual, and people-centred conception of liveability, one that is shaped by the rich tapestry of individual experiences, perceptions, and aspirations.

While traditional approaches to liveability have often relied on quantifiable metrics such as affordability, transportation access, or environmental quality, this study challenges this reductionist view. It argues that liveability cannot be distilled into a universal checklist of attributes, but rather emerges from the complex interplay between people and place, mediated by personal histories, cultural backgrounds, and socio-spatial contexts. The thesis demonstrated how migrants' perceptions of liveability are deeply influenced by their unique life trajectories and expectations, highlighting that what constitutes a liveable place for one individual may differ significantly from another. By foregrounding these diverse and sometimes contradictory perspectives, the thesis underscores the limitations of one-size-fits-all liveability frameworks and emphasises the need for context-sensitive approaches that recognise the plurality of lived experiences. Moreover, the findings reveal liveability as an ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation, rather than a fixed state or endpoint. This processual understanding questions the notion of liveability as a static ideal or benchmark, instead emphasising the importance of flexibility, resilience, and responsiveness in fostering liveable places over time.

The research also highlights the central role of emotions, memories, and social connections in shaping individuals' sense of liveability and belonging. Beyond the material and functional aspects of a place, the affective and relational dimensions often determine whether a place feels liveable or not. The stories and narratives shared by participants revealed how seemingly intangible factors such as community spirit and social support can be just as important, if not more so, than tangible liveability indicators in promoting well-being and quality of life for migrants. This refined understanding of liveability encourages a more holistic and human-centred approach to creating and maintaining liveable environments in regional contexts that would welcome and retain migrants.

8.2.3 *Amenity Migration*

This thesis challenges and expands upon traditional understandings of amenity migration, offering a critical examination of the concept and its application to the Cairns context. While conventional portrayals of amenity migration often emphasise it as a unidirectional, voluntary, and consumption-driven process, this research paints a more complex picture. It demonstrates that amenity migration to Cairns is shaped by a diverse array of factors beyond simple lifestyle preferences, including employment opportunities, housing affordability, social connectivity, and community dynamics.

By foregrounding the subjective and affective dimensions of migrants' experiences in Cairns, the research challenges romanticised notions of the 'rural idyll' or 'tropical paradise' that have often underpinned amenity migration narratives. This approach reveals the socially constructed and

contested nature of amenity, showing how migrants' perceptions and valuations are shaped not only by individual preferences and backgrounds but also by their interactions with local communities, environments, and economies. Consequently, the research contributes to a more dynamic understanding of amenity as a fluid concept rather than a fixed attribute of place.

Furthermore, the thesis advances our understanding of amenity migration as a negotiated and contextualised process. By situating migrants' decision-making and settlement processes within the broader context of their life courses, experiences, and aspirations, the research reveals the complex interplay of factors that shape the attractiveness and viability of Cairns as a destination. This approach highlights how migrants actively weigh the costs and benefits of different locations and lifestyles, adapting their strategies and expectations over time. The study also challenges the assumption that amenity migration is a one-way or permanent process. By revealing the potential for disillusionment, dissatisfaction, and re-migration among migrants whose expectations of Cairns are not met, the research underscores the contingent and reversible nature of amenity migration and its implications for regional population dynamics and stability.

Finally, the thesis contributes to a more holistic understanding of amenity migration outcomes. By documenting both positive and negative experiences of migrants in Cairns, the research reveals the gap between imagined and lived realities of regional places. This suggests that the attraction and retention of amenity migrants is not just about promoting natural and cultural amenities, but also about fostering more realistic, inclusive, and sustainable forms of regional development that can accommodate diverse needs, aspirations, and lifestyles, while recognising the dynamic mobilities that shape these experiences.

8.2.4 *Mobilities Paradigm*

The thesis expands the mobilities paradigm by offering a more holistic and dynamic understanding of migration and placemaking processes. Through the innovative use of qualitative GIS and episodic narrative interviews, the research captures the spatial and experiential dimensions of migrants' everyday mobility practices in Cairns. This methodological approach aligns with and extends the mobilities paradigm's emphasis on the embodied, affective, and sensory aspects of movement and placemaking. By exploring migrants' experiences of walking, commuting, and exploring the city, the research reveals the intricate interplay between people and place, highlighting the multi-scalar nature of mobility experiences.

The incorporation of emotional geographies into the analysis of migration experiences further enriches our understanding of how individuals navigate and make sense of new environments. This approach demonstrates how everyday mobilities shape migrants' sense of

belonging, liveability, and urban citizenship, contributing to the growing body of literature that examines the affective and experiential aspects of mobility and their impacts on regional well-being and development. It reveals the complex ways in which emotions and affect influence migrants' perceptions of liveability and their decisions to stay or leave a particular location, providing a more nuanced perspective on the factors that shape migration outcomes.

The thesis also provides valuable insights into the complexity and dynamism of contemporary migration patterns in regional contexts. By examining re-migration as a response to housing insecurity and dissatisfaction, the research engages directly with the mobilities paradigm's emphasis on the temporal and spatial dynamics of movement. This focus reveals how mobility decisions are shaped by a complex interplay of structural, cultural, and personal factors, contributing to a more refined understanding of regional mobility that transcends rigid notions of permanent settlement or one-way migration. The findings challenge traditional conceptualisations of amenity migration as a unidirectional or permanent process, instead revealing the potential for disillusionment, dissatisfaction, and re-migration among migrants whose expectations of their destination are not met. This insight has notable implications for understanding the fluidity and reversibility of contemporary migration patterns, particularly in the context of regional development and population dynamics.

The theoretical insights and innovations emerging from this thesis offer noteworthy contributions to future research on regional migration and liveability. By challenging dominant assumptions and binaries in these fields, such as the urban-rural divide, and the objective-subjective dichotomy the research opens new avenues for theoretical and empirical inquiry. These insights can bridge disciplinary boundaries and engage with the multiple dimensions and scales of regional change. By bringing together insights and approaches from various fields, including human geography, urban planning, and migration studies, the research contributes to the development of more holistic, integrative, and critical frameworks for understanding and supporting the well-being and inclusion of migrants in regional settings.

8.3 Methodological Innovations

This thesis introduces a notable methodological innovation in migration and liveability research by integrating qualitative GIS and episodic narrative approaches. This mixed-method approach offers a powerful means of spatially contextualising migrant narratives and experiences, providing a place-based understanding of liveability in Cairns that transcends traditional cartographic methods. By combining spatial data with rich qualitative information, this methodology addresses a critical gap in conventional research approaches, which often struggle to capture the

affective and embodied dimensions of place and belonging. The use of participatory mapping techniques alongside episodic narrative interviews empowers migrants as active co-creators of knowledge, ensuring their voices and perspectives are central to the inquiry process and outcomes.

Reflections on the effectiveness of this approach reveal its capacity to uncover the intricate relationships between migrants' personal histories, cultural backgrounds, and the socio-spatial contexts of their new environment. The resulting spatial narratives offer a layered and context-based understanding of how migrants navigate, experience, and make sense of Cairns, illuminating the complex factors that shape their perceptions of liveability and belonging. This methodology enables a complex exploration of the lived experiences of migrants, providing insights that would be difficult to obtain through more traditional research methods.

The incorporation of Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) into migration studies represents another novel methodological approach in this thesis. When combined with qualitative methods, IPA offers a systematic framework for identifying areas of strength, weakness, and potential interventions to enhance liveability in regional places like Cairns. The utility of IPA in understanding migrant perceptions lies in its ability to quantify and visualise the discrepancies between what migrants deem important and their actual experiences. It creates a clear, actionable understanding of migrant priorities and satisfaction levels that can inform evidence-based strategies for enhancing regional liveability and attractiveness. Evaluation of IPA's application in this study reveals its effectiveness in highlighting critical areas where migrant expectations are not being met, such as housing affordability, employment opportunities, and social integration. Furthermore, the visual representation of the gaps through the IPA matrix offers a powerful tool for communicating complex findings to policymakers and stakeholders, facilitating targeted interventions and resource allocation.

The methodological approach in this thesis maximised effectiveness by combining IPA with qualitative methods, providing context and depth to numerical data. Central to this approach was the use of episodic narrative interviews, a valuable method for accessing the 'small stories' and everyday experiences often overlooked in traditional migration research. This technique offers a window into the subjective and emotional dimensions of migrant decision-making and settlement, yielding rich, contextualised data that illuminates the lived realities of regional migration. The episodic narrative approach proves particularly adept at revealing the temporal and emotional aspects of migration experiences. By encouraging participants to share specific episodes and reflections, it captures the evolving nature of migrants' perceptions, expectations, and sense of belonging over time. This method offers insights into the dynamic process of adaptation and

integration in regional settings, while maintaining the flexibility and openness of the narrative format. Furthermore, this approach provides a platform for migrants to articulate their own understandings of liveability and belonging, challenging prevailing narratives and assumptions about regional migration. The emphasis on migrant perspectives not only enriches theoretical debates but also has significant implications for policy development and implementation.

8.4 Policy and Practice Implications

The insights generated from this research have significant implications for policy and practice in regional development and migration. As Australia grapples with challenges of population growth, urbanisation, and regional disparities, there is a growing need for evidence-based strategies to promote sustainable and inclusive regional development (Collits, 2014). By amplifying migrant voices and revealing the complex realities of regional settlement, this thesis lays the groundwork for more responsive, inclusive, and effective policy interventions.

The findings underscore the need for a paradigm shift in regional development strategies, moving away from universal approaches towards more tailored, context-specific, and people-centred initiatives. To enhance regional liveability, policymakers must adopt a holistic approach that addresses economic, social, and environmental factors. This entails fostering a diverse economic landscape that extends beyond traditional sectors, with a focus on cultivating innovation hubs and supporting small businesses to create a resilient job market (Yi et al., 2021). Such initiatives would not only attract a wider range of skilled migrants but also provide opportunities for entrepreneurship and career growth within regional settings.

In addition to economic considerations, the physical environment plays a crucial role in shaping migrant experiences. The development of green spaces and recreational facilities should be tailored to accommodate various cultural preferences, thereby promoting both physical and mental well-being among diverse populations (Lynch et al., 2020). This approach recognises the importance of culturally responsive urban design in creating inclusive and appealing regional environments. Simultaneously, improving public transportation networks emerges as a crucial factor in enhancing connectivity within the region and to major urban centres, addressing concerns of isolation that often deter migrants from settling in regional areas.

Building on the importance of cultural responsiveness, the establishment of cultural precincts that celebrate diversity and provide spaces for intercultural exchange stands out as a pivotal strategy. These precincts can serve as focal points for community interaction, fostering a sense of belonging among migrants while simultaneously strengthening the unique identity of regional cities (Fincher et al., 2014). By implementing these measures, regional areas can position

themselves as attractive destinations that offer not just economic opportunities, but a high quality of life and a strong sense of community.

While physical and cultural infrastructure are important, tailored settlement services that address the specific needs of different migrant groups are equally essential. This approach recognises the heterogeneity of migrant populations and could involve developing specialised support systems for families, single migrants, and older migrants, each facing unique challenges in the settlement process. These programs should be structured to provide both practical support and emotional companionship, crucial elements in the early stages of settlement (Boese, 2015). To ensure the ongoing effectiveness of these initiatives, establishing robust feedback mechanisms for continuous improvement of settlement services is vital.

By identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their regions and developing targeted interventions that address the needs and aspirations of diverse migrant populations, policymakers, urban planners, and community leaders can create more vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable regional communities. This comprehensive approach not only enhances the experiences of migrants but also contributes to the overall development and prosperity of regional Australia. As the nation continues to evolve, these strategies will play a crucial role in shaping a more balanced and equitable distribution of population and resources, ultimately fostering resilient and dynamic regional centres that can thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

8.4.1 *Housing Policy in Regional Areas*

Central to these strategies is the critical issue of housing, which serves as a foundation for successful migrant settlement and community integration. Addressing housing insecurity for migrants in regional cities demands a sophisticated and forward-thinking approach to housing policy. The development of diverse housing typologies, including medium-density options and co-living spaces, is crucial to cater to varied migrant preferences and financial capacities (Xie & Chen, 2018). This strategy not only addresses immediate housing needs but also contributes to the creation of more vibrant and sustainable urban forms in regional areas. Implementing rent-to-own schemes or shared ownership programs specifically designed for migrants can provide viable pathways to homeownership, encouraging long-term settlement and community investment (Soaita et al., 2017; Wallace, 2012).

In addition to these measures, innovative approaches such as community land trusts represent a promising solution for ensuring long-term affordability and preventing gentrification in areas with growing migrant populations (Choi et al., 2018). This model, which separates land ownership from building ownership, allows for more affordable housing options while maintaining

community control over land use and development. Complementing these structural approaches, the introduction of culturally sensitive social housing options that accommodate extended family structures and specific cultural practices can further enhance the inclusivity of regional communities.

8.4.2 *Community Integration and Social Cohesion*

While addressing housing needs is crucial, fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion in diverse regional communities requires a holistic approach that extends beyond physical infrastructure. Community integration and social cohesion are essential components of successful migrant settlement and regional development. Facilitating intercultural dialogues through community-led initiatives emerges as a powerful tool for promoting mutual understanding and challenging stereotypes (Xu et al., 2022). These dialogues should be structured to encourage deep engagement with cultural differences and similarities, moving beyond tokenistic celebrations of diversity to create meaningful connections between long-term residents and newcomers.

To translate these dialogues into tangible community outcomes, it is vital to integrate migrant perspectives into local decision-making processes, ensuring their voices actively shape community development (Mapitsa, 2019). This can be achieved through various mechanisms, such as establishing migrant advisory committees, increasing representation in local government, and implementing participatory planning processes that actively seek out and value migrant input. Additionally, supporting the establishment of migrant-led organisations and providing resources for cultural events not only enhances visibility but also promotes cultural pride and preserves diverse identities within the broader regional context (Luft et al., 2022). These organisations can serve as crucial bridges, facilitating integration while maintaining the rich tapestry of cultural heritage that contributes to the vibrancy of regional communities.

The successful implementation of these strategies requires a coordinated effort across multiple sectors and levels of governance. By adopting evidence-based policies, practitioners, leaders, and policymakers can create more inclusive, vibrant, and sustainable regional communities. These approaches recognise the complex interplay of factors that influence migrant experiences and perceptions of liveability, addressing the multifaceted challenges and opportunities presented by regional migration. The effectiveness of these initiatives will largely depend on ongoing collaboration between different levels of government, community organisations, and migrant communities themselves, ensuring that policies and practices remain responsive to the evolving needs of diverse regional populations.

8.5 Limitations of the Study

While this thesis makes significant contributions to the understanding of regional migration and liveability in Australia, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The case study approach, while providing deep insights into specific contexts, inherently limits the generalisability of findings (Thomas, 2011). This research focuses on Cairns, a regional city in Far North Queensland, Australia, which may not represent other regional cities or rural areas in Australia or other countries. The unique socio-economic, environmental, and cultural characteristics of Cairns might lead to findings that are not applicable in different settings. Thus, while the findings offer valuable contributions to understanding regional migration and liveability, they should be interpreted with caution when considering broader applications.

Another limitation stems from the temporal scope of the study. This research captures a snapshot of migration outcomes at a particular point in time, which may not fully reflect long-term trends and experiences. Migration and liveability are dynamic processes influenced by various temporal factors, including economic cycles, policy changes, and environmental conditions. They involve complex trajectories and multiple timescales, producing specific experiences of time (Robertson, 2018). The temporal scope of this research does not account for these evolving influences, potentially limiting the understanding of long-term migration outcomes and how they might change over time.

The selection of participants for this study, while aimed at capturing a diverse range of migrant experiences, may still be subject to biases. Recruitment methods and the voluntary nature of participation could result in a sample that is not fully representative of the broader migrant population in Cairns. Factors such as socio-economic status or cultural background might influence willingness to participate, potentially skewing the data toward certain demographic groups. Although efforts were made to mitigate these biases, their presence cannot be entirely ruled out. Nevertheless, the in-depth and contextualised nature of the data offers valuable insights into the subjective and experiential dimensions of migration and liveability that have been often overlooked in the literature.

As a migrant scholar with personal experiences of relocation and settlement in Cairns, my positionality and lived experiences have shaped the research process, from the selection of methods and participants to the interpretation and representation of findings. While this insider perspective can enhance understanding and empathy, it also requires ongoing critical reflection and transparency about the ways in which my own subjectivities and assumptions may have influenced

the study (Chereni, 2014). This potential for researcher bias and subjectivity represents another limitation of the study.

The methodological approach itself presents certain challenges. The integration of qualitative GIS and narrative methods requires specialised skills and resources, potentially limiting its scalability and replicability. Furthermore, the participatory nature of the process introduces potential biases and power dynamics that must be carefully navigated. Despite these limitations, the depth and richness of the data generated through this approach offer compelling insights that justify its application in migration and liveability research. Moreover, the use of multiple methods and data sources in this thesis, such as qualitative GIS, participatory mapping, and Importance-Performance Analysis, helps to triangulate findings and enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research.

8.6 Future Research Directions

Despite the limitations, the findings and insights generated by this present work open up exciting opportunities for future inquiry on regional migration and liveability in diverse national and international contexts. One promising avenue for future research is the implementation of longitudinal studies to track migrant experiences over extended periods. This approach would provide deeper insights into how migrants' perceptions of liveability evolve and how long-term integration processes unfold. Such studies could capture the dynamic nature of migration and its impacts on both individual migrants and the host community, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the settlement process.

Expanding the scope of research through comparative studies involving multiple regional cities and rural areas would enhance our understanding of how different regional contexts influence migration experiences and liveability. By examining a broader range of settings, researchers can identify commonalities and divergences, offering more robust findings that can inform regional development policies more effectively. This comparative approach could reveal patterns and best practices that transcend specific locations, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of regional migration dynamics.

Furthermore, future research should delve deeper into specific factors that contribute to liveability, such as employment opportunities, social integration, and environmental quality. Detailed studies on each of these dimensions can provide more targeted insights into the challenges and opportunities they present for migrants, helping to develop more effective interventions. For instance, an in-depth exploration of employment patterns among migrants in regional areas could

shed light on economic integration processes and inform policies aimed at enhancing job opportunities and skills matching in these regions.

By pursuing these research directions, scholars can build upon the foundation laid by this thesis, addressing its limitations and expanding our knowledge of regional migration and liveability. Future studies that incorporate longitudinal approaches, comparative analyses across multiple regional settings, and in-depth examinations of specific liveability factors will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play in regional migration. These multifaceted approaches will not only enrich academic discourse but also inform evidence-based policies that promote sustainable and inclusive regional development, ultimately contributing to the creation of more vibrant and resilient regional communities.

8.7 Concluding Reflections

This research offers valuable insights into the factors that attract and retain migrants in regional Australia, with a focus on Cairns as a case study. By examining the unique characteristics and challenges of regional cities, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of regional liveability and migration dynamics. It emphasises the need for a sophisticated approach to regional development that recognises the diverse and evolving nature of these areas. The findings highlight the importance of aligning migrants' expectations with the realities of regional living, a crucial factor for the long-term success of regional migration strategies. Enhancing liveability in regional areas requires attention not only to physical infrastructure and economic opportunities but also to fostering a sense of community and social connectivity. This holistic approach to regional development could improve the attractiveness and sustainability of regional cities across Australia. Moreover, the research contributes to a broader understanding of contemporary migration patterns, revealing the increasing complexity and fluidity of movements driven by amenity migration and changing lifestyle preferences.

Looking to the future, the success of Cairns and similar regional cities hinges on their ability to balance competing priorities. These include managing growth while maintaining liveability, fostering economic development without compromising environmental sustainability, and preserving local identity while embracing global connectivity. While these cities have the potential to attract diverse populations seeking alternatives to metropolitan living, realising this potential requires addressing key challenges. Chief among these are developing more diverse and affordable housing options, cultivating a resilient and diverse local economy, and building inclusive communities that can integrate newcomers while maintaining a strong sense of place.

Cairns, with its unique blend of natural and urban amenities, serves as a microcosm of both the potential and challenges faced by regional cities in attracting and retaining migrants. As these areas continue to evolve, this research underscores the importance of adopting holistic, people-centred, and context-sensitive approaches to regional development. By ensuring that the needs and aspirations of diverse migrant populations are met, we can foster vibrant and sustainable regional communities that thrive in the face of change.

In conclusion, this study offers a reimagining of regional futures that are more liveable, inclusive, and vibrant for all. It demonstrates the power of critical inquiry, participatory approaches, and multi-disciplinary positioning in generating knowledge that can inform our understanding of regional migration and liveability in a tropical urban context. By presenting a timely and inspiring vision of what is possible, this research contributes to building more sustainable and flourishing regional areas, both in Australia and around the world. As such, it paves the way for future studies and policy developments in this crucial field, embodying the transformative potential of scholarship to make a lasting difference in the lives of regional communities.

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Appendix A: Book Review

Citation: Dadpour, R. (2023). Book review: Brown, D.L. and Schafft, K. A. 2019: Rural people and communities in the 21st century: Resilience and transformation. Progress in Development Studies, 23(1), 115-116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14649934211032568>.

In the face of current uncertainty and volatility, the concept of resilience in rural studies is gaining more attention. This renewed focus not only helps understand rural communities better, but it also helps re-frame the theories and debates around rural development in new ways (Scott, 2013). Brown and Schafft's approach to resilience in this second edition of Rural people and communities in the 21st century: Resilience and transformation deploys an evolutionary approach which is characterised by an emphasis on transformation and adaptive capacity rather than an equilibrium approach which mainly focuses on a return to original state after a system undergoes disturbance. Evolutionary resilience emphasises transformation, whereby a community can adapt, search for or develop alternative development trajectories (Davidson, 2010). The authors stress the significance of evolutionary resilience by putting the two terms resilience and transformation next to each other in the title of the book. They emphasise on critical economic, social, political and to some extent the environmental roles of rural communities amid rapid universal urbanization and metropolitan expansion.

While Brown and Schafft stress local challenges and realities in rural areas, they also point to the importance of subjective approaches to understanding rurality. Their theoretical framework is, therefore, derived from contrasting two different approaches: rural as a socio-geographic locality versus rural as a social construct. They see these as complementary rather than fundamentally opposed. The book's resulting multidimensional approach to rurality is revisited throughout the different thematic sections of the book on rural communities, institutions and environments; rural populations and rural economy; and socio-economic well-being. The non-binary discussions around in- and out-migration and aging population are particularly salient and provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of both challenges and opportunities faced by rural communities due to unique population structures.

This new edition of the book includes a whole new chapter on rural politics and governance with a focus on political participation and voting in rural communities. The authors challenge the widely held belief that rural communities are more conservative than urban ones. Grounding their argument on the 2016 US presidential election, Brown and Schafft suggest that the long-term social and economic side-lining of rural areas in national agendas, especially in the rural Midwest, was one of the main factors in Trump's election success. National and international awareness of this side-

lining and election results could have profound impacts in other jurisdictions. The authors also identify some of the reasons why rural communities matter in the political context of the wider world. This non-conventional and artfully crafted argument gives a stronger conclusion to the first section of the book when compared to the first edition.

Despite their place-based approach, the authors only briefly discuss the environmental aspects of rurality and ecological approaches to resilience; instead, the authors rather predictably focus on the extraction of natural resources (both renewable and non-renewable) and associated conflicts regarding natural resource development and management. Since rural places should be analysed as an interdependent set of socio-spatial, economic, institutional and environmental systems, the lack of a complex discussion around rurality and its relation to environment as more than just amenity limits the scope of this edition. Matters such as the impacts of climate change on rural communities, especially in the face of current ecological crisis and risks, are not well explored. More comprehensive discussions around identifying the opportunities and vulnerabilities of rural places with regard to their landscapes and ecosystems would add invaluable weight to the argument and support the authors' ontological perspective.

Moreover, despite a very limited geographical area covered in the case studies of this book, the title of the book wrongly suggests a comprehensive worldwide argument in relation to the growing debates on rurality in different countries. Majority of the statistics, maps and figures discussed in this book are sourced mostly from the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA-ERS) using United States Census Bureau data. This Anglo-American-centricity narrows down the scope and relevance of this book for a wider audience.

Nonetheless, the book does offer engaging empirical analysis grounded on real-life case studies mostly from the USA and occasionally in the context of Europe. It is deservedly marketed as a standard reading of choice for advanced undergraduate and graduate courses in rural and/or community sociology, rural and/or population geography, community development and other related courses. The book is also of relevance to community development practitioners and policymakers and those who are interested in developing a better understanding of rural communities, their roles, circumstances and challenges in contemporary times. The arguments presented in this edition contribute a wealth of resources for an inclusive and coherent dialogue towards a more balanced national rural policy agenda in the USA.

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Appendix B: Creative Work

This appendix presents my creative piece, called ‘the in-between’, consisting of a sketch and accompanying haiku that explores the fluid nature of our environment. The work was created as part of my engagement with the themes of this thesis and was accepted for publication in the becoming—Fluid project. This piece captures the essence of fluidity in our environment, reflecting the dynamic and ever-changing nature of the landscapes and communities studied in this thesis. While the main body of this thesis focuses on empirical research and academic analysis, this creative piece represents a more intuitive and emotive engagement with the fluid nature of place and belonging, themes central to this study.

This piece was accepted for publication in becoming—Fluid, the final book in the BECOMING trilogy. This publication series aims to investigate the complex relationships between humans and other bodies through the concept of becoming. The acceptance of this work for publication in such a forum underscores its relevance to broader discussions about human-environment interactions and the fluid nature of place and identity. The inclusion of this creative piece in becoming—Fluid, alongside other artistic, performative, and cartographic interpretations, situates my research within a wider context of creative-academic explorations of place, mobility, and environmental change.



We are the art of in-between,
A scene that's felt but seldom seen.
Our edges blur, our centres hold,
In the quiet depths, new worlds unfold.

Appendix C: Original Paper

Citation: Ghasemiardékani, M., Dadpour, R., Irannezhad, E., & Bidarmaghzi, A. (2023). Endangering trust in health services: using ambulances to arrest protesters in Iran. *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, 39(4), 345-351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13623699.2023.2264122> .

Introduction

Since the beginning of the nationwide protests in Iran in September 2022, ambulances have been seriously misused for non-medical transports to suppress the recent protests in Iran such as detention and transfer of the protesters, and transfer of military forces. This can lead to a loss of public trust in the healthcare system in Iran. Using ambulances for non-medical purposes during armed conflict violates International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which seeks to protect healthcare professionals and infrastructures, ambulances, and injured people. While the situation of protest and civil uprisings in Iran is not considered an armed conflict, these protections should apply given the provisions of Human Rights Law (HRL) and customary International Human Rights Law (IHRL). This commentary discusses the misuse of ambulances in Iran and its implications for healthcare services. It also discusses the importance of upholding HRL and IHRL in protecting healthcare providers and facilities during protests and civil unrest.

On 16 September 2022, Mahsa Jina Amini, a 22-year-old girl from the Kurdish population of Iran was arrested and beaten by morality police for allegedly wearing her hijab inappropriately. She later fell into a coma and died in a hospital. This incident triggered protests across the country with the slogan of 'Woman, Life, Freedom'. Iranian women removed and burned their hijabs, and some even cut their hair as a ritualistic act of defiance against the authorities' oppressive policies.

The protests were met with excessive brutality and oppression by security forces. Many injured protesters seeking medical care were arrested by security forces at hospitals, and the majority of them were directly transferred to prisons (Amnesty International Citation2022). Healthcare professionals who provided care to protesters were also intimidated and arrested by security forces, prompting some medics to provide treatment for injured protesters at their private clinics or even at demonstrators' houses (IranWire Citation2022).

One of the medics who provided care to injured protesters was Dr. Ayda Rostami, a 36-year-old physician, who was allegedly abducted and murdered by security forces on 12 December 2022 (Jones Citation2022). According to the forensics death report, her body was found with a smashed face, bruised lower torso, an emptied eye, and two broken arms, and the cause of death was falsely

reported to be a result of being hit by a hard object (Sinaee Citation2022). The authorities in Iran ordered medical examiners not to reveal the cause of Ayda's death, raising serious concerns about the government's attempts to cover up its human rights violations.

These incidents highlight the government's disregard for the human rights of its citizens, particularly those who express dissent. The use of excessive force against peaceful protesters and the intimidation and arrest of healthcare professionals who provide medical aid to protesters are clear violations of international human rights law (Footer and Rubenstein Citation2013). Customary international law comprises rules considered 'general practice accepted as law' that exists independently of treaty law. Customary IHL is crucial in today's armed conflicts because it fills gaps left by treaty law, which cannot be applied to all aspects of both international and non-international conflicts, strengthening the protection afforded to victims. While the situation in Iran is not considered an armed conflict the abuse of ambulances is similar to that documented in many armed conflicts (Safeguarding Health Citation2016).

International law is made up of both treaty law and the rules of what is known as customary international law. Treaty law is a written convention to which states formally commit themselves through a process of signing and ratification. On the other hand, and as above, customary international law is not written but derives from 'a general practice accepted as law'. The international community must take into consideration customary rules that reflect the practice of states, and these are also legally binding. Some states have not ratified important treaty law, nevertheless they remain bound by the rules of customary law. In addition, the relative weakness of treaty law in governing non-international armed conflicts involving various types of armed groups usually occurs within one country's boundaries (International Review of Red Cross Citation2005).

Using ambulances to arrest protesters

During the recent protests in Iran, reports show that ambulances were being used to transport arrested protestors to detention centres instead of being used for medical purposes. As examples, there are reports by Tabrizy and Jhavari (Citation2022) about abusing the ambulance to transport the police forces and arrest protesters. The Express reports that the use of ambulances as covert police vehicles is not limited to the capital, Tehran. Activists and civilians have reported such incidents in many other Iranian cities (Giannangeli Citation2022). IRANWIRE covered this topic extensively by preparing a detailed report based on social media posts and quotes from social media users, activists, and journalists (Rezaei Citation2022). This exhaustive report shows that the regime's security forces used ambulances to suppress previous protests, even before the recent demonstrations in 2022.

Moreover, numerous videos were circulated on social media showing security forces driving ambulances during the protests, rather than trained paramedics. For example, a social media video portrays a scene where a girl is surrounded and arrested by police forces in Zanjan on 2 March 2023 for wearing a loose hijab. To prevent public defiance and interference, police forces call an ambulance to transfer the arrested girl to the police station.

The misuse of ambulances to arrest protesters has provoked outrage in Iran's medical communities. Most healthcare professionals in Iran have expressed their concerns stating that there is no legitimate medical justification for ambulances being stationed outside police stations, prisons, and detention centres.

Overview of legal frameworks

The use of ambulances for non-medical purposes is a clear violation of International Human Rights Law (IHRL) and Human Rights Law (HRL) (Jean-Marie, G., and A. Louise Citation2005; Smith Citation2022). According to international human rights law (Smith Citation2022), the work of healthcare professionals during protests and civil uprisings must be protected. The International Humanitarian Law (IHL) framework provides this protection for healthcare professionals, facilities, ambulances, and injured people during armed conflict (ICRC Citation2015).

Since the original 1864 Geneva Convention, the protection of health services has become more comprehensive because of developments in medical ethics that prohibit interference with health practices during wartime and civil unrest (Program on International Law and Armed Conflict Citation2015). This protection is outlined in various IHL treaties, including the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977, which set out rules for the treatment of the sick and wounded and for the protection of medical personnel and facilities. These rules were further strengthened in 2005 with the adoption of the Montreux Document, which reaffirmed the protection of medical personnel and facilities in armed conflicts.

Human Rights Law (HRL) establishes the rights between nations and individuals and aims to protect life, well-being, and human dignity. Medical ethics concerns professionals' moral conflicts and dilemmas in different situations (Cook and Syse Citation2010). There should be limits to the use of violence, and military medical ethics are underpinned by the principles that medical facilities and equipment and healthcare professionals are fundamentally neutral actors undertaking humanitarian roles and are afforded protection under IHL (Bricknell and Story Citation2022).

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC Citation2015) has emphasised that healthcare facilities and transportation will lose their protection if they are being used outside of

their humanitarian functions for harmful acts alongside political and military purposes, for instance, using an ambulance for transporting weapons. There are multiple instances of misusing healthcare equipment, facilities, and ambulances in the military and during civil war, from the use of a fake vaccination campaign in Pakistan (Ud Din, Mumtaz, and Ataullahjan Citation2012) to ambulance usage for carrying militants (Sousa and Hagopian Citation2011) and hiding weapons inside health facilities (Terry Citation2013).

Despite all these well-established international rules and policies, health services are frequently compromised; during the recent uprising in Iran this also caused marginalised and vulnerable communities to experience even lower levels of access to healthcare.

Undermining the rights of protestors and healthcare professionals in Iran

Undermining the integrity of healthcare settings and equipment through the deliberate misuse of ambulances cannot be ignored. Healthcare professionals must treat injured and sick people, and the government should also support them. This principle is universally accepted; all health services rely on impartiality and independence. Healthcare professionals and the Medical Council in Iran have voiced concerns about ambulance misuse for non-medical transportation (Tabrizy and Jhavari Citation2022). They believe that using an ambulance to suppress protesters leads people to distrust the health system.

Multiple video recordings support the fact that authorities detain injured people in Iran's hospitals after they have received initial basic medical care. As a result many of the civilians injured during protests choose to stay at home rather than seeking further medical attention, which can cause their health conditions to deteriorate (Amnesty International Citation2022).

In reaction to the unlawful use of ambulances in Iran, the Iranian Medical Council and around 1200 medical doctors have signed a statement urging Iran's Ministry of Health to end the use of ambulances and other health resources for military purposes (Keyhan London Citation2022). The global health system (see Hoffman and Cole Citation2018) also recognises the transgressions being committed by this misconduct (Iran International Newsroom Citation2022).

These voices have been amplified by health-workers in other countries, such as the German healthcare professionals' demonstration demanding Iran's regime discontinue using ambulances to suppress protests in Iran (Iran International Newsroom Citation2022).

The exploitation of healthcare resources for military or political purposes can harm the trust of citizens globally, and every country should be held accountable for any violation of IHRL. In the

case of Iran, the misuse of ambulances by the regime not only violates the rights of protesters but also undermines the trust in healthcare professionals and facilities.

This unlawful use of healthcare resources is not unique to Iran, and it can have serious implications for global health systems. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that health issues are not confined by borders, and actions taken by one government can have ripple effects across the world (Gostin and Wiley Citation2020).

International organizations and governmental bodies must take action to prevent the improper use of healthcare resources in Iran or any other country, and to ensure that people around the world have access to safe and effective medical care. Such violations must be met with global condemnation to promote the rule of law and the welfare of all citizens across the globe (Gostin and Wiley Citation2020). The ramifications of violating International Human Rights Law (IHRL) must be acknowledged and addressed to prevent the erosion of trust in healthcare systems worldwide. It is crucial to hold accountable those who violate IHRL and to emphasise the importance of upholding fundamental human rights in the provision of healthcare services.

Overall, healthcare professionals' voices in Iran must be heard immediately, and international organizations and government agencies must address this misconduct and take immediate actions to ensure the world knows this breach is unacceptable. There is an urgent need for global condemnation of this abhorrent exploitation of trust in healthcare services in Iran to protect the well-being of all citizens across the globe. Healthcare systems must not have to spend resources to regain public trust that might be affected by hearing that medical resources had been used for military acts.

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Appendix D: Original Paper

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Abstract

Since the inception of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" revolution in September 2022, following the tragic death of Mahsa Amini, universities in Iran have been at the forefront of resistance. In response, the government has attempted to silence opposition by exerting control over universities and engaging in waves of arrests and imprisonments. The latest round of attacks extended beyond students and targeted any academic who protected students from violent attacks by the regime or has criticised the state for the draconian policies they have coerced on the tertiary education sector. This study delves into the historical and institutional roots of the oppressive mechanisms employed by the Islamic Republic in Iranian universities, since the 1979 revolution and the subsequent Islamisation project. Through this lens, we analyze how the regime legitimises its practices, enforces misogynistic policies in tertiary education, and coerces universities into submission. We argue that Iranian universities have come to resemble prisons, with academics fearing for their job security and the expression of their opinions, while regime-connected individuals monopolise opportunities such as research grants and travel prospects. Our aim is to raise awareness within the international academic community about the oppressive, misogynistic, and corrupt system that governs Iran's tertiary education sector.

Introduction

Pressure on academics in Iran is multifaceted. The ideological positions that legitimise the gross violation of human rights and the rights of academics to freedom of speech and expression, rest on the historical development of the Islamic republic and the various methods and techniques of oppression and suppression that have been institutionalised. Since its inception, the Islamic republic has feared universities and have faced a major legitimacy crisis as the result of university students' movements in the early 1980s, the 1996 student uprising, the Green Movement of 2009, the 2019 uprising, and the "women, life, freedom" revolution.

As the "Woman, Life, Freedom" revolution unfolded following the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, universities have consistently raised their voices against the regime and have posed serious challenges to the autocratic rule of the clergy in the country (Amir et al., 2022; Berger, 2023; ICOIA,

2023; Madani, 2022; Yalzadeh, 2022). The regime in Iran, have brought all its forces to face these challenges, from initiating hasty policies to expulsion and imprisonment of students and academics. The wave of arrest and imprisonment since September has drawn the attention of the international academic community to the courageous resistance of students and many academics against the oppression of the state. It is for the first time that the increasingly corrupt, tyrannical, misogynistic, and violent system that the regime has established in universities is exposed to the world. Such level of brutality, however, is not a hesitation or as the result of temporary reaction to the revolution, but it has been carefully planned since the formation of the Islamic republic (Golkar, 2012, 2013, 2017; Razavi, 2009).

The history of the establishment of oppression of the tertiary sector and the resistance of universities highlights the role of Iran's student movement in the country's long struggle for democracy. As this article argues, one of the major goals of the Islamic republic has been to force universities to submit to the will of the ruling clergy. Universities, however, have remained a critical voice, and have been paying a heavy price for it. In the latest round of attacks on universities since September 2022, students have been subject to institutional and non-institutional forms of violence, from being arrested, imprisoned, or expelled from universities to being beaten on campus or facing barriers for having access to their grades to complete their degrees (ICOIA, 2023). At any time, their grades could be upheld by their university authorities, or their enrollment could be revoked with no explanation from universities' authorities. They could be prevented from accessing their degree, which is essential for them if they apply to continue their studies outside Iran or if they apply for employment inside Iran. The regime has amplified its intelligence operations in universities since September 2022 and deal with them as prison-like institutions, under heavy surveillance and by threatening students and academics constantly. As this article demonstrates, the regime has extended the oppressive mechanism and systems that uses in Iran's prisons to universities.

The oppression and imprisonment of individual students and academics has been intensified since November 2022, when suspected chemical attacks at schools and female-specific university residential buildings and campuses began. These attacks made many students sick and hospitalised. Reports on these daily attacks are available on major media websites and are socialised globally by Iranian activists and journalists. More than 300 prominent professors from leading universities in Iran condemned these violent attacks and warned the Islamic regime and the security officials about the stormy consequences of covering up such a crime in a statement.(Shirazi & Sharma, 2023). The regime hopes that by spreading fear and intimidation amongst university students and academics will be silenced, and they maintain in power.

These attacks and the continuous violation of human rights in Iran's tertiary education sector are the state's responses to the uprisings. These actions are complimented by more fascist-style policies, defamation accusations and isolations of academics and students. For example, following the Green Movement, the regime passed a new policy based on which students, who had been active in the movement, were identified by a star next to their name (International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, 2010; Mahmoudian, 2010). These "starred- students" were suspended from universities and could neither enrol nor have access to their grades to travel or apply for overseas universities. Soon after the Green Movement in 2009, the regime imposed new Islamisation policies on universities, in five main categories including management, students, lecturers, the educational contents, and the universities' environment (Golkar, 2012). These policies set up the ground for the regime's violent response to the "Women, Life, Freedom" revolution in 2022. The regime is hoping that by deploying a large number of security forces, conducting regular intelligence operators, and installing corrupt officials as university authorities they could control the uprising. In some cases, human resource offices and university officials operate as members of the regime's security forces and pass intelligence to the Islamic Revolution Guardian Corp (IRGC) and members of the regime's paramilitary force (the Basij). These initiatives, many of which have been implemented by IRGC, have created a major rift between academics and the administration authorities in universities. This division prevents trust and unity in universities and has worked to the benefit of the regime. Spreading the culture of mistrust amongst academics is another technique that the regime uses to continue its hegemony over the sector.

Iranian academics outside Iran have been writing about the new wave of oppression in universities (Amir et al., 2022; ICOIA, 2023; Madani, 2022; Yalzadeh, 2022) to raise global awareness and to send a message to the Islamic Republic that their autocratic policies are watched and reported to the international community. The international community of Iranian academics (ICOIA) has been publishing about the oppressive techniques that the regime in Iran has been using against students and academics. Raising awareness in the international community of academics about the situations their peers face in Iran is the way to resist the regime's violent oppression of the tertiary education sector and to expose the system that nurtures it (ICOIA, 2023). To complement their efforts, in this article we explore the genealogy of these oppressive techniques, their ideological premises and the institutions that support them. This article discusses the ways through which the Islamic republic has constructed and established its power institutionally and operationally throughout its history in order to bring awareness amongst the international community of academics about the oppressive, misogynistic, and corrupt system that they install and safeguard in

universities. Understanding the current system is the prerequisite for further research on building a transparent, progressive to, inclusive, and credible tertiary education system in future Iran.

The Islamisation Project

The systematic oppressive mechanisms that the Islamic republic has set up in universities rely on the history of the 1979 revolution and the Islamisation project that the regime has followed since. It is through this matrix that the regime legalises its practices, imposes misogynistic policies on tertiary education and forces universities to submit to its oppressive rules (Golkar, 2012). Ironically, evidence shows that regardless of the regime's efforts, these projects have been unsuccessful (Golkar, 2012, 2017; Iran International Newsroom, 2022). On the contrary, any round of brutal crackdown on universities has resulted in a wave of brain drain, more resistance from students, and a major legitimacy crisis for the regime. Arresting academics and students, whether in the area around the campus or on the campuses, is the physically violent face of a political system that is rotten in its core and can no longer sustain its authority. The increase in the presence of security guards, which are working as intelligence operators in universities, and their attacks on students proves that their techniques are no longer efficient.

In the early days after the Islamic Revolution announced its victory over the monarchy on February eleventh, 1979, universities in Iran became the hubs of political resistance. As the Islamic republic tightened its grip over Iran's politics, university students challenged its hegemonic attitude (Razavi, 2009). About a year after the formation of the "Revolutionary Assembly", in June 1980, the Assembly gave an order for the banning of all political groups in universities and gave them three days to implement the order. When university students and academics resisted, Khomeini ordered the closure of universities in Iran and began the project of "Cultural Revolution" (Golkar, 2012, 2017; Mashayekhi, 2001; Razavi, 2009). It started by the establishment of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (SCCR) which remains as the policy-making body for universities curriculums, staffing, segregation policies, intelligence operations and the employment or expulsion of academic staff and students (Golkar, 2017). Soon after, universities in Iran, which had been the ideological cornerstone and the support base for the revolution, became the biggest enemy of the new regime.

The SCCR became responsible to scrutinise activities of academic staff and students in order to ensure that their teachings, behaviours, and actions were in accordance with Islamic ideals of the new regime. This premise became the ground for legitimising the establishment of intelligence and other security operations in universities. As the SCCR began its project, thousands of university students were arrested, academic staff were expelled from their positions and/or imprisoned (Razavi, 2009). The closure of universities was the first step for Khomeini to silence voices of the

opposition. SCCR has pursued different goals in its policies and security operations since (Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2020).

The most important goal for the Council is the Islamisation of society, and to achieve this goal, it must ensure that universities, as the main institution for “production of knowledge”, are Islamised. The SCCR engaged in a review of all programs in universities and changed the content of textbooks and syllabi of university curriculum to implement the Islamic ideologies and thoughts (Golkar, 2012, 2013). To Islamise Iran’s society through universities, the Council started to “purify-Paaksaaazi” universities from secular ideas, purge them from any signs of westernization, so any idea about secularism could be removed from Iran’s political discourse and education (Golkar, 2012, 2017). This “purification” project was implemented forcefully and covered a very wide range of activities; from the way students and lecturers dress to how academics show their commitment to the Islamic republic, what they read, or which books they recommend to students to read. That is why “purifying” the textbooks of secular theories has been one of the main responsibilities of the SCCR since its inception and especially after 2005 when an authoritarian populist, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became Iran’s president (Golkar, 2012, 2013). Academics in general, and female academics in particular, are constantly monitored for their “Islamic behaviour” in corridors, in their conversations with students, and their interactions with other academics. They refrain from expressing any form of individual identity that might disagree with the identity that the SCCR promotes. Committees including Islamic students Association and the Central Professors Selection Committee (Hay’at-e Markazi-ye Gozinesh-e Ostad) were established to monitor and review students and faculty members for their ideological beliefs and activities (Golkar, 2013). During this process many students and faculty members were fired and/or arrested because of their beliefs or their affiliation with different political groups. SCCR, additionally, investigated any new faculty member’s political views and their commitment to the Islamic Revolution during the hiring process (Golkar, 2013; Mashayekhi, 2001). In the first six months of Ahmadinejad’s government, 90% of university leadership teams such as deans, deputies, executive, and managers in different institutions of higher education were fired and replaced with Basiji professors and the IRGC officials (Golkar, 2013).

The council continues monitoring universities in the same style as prisons and considers this securitised approach to universities as an achievement of the council. As part of the Islamisation project, SCCR has been trying to transform universities and schools, as well as art and cultural centres into institutions that operate based on Islamic tenants. They are obliged to demonstrate “correct Islamic behaviour”, to develop and strengthen ideas about Islamisation and to train professionals who are committed to Islam (Golkar, 2012). After 1979, policies that coerce

commitment to Islamic ideas and practices have determined the Iranian academics' promotion procedures, their access to research funds and the future of their employment. The Islamisation of knowledge including the appropriation of Iran's culture, history, and archaeology was another strategy that was implemented by the SCCR to ensure that the Islamic republic's ideology and its "cultural products" are promoted outside Iran, so, the regime can use universities and global academic interactions as an opportunity for creating stronger unity and connection with other Islamic countries. The pressure of Islamisation is extended to the Islamisation of STEM degrees, but it is humanities and social sciences that are particularly problematic for the Islamic republic (Golkar, 2017).

Among the systematic changes that the Council has imposed on Iran's universities the most noticeable ones are the normalisation of misogyny, the restricting of legal departments, and the establishment of an institutional process in which the decision of security forces are prioritised over university laws. In the last four decades, the regime has closely monitored the implementation of these policies through practical actions that have institutionalised oppression systematically.

To further engrain misogynistic policies, Women's Social and Cultural Council (WSCC) came into existence with the decision of SCCR in 1987 and under its supervision (Ebadi, 2002). It was formed to make policies in the socio-cultural affairs of women and take necessary steps for the fulfilment of its objectives. The responsibilities that the SCCR undertook for implementing these goals have given it the mandates for the legalisation and implementation of a series of policies that provide the base for the oppressive and suppressive methods and techniques that the regime has developed in the last forty-four years. While the Islamic republic has failed to Islamise universities in the last four decades, it has been successful in using violence and draconian policies to silence them temporarily. These policies have been intensified in operational planning to face the "Woman, Life, Freedom" revolution. Since the start of this revolution in September 2022, the reinforcement of SCCR regulations failed, however, from January 2023, the regime has been imposing extra pressure on universities. Predominantly, the aim of the new round of coercive policies is to silence universities by placing further pressure on academics and by maintaining gender inequality as the blueprint of the Islamic republic's education ideology.

SCCR has very clear goals and has set up centralised systems and structures for coercing its policies. The question is how these policies have been implemented in universities. The answer to this question is in one of the responsibilities of the Council. According to its mandates, university presidents and the office of SCCR (called Harasat in Persian) and the Central Professors Selection Committee are tasked to investigate the loyalty and the commitment of individual academics,

students, and university non-academic staff members to the principles of the Islamic republic (Golkar, 2013; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, 2010; Mahmoudian, 2010). In one of Khomeini's speeches in the 1980s, he delineated the responsibilities of SCCR and university presidents by posing a series of questions. He asked the Council to run an investigation on each academic and student to assess their religious affiliations. He said "what does he talk about in his lectures? What type of person is he (how religious is he?) What did he do when he was in university? What is the content of his teachings? How does he convince the young people, and whether he promotes any conspiracy in his teachings? What do they say in his lectures and whether he says anything deviant against the Islamic republic?"

Intentionally and systematically, SCCR turned universities into organisations in which trust is a lost concept. Both Khomeini and Khamenei emphasise on the eradication of trust in universities by assigning the responsibility of spying, targeting, and purging non-committed academics and students. According to the post-2009 policies of the council, Khamenei has increased his pressure on universities to attract and train more committed students to the Islamic republic, particularly those who adhere to and support the absolute jurisprudential leadership. He demanded that the government, the parliament, and the SCCR conduct research on how to attract more committed students, on behalf of universities. Since 2009, Khamenei has increased pressure on universities to not only scrutinise and decide the content of courses in humanities and social sciences, (Lem, 2023) but also all educational tools including films, commentaries, documentaries, and any other content that Khamenei deems "unsuitable for Islamic Iranian culture and raises serious concerns for the leadership". Universities are obligated to revise any course that even slightly contradicts this definition, and all universities must only include those courses in their curriculum that could fit into the framework of "Islamic values" as defined by SCCR (Golkar, 2012). This very deliberate process of purging was another step for indoctrinating universities and tightening the grip of the Council over them. The published document on the topic is called "fundamental reform of education" (SCCR et al., 2011). It is the cornerstone for education policies and was written by the order of Khamenei in the Council in 2009, just a year prior to the "Third Wave" uprising. It was revised in 2011 and was sent to the Ministry of Education for implementation in the same year (Golkar, 2012).

The major goal of this document is to create the ground for security authorities to undermine science for the benefit of "Islamic civilisation" and for the realisation of the Messianic ideals of the Islamic republic. According to the document, from 2014, universities in Iran are no longer solely responsible for Islamisation, but also are obligated to develop context for the change, prepare for the coming of Mahdi (the Shi'a Messiah), and become messianic institutions (SCCR et al., 2011). As a result of its implementation, any reference to Iranian identity or to pre-Islamic Iranian

history has been removed from textbooks in universities and schools. In addition, the works of women poets, secular poets, and poets who wrote during the constitutional revolution in the early 20th century were removed and replaced by the work of poets who are closely connected to the regime. Ironically, in the case of political science, any analysis or historical note about Russia's interference in Iran's affairs or their military invasion during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been removed from the syllabus.

The transformation document contradicts with the UNESCO 2030 education document in its ideals majorly. The "fundamental transformation" document insists on normalising misogyny and highly praises any attempt for normalising it, as a positive move towards Islamisation. On the contrary, UNESCO 2030 places significant emphasis on opportunities for women and girls, which contradicts the Islamisation project, both institutionally and systematically (UNESCO, 2016). In addition to this major contradiction, following the 2022 revolution, and the death of Mahsa Amini, the SCCR, passed a statement in which they emphasised on the importance of observing the mandatory wearing of hejab. The statement considered this monitoring process to be the responsibility of universities and their official authorities. In addition to fulfilling their commitment to jurisprudential leadership, the implementation of this rule amplifies the power of religious forces in universities, especially against the young generation, and to coerce them to submit to the rule of the Islamic republic.

While the existing oppressive system has met the ideals that the Islamic republic envisaged in the Council, the tertiary education sector in Iran has always resisted the training of committed academics and students, even if all academics have to go through a selection process to prove their commitment to Shi'a Islam and the jurisprudential leadership. The Islamisation project transformed the atmosphere of universities and made them hubs for corruption, embezzlement, sexual harassment, indoctrination, and anti-intellectualism. To sustain this corrupt system all universities' administration and managers are employed from IRGC. Their main liability is to conduct intelligence operations and set up fake legal cases against academics and students to silence any opposition.

The latest round of attacks on universities during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" revolution

Standing by the people of Iran, universities have been the hotbed of protests since September 2022, when widespread opposition to the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini in custody engulfed the country. Since, students and academics in Iran face a mounting pressure from the regime's security forces and university officials, have been targets of chemical attacks, sexual accusations and harassment and imprisonment and torture. Across universities in Iran, students are suspended, arrested, tortured, and poisoned to be silenced (Amir et al., 2022; Berger, 2023; ICOIA,

2023; Yalzadeh, 2022). Being the forefront of Iran's "Woman, life, freedom" revolution, universities have been the sites where the regime exercises its power through implementing systematic surveillance and punishment techniques to use them as examples for deterrence.

The latest round of attacks on universities extended beyond students and targeted any academic who protected students from violent attacks by the regime's security guards. Personal narratives of many academics show that at times, academics had to stand between security forces and students physically to protect them from being beaten or arrested. In the early stages of the revolution, the operations of the security forces were exclusively on information gathering and targeting individuals, especially academics but three months into the revolution, the intelligence gathering phase was replaced by a series of punishment policies that encompassed and further limited freedom of expression and freedom of speech. The reports that had been collected by the regime's intelligence operators are used against individuals.

From September to November 2022, most university students refused to go to classes or participate in the propaganda events that universities held to discredit the revolution. This decision put lecturers in a difficult position. They were either cooperative with secret forces to put pressure on the students to come back to classes, or they were supportive of students, and paid the price for it. Video clips show that while students resisted going to classes, some lecturers continued teaching in empty classes out of fear or due to the rentier economy that legitimise their employment and the corruption of the sector. Those academics who disagree with the increasing intelligence operations in Iran could hardly speak about the methods the universities use to isolate and stigmatise them. There are only a few academics who raised concerns regardless of the brutal oppression of the state. Some of these academics are outside Iran and have lost hope to go back to their jobs. Some others who are inside Iran, are arrested, tortured, or expelled from their positions permanently (Lem, 2023). In most cases, critiquing lecturers who are outside of Iran, are cut off from their university portal and their employment is terminated without prior notice.

In February 2023, after many academics had been expelled from their positions, the minister of education claimed that their "academic incompetence" was the reason for their dismissal (Iran International, 2023). This allegation was far from the truth. On the contrary, the Islamic republic has used such unfounded excuses to discredit dissident academics. The SCCR policies strongly encourages the punishment measures universities authorities use, specifically if they include collecting intelligence information on students, which could expel them from tertiary education at any time, and often without any transparent process or accountability.

According to the SCCR and based on a direct order from Khamenei, every member of academia in Iran is responsible to make sure that university is supportive of the regime and does not promote secular ideas or any idea that disagrees with the goals of the Islamisation project. The regime has fostered and nurtured this corrupt system for situations like the "Women, life, freedom" revolution. Many staff members in universities are intelligence operators who compete over reporting academics who support students in order to expel them from their position. These intelligence operators collect the recordings of discussions that students and academics have in their classrooms, monitor any resource that is introduced to students, and scrutinise any idea that might imply critiques of totalitarianism. Even if not arrested, based on these intelligence operations, neither students nor academics could feel safe in universities as the result of constant monitoring, and the fear of expulsion. Not being able to trust anyone means that often academics are concerned about being targeted and many academics exercise self-censorship and encourage students to do so. Spreading fear is the most important tool for the Islamic republic in silencing universities. This fear-mongering technique is multiplied by intimidation.

A new collective project of intimidation was clicked in universities from November 2022 whereby the protesting students were intimidated by the security forces and by those academics who support the regime, or by members of IRGC who attacked universities and arrested students. Intimidation is practiced in all aspects of academic life, from not being supported by other academics, to being expelled from a position without any prior knowledge, or losing connection with university portals without any explanation and being removed from the positions in which they provided services to students.

Both the university management team and the administrators work as the wheels for this corrupt and brutal crackdown and SCCR was founded and developed to control intellectual and academic activities.(Golkar, 2010, 2017). Through policies of the SCCR the security forces has become the dominant voice in the sector and gained the authority to violently silence students and academics in universities.

The institutional corruption in Iran's tertiary education system

The project of Islamisation was funded by the regime but the human resource for the project came from the quota that the state determined for the members of IRGC, and members of Basij, which was formed during the Iran and Iraq war but was later transformed into an organisation dedicated to Khamenei. Over time, university authorities from IRGC and Basij have developed a system that conditions academics and students' success and professional development to show ideological commitment. Their position of power has spread a corrupt system in which they

plagiarise from other academics and students' works, produce outcomes that neither meet the standard of academic writing nor is based on facts and evidence, and connect themselves with small research organisations outside Iran that struggle with funding. This endemic institutional corruption in universities is legitimised by the nepotistic and patrimonial characteristics of rentier states such as Iran.

As a country that almost exclusively relies on oil money and has no will or reason for a transparent and accountable tax system, the Islamic republic has used rentier money to buy support internationally and pay credible academics to use their names as advisors. For instance, the regime built a single sex university in Tehran (Imam Sadeq University) that trains interrogators, ideologues, prosecutors, foreign affairs officials, spies, and other security related technocrats (Golkar & Aarabi, 2021). Many members of the governments of Ahmadinejad and Raisi are graduates of this university. The corrupting impact of Islamisation and rentier economy has gone beyond universities in Iran and engages international academics and academic institutions that collaborate with them.

In many cases, the intimidation techniques are not limited to academics and engulf their families. Many academics report how their houses and family members have been closely monitored and how they are isolated from other academics and their support. As a result of these brutal techniques critical academics are fearful for their own safety or the safety of their family members. Reports of security forces circling around the academics' home with cars or motorcycles in evenings to monitor their time of arrival, and their activities after work are common. Security forces and university staff members are closely monitored and their recorded discussions in the classrooms are saved by university authorities to cause fear amongst academics and threaten them that their parents or family members could be under pressure or even arrested.

Increasingly, universities resemble prisons with academics being fearful of losing their jobs, while those academics with connection to the regime, monopolising opportunities that others miss. Research grants and travel opportunities in Iran's rentier economy are only presented to those rentier academics who contribute to the Islamisation project and marginalise secular academics. They are supported by the regime to participate in international conferences or other opportunities.

No academic in Iran could become a university authority in Iran's tertiary sector without being connected to this corrupt core. They cannot use any research grant or any opportunity for travel and those who manage to do so, face many obstacles. When an academic is tagged by the system as "problematic", they could be marginalised, demoted, interrogated, and arrested. The goal of this process is to communicate their insecurity and emphasise the regime's power by isolating them from their students, their colleagues, and their university services. While male and female

academics are subject to the same systematic oppression such as commitment to jurisprudential leader and the Islamic republic, female academics are further pressured by the institutionalised misogynistic and sexualised atmosphere in universities in Iran. Female academics are subject to regular abuse by security forces, their bosses, and their regime-supporting colleagues and students for the way they wear their hejab, the way they walk, dress, act, speak, or just for being a female academic.

Any academic who criticises the regime or is “non-cooperative” could be accused of being connected to Western intelligence agencies, or of being paid by the United States, the UK or Israel for their activities. If any academic expresses an opinion that could be interpreted as a critique of any official or the leadership institution, they could lose their jobs. During the months of November 2022 to April 2023, any academic who supports students and their voices have been targeted by intelligence forces in universities who collect, and most times fabricate stories to use against them. Even though the heavy surveillance of universities and academics is embedded in the policies of the Cultural Council, pressure on academics is exaggerated by a fierce competition amongst universities authorities over showing their “love to the leader”.

Resistance and resilience

Those Iranian academics who remain independent, publish collective letters, sign petitions, and raise a voice against the systematic oppression of students and academics have accepted the consequences of their position. Many of them inside Iran had to leave the country in fear of unemployment, imprisonment, and defamation. Academics who have been the voice for their peers from outside Iran have accepted that their public statements take away their right to return home.

The “Women, Life, Freedom” revolution was partly the result of the misogynistic policies that female academics and students and women in general have been enduring for the last four decades. Regardless of these oppressions, however, Iranian women remain committed to talk about equality and inspire their students to stay truthful to their education and their scholarly integrity. Today, thousands of Iranian female scientists and scholars work in different universities around the world, which shows the success of generations of women resistance against the regime’s gender apartheid.

The tools and strategies that the Islamic republic has used in its tertiary education policies are not limited to systematic surveillance and oppression. In Iran, those academics who manage to find a position are only employed by temporary contract, with a salary almost equivalent to USD\$200 a month. These conditions bring academics to a complete financial dependency. Many

could not resign because even a resignation could imply opposition against the regime. Resignations could be refused by the university or the SCCR, therefore, should be planned carefully with a justifiable excuse. Any disobedience or action that is reported to university authorities or SCCR could result in the termination of one's salary, sometimes even without their knowledge. Universities have no obligation to explain to the academics when and why their contract was terminated.

Conclusion

The Islamic republic is terrified of the "Women, Life, freedom" revolution and their fear is most evident in the new series of misogynistic and anti-intellectual policies that Iran's parliament has passed. There are also new sets of tertiary education policies that are designed to future pressure those academics. The number of academics who are expelled from their positions has increased and news about imposing harsh punishment for students who break the laws on sexual segregation of public spaces on university campuses, such as libraries and eateries. The strategy of the regime is to show that no amount of pressure from Iran's civil society or students would make the regime refrain from coercing its ideological position. It also aims to discredit the revolution by further silencing academics. Supporting a colleague who is expelled from their position, therefore, could be very costly. To counter this brutal and corrupt system, Iranian academics outside Iran have been raising awareness in the international environment about the dire situation in Iran's tertiary education system.

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Appendix E: Original Paper

Dadpour, Rana (2024). Echoes of Dissent: The Transformative Power of Sound in Iran's Urban Nightscapes. *Philosophy of the City Journal*. 2(45–59). <https://doi.org/10.21827/potcj.2.4>.

Abstract:

The suppression of public dissent in Iran has catalysed alternative forms of resistance, most notably Nocturnal Rooftop Slogan Chanting (NRSC). This study explores NRSC as an urban phenomenon, illuminating its role in reshaping nightscapes under an authoritarian regime. How can politically disenfranchised citizens reclaim urban spaces and assert their voices under oppressive conditions? It is argued that NRSC creates alternative sonic geographies, challenging conventional narratives of nightscapes and expanding spaces of dissent. Combining theoretical analysis with empirical observations, this study includes a thematic analysis of 158 videos of NRSC from 2021 to 2023 and provides insights into the characteristics and content of these protests. The findings reveal that NRSC fosters communal identities and challenges state control through the creation of dispersed, anonymous, yet interconnected acts of sonic occupation. It thus transforms urban nights into platforms for collective expression and symbolic resistance. The study also demonstrates that NRSC's effectiveness lies in its ability to leverage the urban nightscape, particularly the vertical dimension of rooftops, to create a pervasive soundscape of dissent. It invites further research into the role of sensory experiences in shaping political landscapes and suggest a re-evaluation of urban nights as crucial spaces of identity formation, and resistance.

Keywords: Nightscapes; Soundscapes; Right to the City; Iran; Spatial Politics.

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The Call of the Night: An Introduction

"why should I stop, why?"

the horizon is vertical, vertical / and movement fountain-like...

and in the chemical space after sunrise / there is only sound, / sound that will attract the particles of time..." – It is only sound that remains, Forough Farrokhzad, 1966

In the quiet of the night in Iran, when the oppressive silence of authoritarian rule blankets the city, the air suddenly vibrates with the resonance of collective dissent. This auditory defiance, known as nocturnal rooftop slogan chanting (NRSC), involves citizens gathering on rooftops after dark to chant anti-regime slogans (*for an example video see Ashrafi, 2022*). The long history of oppression in Iran has engendered alternative forms of resistance. NRSC is a notable example of these forms.

The aim of this paper is to explore NRSC as an urban phenomenon, examining its role in reshaping nightscapes under authoritarian regimes. To achieve this, I analyse how NRSC uses urban nightscape to create forms of dissent, investigating its characteristics and advantages. Specifically, I seek to address two questions: How do marginalised citizens reclaim urban spaces through NRSC? In what ways does NRSC create alternative sonic geographies and challenge conventional nightscape narratives?

Employing a mixed-methods approach, I combine empirical observations with theoretical analysis. A total of 158 videos of NRSC from 2021 to 2023 obtained from publicly available sources constitute the core of the empirical data. This paper unfolds across a number of sections. I first remind the reader of the political structure of Iran in a brief sketch. I then outline a general framework that connects sound, space, and nighttime aesthetics, and try to articulate in this frame the characteristics and strategic advantages of NRSC based on the collected videos, framing NRSC as a form of sonic occupation. Finally, I analyse NRSC through the lens of the right to the city and demonstrate how it may be seen as a practice of fostering communal identities and reclaiming urban spaces. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of auditory dimensions of nightscape and urges a reconsideration of various ways city spaces may be contested, utilised, and transformed at night through alternative forms of publicity.

Setting the Scene

Iran has been under a totalitarian rule since the 1979 Islamic Revolution brought a clerical regime to power. The country is effectively controlled by a Shia cleric (the ‘Supreme Leader’) who exercises unlimited power over the lives of the citizen and has at his disposal the specially created armed enforcers, notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the affiliated militia group called the Basij (Boroumand, 2009). All the political positions and bodies are directly or indirectly appointed by the Supreme Leader, currently Ali Khamenei. These unelected institutions wield the resources of the state to suppress any criticism of the ruling political system (*see Human Rights Watch, 2023*).

This authoritarian structure manifests in the systematic suppression of public dissent. Street demonstrations are met with brutal force, including beatings, use of live ammunition, and generally deadly violence (see Amnesty International, 2020). Dissenters face surveillance and arrest by intelligence and security services whose primary role is to identify and detain activists and protests organisers (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010). Beyond surveillance and physical crackdown, the state deploys legislation to stifle dissent. The legal framework creates a controlled environment where the government can systematically restrict public expressions of opposition (Khosravi, 2017). Sweeping laws have criminalised public criticism and dissent as ‘insulting’ authorities or ‘spreading falsehoods’ which carry heavy sentences (Amnesty International, 2022). Censorship, digital control, and internet shutdowns are also employed to control public discourse, curb freedom of speech, and stifle activists’ movements (Rahimi, 2011).

This extensive repressive apparatus is designed to swiftly suppress public manifestations of dissent before they can gain momentum. The severe punishments and brute force employed by the state’s actors create an environment of fear and distrust, effectively discouraging open protest (Adam-Troian et al., 2020). Moreover, the regime’s tight control over public spaces leaves other traditional avenues for expressing dissent severely restricted. In response to these formidable constraints, alternative modes of protest emerged, demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of dissenting voices in repressive contexts (Rivetti, 2017). A notable example is NRSC, which has gained prominence as a safer method of expressing opposition. I now provide an exploratory account of NRSC, examining its significance and impact as a form of urban resistance in contemporary Iran.

Sound and Space

In urban environments, auditory experiences constitute a notable part of sensory perceptions, from the hum of traffic to the chatter of passers-by (Augoyard & Torgue, 2006; Mansell, 2020). This auditory landscape, though fleeting, forms a deeply influential aspect of city life. Feld (1994) suggests that sound is a powerful lens through which we can understand the complex interplay between people and their urban surroundings. As it envelops and permeates the cityscape, sound has the capacity to subtly guide or even exclude urban dwellers in their daily interactions with the city (Atkinson, 2007). By creating an immersive experience, sound plays a crucial role in shaping how urban spaces are perceived and experienced by their inhabitants (LaBelle, 2019; Ihde, 2007).

Building on the sonic richness of urban life, the field of sonic geographies delves deeper into how auditory elements shape the spatial and social fabric of cities (Holloway, 2022). This emerging discipline draws on the scholarly exploration of soundscapes, which scrutinises the profound impact of sound on our experiences of place, our sense of identity, and the dynamics at play in urban

settings (Dillane & Langlois, 2015; Prior, 2017; Revill, 2000). At the heart of this field lies Schafer's (1993) influential definition of the soundscape as the all-encompassing sonic environment that envelops individuals. Schafer's work underscores the critical importance of attentive listening to the myriad sounds of our surroundings, viewing it as a key to unlocking the urban discourse.

This understanding of sound as a vital component of urban life extends beyond mere observation into the realm of action. Beyond its role in shaping urban experiences, sound emerges as a formidable instrument of defiance, particularly within city spaces. It can become a medium through which marginalised voices can challenge dominant narratives and assert their presence in the urban soundscape (Atkinson, 2007; Greenlee, 2015; Yoganathan, 2021). This sonic confrontation can sometimes escalate to aggressive or even violent expressions, underscoring the power inherent in sound as a form of urban discourse (Witte, 2008).

Despite its significance, sonic resistance remains largely unexplored in academic literature. Nonetheless, a few pioneering studies have already begun to illuminate this field. Summers (2020) investigates how Black communities in Washington, DC utilise sound aesthetics to resist displacement and maintain their cultural foothold in gentrifying neighbourhoods. Similarly, Tausig's (2018) work examines the role of sound in expressing dissent during the 2010 anti-government protests in Bangkok, Thailand. These studies reveal how sonic resistance in urban spaces can create auditory realms that challenge established power dynamics and dominant narratives. Yet, a significant gap persists in our understanding of nocturnal sonic resistance. Most existing research focuses on daytime sonic activities, overlooking the night's potential as a matrix for political engagement and community building. This oversight is particularly pronounced in non-Western contexts, where the political dimensions of nighttime urban soundscapes remain largely unexplored.

To address this gap in nocturnal urban research, this study investigates the phenomenon of NRSC in Iran. This exploration reveals how nighttime sonic practices serve two purposes: as a form of resistance and as a reimagining of nighttime aesthetics. By focusing on this after-dark activity, I hope to show sound's distinctive capacity to transform urban spaces and confront socio-political norms under the cover of darkness.

Aesthetics of the Night

Night has been often characterised by vulnerability, silence, and a sense of isolation (Edensor, 2015). The concept of silence requires careful consideration. Literal silence, as in the absence of audible sound, is rare in urban environments (Picker, 2003). In contrast, metaphorical

silence often denotes a lack of voice or agency in political and social spheres (Freedon, 2015). As Foucault (1990) argues, silence is not merely the absence of discourse but can be an integral part of power relations. Authoritarian regimes may enforce both literal silence (through curfews or restrictions on public gatherings) and metaphorical silence (through censorship and suppression of dissent), and very often the latter through the former. Sound can challenge both forms of silence simultaneously by breaking the quiet while also giving voice to suppressed political opinions. This potential is even more pronounced at night when the absence of everyday sound amplifies the impact.

The historical and cultural significance of night in urban contexts has been a subject of growing scholarly interest. Ekirch (2005) traces how the perception of night in Western societies shifted from a time of danger and spiritual significance to a period of leisure and productivity. Beaumont (2015) argues that the nocturnal city became a space of both liberation and control, where new forms of social interaction and cultural expression could emerge.

Nighttime alters perceptions of space, safety, and social norms in complex ways. Williams (2008a) observes that urban nights are often characterised by a sense of liminality, where usual social boundaries become more fluid. This fluidity can lead to both increased feelings of freedom and heightened perceptions of risk. Shaw (2018) notes that the altered sensory environment of night – e.g. reduced visibility, changed soundscapes – can profoundly affect how urban spaces are navigated and understood. These changes in perception create opportunities for alternative uses of urban space, including forms of resistance, providing a *refuge* for marginalised groups or activities.

Chatterton and Hollands (2003) discuss how nighttime economies can provide spaces of expression and community for subcultures and minority groups. They argue that nocturnal rhythms differ significantly from daytime urban patterns, resulting in distinct social and political dynamics. This divergence allows for alternative forms of social interaction and political engagement that are often suppressed or silenced during the day. It turns the city's nightscape into 'insurgent public space' (Hou, 2010) – unofficial sites where citizenship and political expression flourish beyond state-sanctioned areas. Shaw (2017) builds on this by examining the protective qualities of nighttime for political activities under authoritarian regimes. Using the Nuit Debout protests in Paris as a case study, Shaw demonstrates how the cover of night can shield participants from immediate repression, enabling more open and creative forms of political expression. The relative invisibility and reduced surveillance at night provide a temporal refuge that can in some measure protect expressions of dissent. This temporal shift facilitates forms of political organisation and resistance that are fraught with danger during the day.

The shift to nighttime for protests, such as the *Nuit Debout* in Paris, represents a strategic response to restricted daytime freedom (Shaw, 2017). The cover of darkness works against typical mechanisms of social control and surveillance (Shaw, 2015; 2018), creating a *backstage* to the city where alternative political expressions can emerge. In this backstage, the interplay of darkness and light, the stark contrasts, and the often-muted palette of nighttime visuals create a unique sensory environment. This environment can heighten awareness and intensify the emotional impact of collective actions. The shadows cast by moonlight and/or artificial lighting can symbolise the hidden yet persistent nature of dissent. The relative quiet of the night allows the sounds of dissent to carry farther and resonate more deeply.

The cultural significance of nighttime rituals and activities adds another layer to the aesthetics of the night in this context. Historically, many cultures, including the Iranian culture, have viewed the night as a time for storytelling, communal gatherings, and spiritual rituals (Bayat, 2021; Bronfen, 2008). NRSC leverages cultural traditions and the unique characteristics of nighttime—such as altered rhythms and the sensory experience of darkness—to create a powerful aesthetic phenomenon. The auditory experience of collective chanting, the visual interplay of shadows and light, and the emotional resonance of solidarity transform NRSC into more than just a form of urban resistance. To fully appreciate its power and significance, it is essential to explore NRSC's intrinsic sonic nature and its relationship to the nightscape, highlighting how it engages the senses, evokes emotional responses, and fosters a shared cultural identity.

Methodology

Due to the all but impossibility of conducting direct fieldwork in Iran (Rezai-Rashti 2013), we have to rely on secondary sources such as media reports, social media content, and video footage to examine the phenomenon of NRSC in Iran. Combining theoretical analysis with empirical observations from secondary sources, I examined 158 videos of NRSC events from 2021 to 2023, including their often-expressive captions. These videos provide insights into the frequency, geographic spread, and content of NRSC events, as well as public reactions and regime responses. It is important to note that while acknowledging the limitations imposed by the sensitive political context, I maintained a critical approach to the evaluation of the authenticity of the videos.

The NRSC videos were systematically collected using search terms such as night protest – اعتراض شبانه (E'terāz-e Shabāneh)—, rooftop protests – اعتراض انتپش بام (E'terāzāt-e Posht-e Bām)—, night rooftops – پش بام شبانه (Posht-e Bām Shabāneh)—, and rooftop slogans – شعار راه پش بام (Sho'ār-hā-ye Posht-e Bām)— in Persian language, across various social media platforms, primarily X (formerly known as Twitter) and YouTube. Additionally, content from contemporary Persian-language news

agencies based outside Iran, such as BBC Persian, Iran International, and Manoto TV, was examined. This search strategy ensured a diverse and representative sample of NRSCs across different time periods and locations.

To protect the privacy and security of individuals involved in NRSC events no personal identifiers were recorded. Consent for the use of publicly available social media content was implied, but care was taken to respect the dignity and agency of all participants. Additionally, the potential risks to individuals were mitigated by focusing on aggregated data rather than specific incidents or individuals. The collected videos and their captions were then analysed for content and observable patterns of participation, providing crucial information on this unique spatio-temporal phenomenon that intersects sonic resistance and nocturnal urban experiences.

NRSC: A Nighttime Protest

NRSC has a long history in Iran (Kheshti, 2015), and happens year-round, even when rooftops are covered in snow (*for an example video see VOA News, 2022*). NRSC events exhibit distinct temporal patterns, with peaks in activity coinciding with significant political events or anniversaries. Notably, there was a marked increase in frequency and intensity during October 2022 during the immediate aftermath of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising. While initially concentrated in major urban centres like Tehran, NRSC spread to smaller cities and even rural areas over time, suggesting a diffusion of this protest method across diverse geographical contexts.

At nighttime, typically around 9 pm when the streets have quieted, people gather on rooftops across cities and villages to participate in NRSC. The participants position themselves on rooftops, balconies, or even leaning out of windows and begin chanting anti-regime slogans under the cloak of darkness. In addition to sound, few videos captured the strategic use of lights (e.g., flashlights, laser, video projection) to create visual solidarity and enhance the protest's visibility. The chants usually start with a few voices and quickly spread across neighbourhood as more people join in.

The content of the chants varies, but often includes slogans that directly challenge the legitimacy of the Islamic regime. The content of chants evolved over time, incorporating current events, and responding to regime actions. New slogans emerge rapidly, often spreading across different locations within days. The chants reflect a range of emotions, from frustration with economic hardship and social restrictions to demands for fundamental political change. The chants are typically short and impactful, designed to convey clear messages of dissent. Common slogans

include “Down with dictator,” “Down with Islamic Republic,” “Woman, Life, Freedom,” “Islamic Republic, we don’t want, we don’t want,” and calls for release of political prisoners.

Participants employ sophisticated acoustic strategies, such as using echoes between buildings to amplify sounds and coordinating chants across neighbourhoods to create overlapping soundscapes. The acoustic dispersion amplifies the protest’s presence and provides a layer of protection for the participants by masking their exact locations. The chants bounce off buildings, creating a surround-sound effect that makes it challenging for state forces to pinpoint the exact source of the chants (*for example, see the video published by BBC Persian, 2023*). Even when state forces find where the chants are coming from, they usually struggle to get a clear view—due to the darkness—or to access rooftops easily to detain participants. The layout of city rooftops and the duration of these protests, typically lasting about 30 minutes to an hour, often makes it hard for authorities to stop this form of protest. Instead, they resort to intimidation tactics to try to scare people away by yelling insults, breaking windows, and vandalising nearby properties. NRSC lasts long enough to make an impact but is too brief for the authorities to organise an effective response.

While comprehensive demographic data on NRSC participants is difficult to obtain due to the nature of the activity, media reports and social media content provide some insight into the composition and motivations of those involved. Both women and men participate in NRSC, spanning a wide range of ages and social backgrounds, though young adults and students seem to be particularly active (Figure 1). This aligns with broader trends in Iranian protest movements, where youth have often been at the forefront of political dissent (Alinejad, 2020; Golkar, 2018).



Figure 4 The silhouettes of young girls on a rooftop in Iran during the 2009 Green Movement, convey an unexpected strength as they unite in chorus each night. Source Oyarzun (2012)

The motivations for participating in NRSC are diverse but often intersecting. For many, it serves as a way to express political dissent when other avenues are closed off. It also functions as a form of emotional release and a means of fostering solidarity with like-minded individuals. Some participants reported feeling a sense of empowerment and collective identity through the act of chanting, even when they can only hear, but not see their fellow protesters. “chanting slogans from rooftops helps to strengthen the morale, show that we are not alone in the street,” an anonymous user (ForEveryBd, 2022) posted on X (formerly Twitter) amid the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom uprisings. These motivations are closely tied to the structural elements that make NRSC effective: anonymity, decentralisation, collective identity, and symbolism.

Key Elements of NRSC

Of the four key elements that underpin NRSC’s potency, anonymity plays a crucial role in fostering and sustaining this form of resistance. Unlike traditional street rallies where participants can be easily identified and targeted by state authorities, rooftop chanting at night offers a significant degree of anonymity for protesters. Darkness makes it considerably more challenging for the state to single out individuals due to visual obstructions. Furthermore, by maximising the acoustic impact of the chants in the quieter nighttime environment, the risk of immediate identification is reduced. The cover of night provides participants with a protective veil, allowing

them to express dissent with reduced fear of individual repercussions and immediate retaliation. The importance of anonymity in modern resistance movements is not unique to NRSC. For instance, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong used anonymous communication platforms to circumvent state surveillance (Tang & Lee, 2017). This anonymity not only allows the practice to persist in the face of rigorous state repression, but also intersects with the psychological aspects of resistance movements, giving participants the courage to express their dissent and thereby fuelling the momentum of resistance.

While the cover of night offers some protection, the use of private rooftops does present risks. Authorities have attempted to identify participants by using surveillance technology and informant networks (Michaelsen, 2018). In response, protesters have developed strategies to maintain anonymity, such as coordinating chanting times through encrypted messaging apps and using voice distortion techniques. It is important to note that absolute anonymity is not always the goal or the reality for all participants. Some view the risk of identification as part of their act of resistance, a deliberate choice to make their dissent known despite potential consequences (Khosravi, 2017).

Beyond anonymity, the dispersed nature of NRSC, spread across various locations in urban and rural nightscapes, significantly enhances its resilience and effectiveness. Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) argue that decentralised protests are more difficult for state authorities to control, contain or predict as there is no central leadership to target (Chatterton, 2006; Graeber, 2009). This structural characteristic allows NRSC to adapt and respond to changing circumstances and tactics, mirroring the adaptability seen in movements like Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring (Castells, 2015). Similarly, the Gezi Park protests in Turkey showcased decentralised organisation and coordination through social media and digital communication tools (Gerbaudo, 2017; Poell & Uitermark, 2016). The distinctly dispersed nature of NRSC bolsters its ability to endure over time.

While decentralisation provides NRSC with structural resilience, the formation of a collective identity serves as its backbone. This collective identity is fostered through shared slogans and the sense of unity, even when participants cannot see each other. Melucci (1995) argues that collective identity in social movements is a crucial process of constructing an action system, where individuals define the field of opportunities and constraints for their action. In the context of NRSC, as participants collectively express their discontent, individuals become part of a wider community of resistance, creating an imagined community of challengers (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). This shared identity and experience creates a platform for 'connective action' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012),

where individuals and groups mobilise and engage in collective action, without the need for strong organisational control.

The repetition of rhythmic chants facilitates widespread engagement and synchronisation, nurturing solidarity among protestors (Turino, 2008). Through the use of common slogans and rhythmic patterns, NRSC creates what Oyarzun (2012) calls a 'commonscape' – a collective realm of dissent. This commonscape represents more than just a shared physical or auditory space; it embodies a communal cognitive and emotional landscape where individual experiences converge into a collective consciousness. Within this sonic commonscape, participants transcend their individual identities to become part of a larger, unified voice of resistance. The commonscape acts as a temporal and spatial commons, where the boundaries between self and other blur, fostering a sense of collective agency and shared purpose. The rhythmic nature of the chants serves to synchronise not just voices but also bodily rhythms and emotional states creating a collective effect, reinforcing solidarity and empowerment. This collectiveness generates a ripple effect that not only strengthens the resilience of the movement but also lays the groundwork for powerful symbolic actions.

As participants share in this collective realm of dissent, they collectively generate and imbue meaning into their actions, transforming simple acts into potent symbols of resistance. This process of collective meaning-making within the commonscape amplifies the impact of individual actions, turning them into shared symbols that resonate beyond the immediate context of the protest. Scholars argue that symbolic repertoires play a key role in social movements, especially when overt resistance is suppressed (Chatterton, 2006; Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010). In the case of NRSC, the act of citizens gathered on rooftops, voices rising in unison across the urban landscape, creates a symbolic representation of widespread dissatisfaction with the regime. This simple yet potent expression of defiance and demand for rights transforms the urban soundscape into a platform for dissent and solidarity (Harvey, 2008; 2012; Lefebvre, 1996). The symbolic power of NRSC lies not just in the content of the chants, but in the very act of collective vocalisation, which becomes a metaphor for the voice of the people rising above the constraints imposed by the authoritarian state.

The incorporation of discourse and symbolism extend beyond challenging immediate political structures. It is intrinsically tied to the wider fight for rights and reclamation of urban spaces in authoritarian contexts (Graeber, 2009; Holston, 2008). Various forms of street art, and public performances have been used historically as a medium not only to destabilise state authority, but also to create alternative public narratives (Fadaee & Schindler, 2016; Olesen, 2013). These symbolic

acts are part of the broader assertion of citizens' right to the city –a right encompassing active participation in shaping the social, economic, and political life of urban spaces. This struggle reflects the ongoing contestation between citizens and the state over control, interpretation, and occupation of urban environments (Borén et al., 2023).

Sonic Occupation

The concept of NRSC challenges traditional conceptualisations of urban resistance by adding a sonic dimension to occupation-based practices across the globe. Traditionally, occupation involves various methods of extending bodies, objects, and practices into space to create new landscapes of daily common experiences (Vasudevan, 2015). This approach typically leverages control of tangible spaces to disrupt norms and assert collective power, as seen in sit-ins or worker picket lines (Tilly, 2004; Vasudevan, 2015). The notion of sonic occupation as in NRSC introduces an extra layer to this form of spatial contestation. It diverges from conventional methods by using sound, rather than bodily presence, as the primary medium to assert presence actively and intentionally. By extending sound into the public realm and occupying the intangible, NRSC creates a new lifeworld comprising everyday experiences, shared understandings, and communicative practices that form the backdrop of social existence (see Habermas, 1987 for more on lifeworld). The ephemeral nature of sound allows for a more fluid and dynamic and less risky form of occupation, one that permeates urban boundaries and can adapt and respond to the rhythms of the city in ways that static, corporeal occupations cannot, and thus expanding the repertoire of everyday resistance.

In this way, by filling the city's auditory space with collective chants of dissent, protestors audibly disturb the phoney quiet of the status quo. Their amplified interweaving voices carve out an alternative community embedded directly within the auditory spaces of everyday life. This auditory intervention goes beyond mere noisemaking, encompassing the creation of alternative soundscape. For instance, during Hong Kong's 2014 Umbrella Movement, protestors used loudspeakers to amplify their message across urban spaces (Chalana & Hou, 2016), while in Latin America, the *cacerolazos* (pot-banging protests) utilised domestic items to create a cacophony of dissent (Sutton, 2006). These examples, similar to NRSC, illustrate how sonic occupation as an innovative form of urban occupation, enables different social groups to constantly redefine and reoccupy urban spaces to assert their presence.

In this process, NRSC democratises urban space by permeating areas that are not visually accessible or typically used for public gatherings and political discourse, notably rooftops. It highlights the political dimension of sensory engagement with the city. Picker (2003) discusses how modern cities are often understood through visual terms, reinforcing a certain sensory hierarchy.

NRSC challenges this by foregrounding the auditory dimension of urban experience, aligning with Degen's (2008) call for a multisensory approach to the city. This contestation leads to the creation of new social and spatial dynamics and therefore new auditory spaces, even if they are only short-lived.

This approach contrasts sharply with conventional urban planning, which often prioritises visual aesthetics and spatial arrangements that reinforce existing power dynamics. Public squares and major thoroughfares, for example, are frequently designed to facilitate control and surveillance (Harvey, 2008). In contrast, sonic occupation subverts these design intentions by creating auditory spaces that are less easily controlled or monitored.

The result of this subversion is a striking contrast between visual obscurity and auditory clarity, which in turn creates a unique aesthetic experience, infusing the urban night with new meanings and possibilities. This transformative intervention in the lifeworld of the city, creates a counter-lifeworld characterised by solidarity, shared experiences, and a collective reimagining of the possibilities for change. By strategically using sound to assert agency, NRSC empowers marginalised voices to fosters collective emancipatory practices (LaBelle, 2018). Through the creation of this protesting lifeworld, participants challenge the hegemonic order and dominant forms of legality. They assert their right to shape their shared political reality, even in the absence of ideal conditions for communicative rationality (Habermas, 1984), and by doing so, they reclaim their collective power to transform the city.

NRSC and the Right to the City

NRSC serves as a powerful countermeasure to the control exerted by government policies, and social codes of conduct that aim to shape and often control people's actions and desires within nighttime spaces (Williams, 2008b). By fostering radical belonging and connecting communities through re-presented sounds, NRSC challenges established norms and reclaims urban spaces and identities (Devadoss, 2017; Johnson, 2013; Kheshti, 2024). Participants refuse to remain passive in their sonic environment, instead reclaiming their acoustic agency and leveraging soundscapes to build aural counterpublics that circulate counter-discourses (Rice, 2016; Saher & Cetin, 2016; Yoganathan, 2021). This practice not only disrupts the intended use of nighttime spaces but also actively resists the imposed order, reshaping the urban environment to reflect the needs and desires of the community.

Within this framework of resistance, NRSC exemplifies a contemporary struggle over the right to the city, directly engaging with Lefebvre's (1991) vision of urban life as a collective oeuvre, or work of art, shaped by its inhabitants. The nighttime, often perceived as a static space dominated by

capitalist urbanism—through nightlife economies, surveillance, and control—is reimagined through NRSC as a dynamic, participatory space. By transforming the nightscape into a site of political struggle, NRSC participants are not only reclaiming urban space but are also reasserting their agency as co-creators of the urban experience. This act of resistance pushes back against the reduction of urban life to a mere function of economic activity, highlighting the intrinsic value of urban spaces as sites of collective identity, memory, and resistance.

NRSC goes beyond simply resisting the commodification of urban nights; it transcends reactive forms of resistance—such as urgent mobilisations against state oppression—by actively reclaiming and redefining urban acoustics. By disrupting the binaries between the audible state, and the silent other (Bassel, 2017), protestors create a new dimension of spatial contestation that moves beyond physical structures and visual demarcations. This sonic intervention enables participants to exercise their right to the city through sensory means. By foregrounding auditory experiences, NRSC participants disrupt the dominant visual-centric understanding of urban space, introducing a multisensory approach to the right to the city.

Through this exercise, protestors not only reclaim physical and auditory space but also engage in a profound act of cultural production. The chants of resistance transcend their immediate context and become part of the city's cultural fabric. These sonic expressions contribute to a collective memory of dissent that endures long after the protests have subsided, becoming an integral part of the urban narrative. This cultural production is a critical component of the right to the city, as it affirms the presence and agency of marginalised communities in the face of oppressive power structures. A powerful example of this can be seen in Iran's 2022 rooftop chants of *Woman, Life, Freedom* which echoed through urban nightscapes, embedding a lasting symbol of defiance and hope into the collective memory of the cities and their inhabitants.

The cultural impact of NRSC reverberates through broader spatial reclamation efforts, notably by incorporating the city's vertical dimension into the struggle for urban space. Traditionally, Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city has focused on the reclamation of ground-level urban spaces—such as public squares, streets, and parks—as primary sites of resistance and participation. NRSC, however, expands this framework by transforming typically private and inaccessible spaces, like rooftops, into arenas for collective political expression. By blurring the boundaries between public and private spaces—a distinction long central to urban theory (Madanipour, 2003)—NRSC reinterprets Lefebvre's idea, extending it beyond the horizontal public domain into the vertical expanse of the city. This vertical appropriation resonates with Graham and Hewitt's (2013) call for a more three-dimensional understanding of urban politics and social interactions. By asserting a claim

to the urban volume—encompassing the city’s three-dimensional space, including rooftops and other vertical elements—protestors significantly broaden the scope of urban resistance. The integration of private and public realms across both horizontal and vertical dimensions through nighttime soundscapes not only reconfigures our understanding of spatial categories but also redefines the possibilities for political engagement and resistance within the multifaceted urban environment.

This innovative reimagining of urban resistance through NRSC is not confined to Iran but echoes across urban movements across the globe that seek to reclaim the city from capitalist, state, and surveillance-driven forces. By leveraging sound and the cover of night, NRSC presents a pioneering application of Lefebvre’s principles in a non-Western context, challenging the dominance of Western-centric models of urban resistance. The global implications are profound: NRSC provides a template for marginalised communities to assert their right to the city in other repressive contexts. As NRSC continues to inspire new forms of urban resistance globally, further research could explore its adaptability and impact across diverse contexts, underscoring the enduring power of sound to reclaim urban spaces, even in the darkest hours of oppression.

Conclusion

In conclusion, NRSC exemplifies the complex interplay between sensory experience, political resistance, and urban spatial dynamics. It transforms the night into an amplifier for collective demands for rights and recognition. This practice transcends conventional protest forms, embodying a form of sonic occupation that redefines the urban night as a domain of expression, belonging, and political engagement. The significance of NRSC extends far beyond its immediate Iranian context, providing valuable insights into the intersections of sound, space, and resistance in urban environments worldwide. By reconceptualising the city’s vertical dimension and nighttime hours as stages for dissent, NRSC participants not only challenge oppressive regimes but also forge a new urban identity rooted in solidarity and resistance. This sonic reimagining of the right to the city highlights the potential for marginalised voices to reshape the social, political, and sensory fabric of urban spaces, underscoring the enduring quest for a more just, inclusive, and vibrant urban life.

As we contemplate the future of urban nightscapes, it is crucial to recognise the multisensory nature of urban experience and the transformative potential of sound in shaping civic engagement. The echoes of dissent remind us that even in the darkest of times, the collective voice

of the city can illuminate pathways to social and political transformation. Through NRSC, I argued that we are prompted to revalue urban nights as spaces of immense potential and political engagement, where the power of sound can drive meaningful change and foster a deeper sense of community and resistance.

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