This work-in-progress research project explores how tourism development affects local community resilience to natural hazards in tourist destinations presenting different manifestations of local empowerment, state regulation and local self-organisation. Being highly significant to the Australian economy—representing 11% of GDP (WTTC, 2016), tourism requires comprehensive understanding to ensure it is properly addressed in planning processes that target disaster risk reduction and local resilience for community benefit. Seeking to support disaster risk reduction, the Australian Government acknowledges it cannot be fully eliminated (Australia, 2003, p. 1). Endorsing the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience in 2012, the Council of Australian Governments states that “communities need to be empowered to take shared responsibility for coping with disasters” (Australia, 2011, p. 1).

For this research project, a multiple case study design informed the selection of 2 core sites where alternative self-government arrangements have been executed and formally recognised for about 40 years—Christiania (Copenhagen, Denmark) and Norfolk Island (Australia), and two reference sites where state regulation and control is exercised in different local governance models—Port Fairy (standard unit of a Victorian Local Council) and Lord Howe Island (state-appointed administrator responding to a state-local board). The four sites are tourist destinations under different natural hazard threats, bearing distinctiveness in term of clear boundaries; being subject to different degrees of state regulation; and portraying different manifestation of self-organisation connected to specific levels of local empowerment, local social cohesion, local identity and local attachment to place. Findings deriving from this project are expected to advance understanding of the connections between urban and regional development, illustrating pathways for building local community resilience to natural hazards, informing Australian and Victorian policy-making for disaster risk reduction.

How can tourism development affect social-ecological resilience to natural hazards in tourist destinations presenting different manifestations of local self-organisation and subject to different degrees of state regulation?

Norfolk Island is an isolated small oceanic island with a history of different degrees of self-governance and recent government reforms transforming the island to greater Commonwealth government control, despite being a young island community established in the 1800s, Norfolk Island’s geographical isolation and community identity have continuously sparked claims for indigenous acknowledgement and right to self-determination. This tourist destination, that at one point operated its own airline, is an insightful site to illustrate questions of local empowerment and social cohesion to resilience building. Tsunamis, Cyclones, Storms and Droughts are key natural hazards likely to impact the Island more severely.

Having experienced a more stable level of self-organisation over the decades, allied to growth containing strategies, Lord Howe Island is an interesting counterpart to all other three cases. It presents a unique model of shared governance that can be used to reflect on the cases of Norfolk Island and Christiania. The way it has managed to control tourist numbers and impacts is also likely to provide relevant reference for the analysis of Port Fairy and Christiania. Similar to Norfolk Island, Tsunamis, Cyclones, Storms and Droughts are key natural hazards that can impact Lord Howe Island more severely with the added threat of coral bleaching from climate change likely to affect its diving-oriented local tourism industry.

Port Fairy is a peripheral small town on the Great Ocean Road that is rich in heritage, festivals and local identity, being voted as “the world’s most liveable community of towns with a population of under 20,000” in 2012 (Williams, 2015). Subject to natural hazards deriving from sea-level rising, land erosion and storms, Port Fairy will need to address growth and development deriving from tourism development sparked by its recent title and increased media exposure. It presents a good counterpart to the other 3 cases, being an example of greater state regulation through applicable standard Victorian governance and urban planning provisions, legislation and regulations. The town’s strategies to protect its level of liveability despite increased tourism development and risks of hazard threats can be useful for future reflection on the case of the City of Melbourne and its pursuit of greater resilience.

Resilience building can be influenced by a combination of state regulation and self-organisation, or top-down and bottom-up approaches. While regulation can aim for quicker governmental responses and standardised risk treatment, self-organisation can cater for localised treatments, to the unexpected and to moments of temporary system failure or State absence, common characteristics of catastrophic events.