

## “Walk the Talk” with David Holmgren Retrosuburbia - The Downshifter's Guide To A Resilient Future

### Chapter 1 - Retrosuburbia – An Introduction

**David Holmgren:** Thank you for the very special acknowledgement of country. I think it's amazing how much we forget how the past and especially the deep past is always present and even the recent past. My story that I presented last night of Aussie street is of course reawakening lived experiences of Australian suburbia in the very recent past in recent decades and yet that world is faded so much that it becomes amazingly radical and different in considering it, let alone when we think about the history of land use change in an area like this with the logging history, the intense horticulture and then the residential development. Huge changes in how this place has been over short times but everything that always has been is still present. So let's find the presentation, which is one that I haven't done before. Most of the presentations I've been doing are the Aussie Street presentation, which I did last night at Lilydale.

This one is really more crafted to introducing the ideas in the book, especially to audiences that have some familiarity with permaculture and let's have a show of hands how many people here have done a permaculture design course for example. Yeah, so a significant proportion. By the way, how many people were at my Aussie street presentation in Lilydale last night?

So and so yeah, this street is in some ways very much tailored to connect to average Australians. It doesn't sort of really require prior knowledge of what permaculture is. This one's a little bit more crafted towards thinking about some of the ideas in the book with a little bit of a bias to the biological field, which a lot of people coming with an interest in permaculture. Of course gardeners and garden farming is a central strategically important part of permaculture. But of course permaculture is a design system for sustainable living and land use so it's a really covers a broad territory that within this book Retrosuburbia is brought down to three fields: the built, the biological and the behavioural in some ways.

Those three fields are a summary of the seven domains of the permaculture flower that sort of look at the spectrum of where we might apply permaculture design. I want to talk about Retrosuburbia in context of a lineage and thinking about how permaculture starting in the 70s how it actually was applied in Australia and we can think of it as being a lot to do with Greenfield site design, the blank site that is designed from scratch, often in a rural context associated with back to the land or if you like in a more recent decades time, tree change lifestyle change and move to another place., very much focused at the individual and household level. When I say focus that's really where the action of permaculture was whether whatever the ideas were a lot of the early ideas were actually really focused on the potential of suburbia as well as the broad acre landscapes, but ironically permaculture didn't really affect either of those much because of the social and economic conditions.

And I think that lineage then led to many different spin offs. And one of those was the Transition Town's movement in Britain. This is Rob Hopkins with his Superman t-shirt on at Kinsale actually where the precursor to the Transition Towns' movement got going when we were there in 2005. co-teaching with him. He cost was a permaculture teacher and if we think of Transition Towns, not just in the British context, but the way it sort of came back into Australia. It has been much more focused at the community scale. I would see groups like our own Hepburn Relocalization network that my partner Su has been running in our area for more than a decade with other community members that sort of community level people focused more similarly with Epic, often looking at public land, public processes and emphasizing if you like the people side of permaculture. How part of that came about in response to the recognition of the limits of doing it by yourself or the limits of the household and also in relation to looming threats of climate change, peak oil and economic contraction. So retrosuburbia in that sense is sort of like builds on both of those lineages, but brings it back to the household, but the household where most people actually live which is suburbia.

So it's building on the lessons of new build, novel land uses things like food forests that didn't exist in previous generations. The lessons from Intentional Communities, Transition Towns, all of those learnings to empower households to achieve their potential to live well now on less while building resilience to challenging features and providing the foundations for relocalized economies and self-governing communities. So it's a big vision but it's bringing it back to that very basic stuff with the households in the same way that Transition Towns and related community based things recognized the limits of doing things by yourself and in social isolation and sometimes physical isolation in remote areas. We've also recognized that when we work at the community level there are a lot of things where to get agreement and consensus we have to come back to what the common understanding is and that weeds out the radicalism the creative, free spirit design and also in a country like Australia, the straitjacket of regulation and risk management, which is a toxin in this country, which is radically undermining our future resilience and sustainability. So if the household level to an extent, we are free to break out of that do whatever we want within some limits within the limits of legal license and social.

So all of these levels and ways of course are relevant and necessary and different people in different pathways in their life will be on that Journey. So that's and this I haven't presented that idea of retrosuburbia being, if you like permaculture 3.0 as Transition Towns was permaculture 2.0.

Permaculture originally conceived 1.0 in that sense of software versions language that is common these days so why suburbia? It's where most people live and or have grown up. If we count not just the suburbs of our capital cities, but also our big regional towns like Ballarat and Geelong and then our smaller country towns and our little sort of peri-urban villages that actually if you count all of that is suburbia where people live on detached houses on small blocks of land with some town services but some capacity to autonomously do things themselves without having to worry about the body corporate or this or so many other parties that have to be consulted that suburban spectrum is huge. It's the vast majority of Australians the media often talks about, you know, the city and the country as though everyone in the country is a farmer. Almost no one in Australia is a

farmer in that sense. Most people live outside the capital cities live in our big regional towns or our smaller towns and villages like Hepburn Springs where I live which although we are on two and a quarter acres we're in a suburban street, essentially.

So suburbia is so predominant in Australian suburbs. We have the space. We have the sunlight. We have the infrastructure of water supply. We have the access to be able to, to an amazing degree be relatively self-reliant the self-reliance we associate with rural living. On the other hand we have the critical mass of people and economic interaction that we associate with urban areas.

The other aspect about suburbia and I mentioned this last night in response to discussion is that there's the possibility to replicate solutions that what worked in their house, that's the same sort of house construction as this one. It's got the same orientation or we're on the same soil type as that place just down the street.

A lot of people are surprised that you can actually go to the next street and maybe not be on the same soil type.