

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

Chapter 2 - Why Suburbia?

David Holmgren: In suburbia, we find there is this pattern of similar situations. So it's possible that a solution that worked here can be copied. Now you could say “Well so what, we can do that all the time with everything, you know, software works like that. Use the same software the design of airports more or less the way they function everywhere in the world is the same. That's the way it's worked in the industrial world.”

We're used to being able to copy. But what the future we're going into is a world where things will have to be site and situation-specific. The available resources are very particular to place. This is what we're finding with renewable energy is there's no one big solution that fits all. So this is a fundamental challenge in sustainability to our civilization, which is used to that there's one big solution to every problem.

That works for each problem. It's not the way of the future but at least in suburbia, there's a better possibility that yeah what this work there, we can copy that and that's very important because a lot of people will be dealing with these challenging futures without any forethought planning. No planning by government.

In fact, they just keep making the problems worse. So, people will be responding as they can and they won't have the patience or the time to fiddle around and experiment with stuff. They need to know what works if they want to grow food. They want to know what actually will produce significant amounts of food that I can eat out of my garden with the least effort.

I don't want to experiment with oh, maybe this variety. Okay, what's the guy down the street? He looks like he knows what he's doing. Yeah. What about I copy that and it's the same with other things that people are doing. Well. Is that the moment we just semi extent have the privilege of a lot of us being able to experiment and apply which is fantastic and important because that's how learning happens there's another aspect that sort of came up in looking at the limitations.

To garden farming, and by garden farming I mean the production of food as part of the household economy where people live. I distinguish that from urban agriculture, which is usually commercial or it may be community based but it's at some sort of scale. It's not directly associated with a house.

It's often on land that is public land and it's a very important part of the equation but I see garden farming. Garden agriculture is a lot of what people think of when they think permaculture. So if we look at garden farming what scale are we talking about? Well, there's a whole range of scales there are container courtyard suburban commercial

horticulture.

And then, there's the farming scale ones the broad acre cropping grazing and then rangeland and forestry and there's a logarithmic each of those blocks is a tenfold increase in the area you're talking about. Container gardening might be one square meter but the important thing is soil potting mixes and totally controlled environment at the other end of the scale.

You just work with whatever the soil is. You can't significantly change it on a rangeland system. The system is too big and too powerful for you to do more than the tiniest little bits of management and rainfall is really the limiting factor. Soil not so much, sunshine not so much in this suburban scale and the tiny end of that.

We might say as a hundred square meters going up to a thousand square meters or a few thousand square meters in this zone the soil, the rain and the sunshine are about equally limiting and equally important. So if we're in a courtyard in a terrace house, the key thing is light, you know, I can put it I can get enough water.

I've got so little growing space you can get the water from the town water or tanks or anything more water than your knee. You can amend the soil and modify it but you can't make sunlight. Well, of course you can with these artificial things, but that's just a way to drive climate change and everything worse, sunlight is the limiting factor which is why in Europe people, urbanites producing food, mostly didn't try and do it around multi-story buildings in cool cloudy climates. They amalgamated together in lot moments in a field within walking or bicycling distance from their apartments and that made a lot of sense, but in the suburban context, the sunlight is less limiting.

I'm sure part of a lot of people recognize many sites in the Dandenongs it's actually very much a limiting factor because the vegetation,, the scale of evergreen vegetation, primarily mountain ash trees and the like and the steep topography make all of that very important which we can come back to.

Okay, so that's there's just that balance there that I think makes suburbia sweet for highly productive garden farming. So we think that really it's possible even though it would require very different society and economy for suburbia p2b. Net export or in fresh fruit and vegetables and small livestock products.

Eggs, rabbits and pigeons and things like that net export. Which is obviously a massive change from what the current situation is. Our inner urban areas are always going to be dependent on food coming from the outside, but there's huge synergies between suburbia and the rural hinterlands and suburbia and our urban core.

So, of course, none of this sort of thinking has ever gone into what we call mainstream sustainability. It's only just coming about because of the grassroots interest but permaculture in the beginning was based on the idea that we all have to downscale big high-density cities and rural life. So Retrosurbia is very much building on that lineage that it's crazy to build cities ever bigger and denser because to retrofit those for a low

energy future is very difficult.

It's not impossible, but it's very, very difficult.