

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

Chapter 3 - Why Retrofitting?

David Holmgren: Why retrofitting? Basically most of the buildings that face difficult futures have already been built. The vast majority of people will be living in buildings that have been built in this particular world economy and society we have at the moment and yet will be facing the challenges of climate change resource depletion and more immediately basically permanent economic contraction as this global bubble economy, which exceeds anything that has ever existed in their 500-year history of capitalism. We are hitting globally for massive downfall independent of the resource and environmental and climate issues. But of course all of these things are linked together.

So we will be dealing with that future with what we've got even in a rapidly growing economy with cheap credit and energy. It takes decades if not centuries for the building stock to actually turn over and be replaced. If you don't have that sort of economy, then you're basically the only way it turns over is by destruction burning or whatever. It doesn't sort of just rebuild itself automatically. So we will be retrofitting and retrofitting can work through a live learning cycle that's less dependent on regulatory approval or bank finance where you can just live with something and say, you know, what if we do this and try something and spend a little bit of money here see how it works, what type of thing. It doesn't require that. You know everything up front and you get all the resources, get the loan from the bank get the approval and boom it's done. So it's much more amenable to this sort of organic pattern of behaviour and a pattern language of design solutions to recurring dilemmas or tensions helps harmonious and functional habitats.

So if we can see, there's our year, there's that type of attached solar greenhouse that work there you have that, generally works to create an indoor outdoor space between the garden and the house and heats the house and you can grow some things and it's a sort of a sunroom that becomes like a patio, maybe it suits one of those, maybe it doesn't. You start to have this repertoire of design solutions. And I think the bursting of the property bubble could see an explosion of retrofitting and adaptive behaviours for more home-based living in larger shared households because we know that in every downturn in history the way people adapt and cope economically is they share because it's more economical.

It's also more secure. It actually meets so many objectives and the stats are showing that's already happening by hook or by crook, not necessarily through the best processes. In the United States and in Europe, average household size not house-sized number of people living under the one roof, is actually going up, most of it of course is extended family reunions, old people moving back in with younger adults and all of those sorts of things and that will require adaption again of what actually already exists.

The first part of the book setting the scene, introduces the concept of resilience and energy,

climate change, financial bubble burst without going into great detail about those things because my purpose in this book is not to argue why an energy descent future is the non-negotiable reality.

We're facing rather than the techno optimistic glitzy propaganda that we constantly see repeated. Yes. There are novel technologies and there's all sorts of fantastic new opportunities that are emerging and in fact, I rub my hands with glee from a permaculture point of view about that energy descent future because a lot of the things I want to do will actually be easier to do in those conditions. But I think people can make their own judgments about that and there's a lot of information out there, but. There's also in those early chapters this framework that I want to basically explain to you is a decision-making frame work for retrosuburban down shifters, and it's generated by two tensions between the imperative to consolidate where one is the territory one knows whether that's in the you know, the house you lived in, own or whatever or your community the sort of territory, you know versus the opportunity or necessity to migrate somewhere else, whether it's to get out of debt and down scale and move to a regional town because the houses are cheaper or whether young adventurous sense that going off to do something different and try something new that is a tension that needs to be balanced. And then there's also the tension between the desire to control and develop a personal household or communal space that meets your vision and perceived needs. And the imperative to downshift and design property assets to be light, adapt to what emerges.

So one is a an ability to say we will put in place what we need and the other is to say no we will adapt and so that then creates four spaces or solution spaces. We call the one in the top left quadrant family castle and it is sort of a nod to the film, that name and it's a lot of what we think of in retro suburban adaption.

It might be an extended family household. It might be people who are taking in woofing hosts. It might be someone who considers themselves household landlord and has other tenants in or even neighbourhood land or do you know the person who buys the house next door and has a few houses and creates their own community, but they are the benign dictator. And so all sorts of variations fit into that adapt in situ really, includes things like taking in a boarder who might become a carer, shared rental concepts of retiring early. Yeah, adapt in situ to age with grace. Obviously it sort of relates to a lot of us getting into older years and then on the other side, the migration, the mobile minimalism is one that relates often very much too young people out to go and learn and do things and stay loose and flexible and be able to go to where the opportunities are and in change challenging environments move away from where badge it's happening.

So that's a huge freedom, but it's also, you know an opening out there. What's the opportunities and then the other one the communal living implies a more planned approach whether it's actually fully intentional community, more shared ownership, planning for we're going to do something bigger, better might take a while to get there and it often involves we're going to go somewhere too. We're going to go to somewhere. That's maybe new to all of us who are coming together and there's obviously crossovers but between these and there's huge synergies between the people in these different spaces. For example, the mobile minimalists are the woofers and volunteers who might be joining people in the

top two quadrants and those communal living and the those in the family castle that have some capacity might be keeping the eye out for the older person by themselves who needs care in the community. So we can think of this as an ecosystem too of people on different pathways. And so that's a very important part of the big picture framing of which is then enlarged in the behavioural section.

The other part of the introduction to the book is of course my Aussie Street story that we did last night at Lilydale which is sort of a permaculture soap opera in four acts and it's a story I've been telling for more than a decade and it's now written down as the chapter in the book.

And it's really yet to connect two punters in the suburbs that this is a world we know and we can adapt. It's also the basis of my critique of the cult of urban densification that provides academia think tanks, government, big business and even the environment movement that you know, we're going to fill in the suburbs and don't get me started on that track because I chose not to write the book about those issues, the polemic that argues all of that case.

But to instead write the manual for people doing this stuff, but where they're in a fight to stop the infilling of suburbia. It's absolute madness and the idea that this has ecological social foundations to it. I'm ready for that debate with anyone and I would love to be debating with, what's his name head of the Grattan Institute who came out and said we need to fill in the empty middle, talking about the leafy suburbs of Melbourne. The idea that we either have to become Los Angeles by going out with sprawl or New York by going up in the center or the sweet selling point we can become London, you know five-story apartments through the suburbs. We don't actually need to do any of those. We could do retrosuburbia and encourage people to take in boarders. What will be defunct gymnasium and dog shampoo service businesses that you know, there's more places that people can live because most of our commercial economy is completely discretionary and once the credit bubble bursts, those businesses won't be there. We'll be back to a sort of what I call BS spuds and petrol economy if you like to put it sort of crudely. And yet, you know, we look around all the businesses, you know drive through the eastern suburbs, the vast majority of it is it's not necessary. And as difficult as course of how you we depart the essential stuff that we do need because it's all interlocked and you know with the stuff we don't really need but either way there's going to be a lot of empty shops and places that could all be new housing. So I'm saying we don't actually need to build any more buildings in Melbourne. Even if we have a rising population and it's hard to get traction for the mainstream media to even start to consider that because the dialogue just keeps going around in this same Loop.

So Aussie Street was part of poking fun at that and I did that with really through this meta-analysis of Aussie Street. So it's a statistical analysis of my imaginary street, which is like a joke obviously, but it shows how the number of residents goes down. And then the permaculture retrosuburbia retrofit rebuilds those numbers and how the floor area per person goes up and then comes down and the big one is the greenhouse gas emissions that you know in the 50s go from 30% of 2010 averages up peaking before the permaculture retrofit starts to bring it down and in full-blown retrosuburbia in the second great

depression it's down to 20 percent of current greenhouse gas emissions just because of just the by-product of people being more home-based and more self-reliant. It's really a simple challenge to academics to review the evidence, which I believe will expose the density meme as a cargo cult. Which is basically that cargo cult is build more buildings and that will achieve population density.

Necessary for urban amenity and efficiency that is a photo over the top a little bit blocked out by that by the sign here. But that's one of the case study properties the property next door has an old lady living by herself. The place next door has three houses filled in the backyard with concrete over here.

We have the 90s apartment block, terrace houses and then the 2008 story apartment block plus a whole lot of commercial development and yet the Grattan Institute says that landscape the population has not increased in density one iota in 30 years. Well guys, that means that strategy was a failure.

Stop building more of the stuff around the idea that oh, there's more people. The way you get more people is put up more buildings smaller numbers of people living together spending less hours at home and more out in the monetary economy and they're out in the monetary economy because that's how the GDP grows faster which increases the tax base for governments, but most importantly profits for corporations.

At least fifty percent of the growth in my lifetime of GDP. I'm arguing, is fake economic growth. It doesn't actually exist when you go and buy your lunch. There's not an increase in productive economic goods and services compared with you making your lunch at home. It's just that it's moved from being part of a household non-monetary economy into the monetary economy.

When it's in the household economy, government doesn't get a slice of the action and neither do corporations other than you know, what is actually same boat to contribute to that. But of course if that is food that you've grown in the backyard or exchanged with neighbours again. So actually I'm really pro-growth.

I'm pro growth of the household and community non-monetary economies because we know they are more environmentally efficient, give society greater resilience and deals with a whole lot of the stresses, loneliness and adverse things that have come from supercharging the monetary economy and all this bullshit about increase the participation rate get more people working.

No one less people working. We want the people who can afford to say, I'm going to downsize and work part-time that creates a job for someone else who needs that job and people who can say no we're going to actually do more things at home lovely. Money, that's the socially responsible way that you share the wealth in society not driving everyone out to work more. So the household and community non-monetary economies, which are the basis of society just completely evaporate. I should get off my soapbox.

So yeah, this is actually not Melbourne. This is same or country towns. Also big

backyards. This is the pattern of you know, fill it in and build over it. Yeah these arguments about efficiency, public transport and sewerage over food growing potential effectively retosuburbia is. To help people doing things but behind that we're starting now and just see those arguments come into the public space and there are academics like Samuel Alexander and Brendan Gleeson at Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute who have a new book coming out called 'The Growth In The Suburbs', which they invited me to actually write the forward to it and that's sort of providing a bit more of if you like the academic argument base behind that these things are actually a good and necessary change.

So moving on to the built field is obviously concerned with all aspects of retrofitting buildings Water systems, energy effluent. All of those, the biological is really how we scale up to produce food and directly have a practical working relationship with nature, where we live and the big one is the behavioural field which covers everything from raising self-reliant and resilient children to aging death and disability and all the big difficult controversial issues.

So just thinking about the built field as creative retrofit and reuse of building. Catching and storing resources. I love this photo. It's actually at one of the case studies that's on the website. No, it's not actually the one that's on the website, but it's by Rosemary Morrow. It's her house in the Blue Mountains and she's a great one for backyard wetlands, but the shed in the back is a sort of a garage backing onto a line which she has retrofitted as a little passive solar bedroom. And of course you can see the water tank. What's the hills hoist doing in the pond? Well, let's the child safety kitties, you know who might fall in the pond. I've had so quite novel use for a hills hoist. So, I think there's so many ways in which we can creatively adapt. But the one that's my favourite and this is one of Brenda Quinlan's first drawings that she did for the book and that's actually her in the greenhouse and it's a greenhouse like we have on our purpose-built passive solar house, but this is how you actually do that on the back of a brick veneer house.

In the suburbs working off the eaves and working where there's a timber floor high off the ground. It's one template of adaption that gives you that turning an average house into a passive solar house and creating that productive space. And of course the template is do you have a long east-west axis or at least a wall within 20 degrees of true north because you try and do this. Further away than that and it doesn't work. It gets too hot in summer and it doesn't actually provide the heat that it should in winter. So, you know, I go around the suburbs and the hardest thing is finding a house what's got a corner facing north, you know, but if you got least a wall doesn't matter, which wall it is but one of the other templates in the book is south facing to the street.

It's a bit sort of counterintuitive. But that often means you've got a veranda or big windows or something at the front and on the back you have often got laundry bathroom bedrooms and a solid wall going out into the garden and that's a perfect place to put the solar greenhouse because you then get this brick work becomes internal to the greenhouse even if the whole house is a brick veneer. And so you don't have any thermal mass in the house. Suddenly, you've got internal and often you can do that in a backyard with a nod from the neighbours without it being a problem of council building inspectors. Whereas if you do it

out the front, you need to be a little bit more circumspect.

So there's two of those templates the other thing that happens, is that often. On a street frontage you might have big even evergreen trees which are in that sun sector. Whereas in the backyard in suburbia, at least you have control usually over what vegetation is there. So you can manage a larger sun sector unless of course the back fence is right next to you as it is in a lot of the modern high density suburbs.