

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

Chapter 5 - What Style Of Gardener Are You?

David Holmgren: This is another one of these diagrams in the book about what style of gardener you are or the sort of framework you use and it's on the vertical axis. You've got intensive and high-yielding gardening top and on the bottom you've got natural and self-maintaining. And then on the other axis, you've got sort of rational approaches that people might call scientific.

And on the other spectrum, you've got intuitive that people might call spiritual even and I've put various authors on that grid, you can see myself there. Here notice that Bill Mollison is over here Dave Jackie is there just in Calvary's Urban Farmer book? Has anyone read Steve Solomon's Intelligent Gardener?

Yeah, and you know, I've sort of put over here Rudolf Steiner, biodynamics, Hari Krishna farming. I've worked with the Hari Krishna's Jeffrey Hodges Jackie French more in this quadrant, Alana more and sort of thinking of agriculture and gardening probably in that spectrum. So there's no one right way to do things.

And I think it's important to recognize that different people will approach things differently. But as we move to smaller and smaller areas, there's an imperative towards the intensive and high-yielding where we control more of the factors rather than leave it to natural processes because when we leave it to natural processes, there's a lot more upswing downswing, feast famine and a whole lot of things: do we really want to eat that?

Well, there's a lot of it. We need to be more like hunter-gatherers, you know adapt to what's around and you know, we can be completely rational and evidence-based but soil's a mystery, nature's a mystery and sometimes the intuitive process is the way we internally connect to what's the right thing that needs to be done and it's at its worst. It's sort of prejudice and basic animal emotions. I'm not so sunny day. I should plant something or and over in the rational, you know, we can have all of these numbers all of sort of self-reinforcing evidence that what we're doing is right when later on we found out that that was actually wrong or didn't work anyway. So, you know, there's always understanding different approaches and accepting that and I think that's been a little bit sometimes a limitation in some articulation of permaculture that it somehow is completely natural and self-maintaining and yet it's in the achieved in high yields of useful Food for People, which is obviously the Holy Grail if that's ideally what you want. But you know these things to some extent are trade off. Okay, hopefully that's a sort of useful for the gardeners amongst you.

Okay, the behavioural field is the big one as I said and the one of the big themes that comes through that I've already mentioned is larger households. These are two sisters and

their husbands and their children who share a 1956 Olympic Village two bedroom house in Heidelberg West They're on the cover of Retrosuburbia and their place is called Hippie Farm after Hibiscus Court where they live. And they have goats in the backyard and she is an integrated pest management expert. She is a home-based mum. He is a potter who works from home and he makes cargo bicycles from a backyard workshop. So amazing home base. Lifestyle, and of course, it's that sharing that debt load of being able to deal with mortgage by having more people sharing. Obviously huge issues about how does that work?

And one of the ways it works in a small house is they live an outdoor lifestyle over a big outside deck that they built and the kids are like kids used to be outside doing stuff not inside. So that's one of the key ways of how you try preparing to go outside. That's what we're always told to do and recolonize the street, reinhabit the street, you know, and then of course we get into all the stuff about safety and complete dysfunction.

I heard a woman interviewed on the radio who's written a book called small animals about children and their care and how she got followed by the ? for having left her son in a car for 10 minutes while she went into a shop and got reported by someone and she talked about the statistics of what is the chances of the child being abducted compared with the child being injured or killed having put the car in the child to go somewhere which we take as completely acceptable. People are really clueless about assessing risk. So we discussed that in the book about risk, the way larger scale risks that we're moving towards with climate change and bubble economics and geopolitical instability and yet we're focused on grinding off the bumps in the pavement and being obsessed about coddling children.

So this is actually an extremely maladapted, psychosocial toxin that spread through society even when we were raising our son Oliver who's now 32 in the 80s, we found we were sort of right out on our own in what we let him do. And yet what we let him do was normal for when we grow up and when I spoke to people who are my parents' generation, they did even more wild things.

You know, so how did we get here? Did we get here by that coddling? So actively changing that and creating a new normal with a few households where we can raise children in a way we choose in a way that's adapted and kids adapt very quickly to recognize that. Oh, yeah we go and do that there and some other places we do something.

But as so? says that only takes three households to create a new normal for children. So huge numbers of things in household, larger households that become possible in terms of self-reliance when there's more people together and whatever form that is whether it's like this or whether it's an extended family household or whether it's a benign dictatorship of a household landlord with tenants. There's so many things where that person's skills and interest can complement this person's and yes, everyone knows that making me laugh of, you know, six people is not much more work than making a meal for two people really and the economies of scale with a few more people really escalate when you start living a self-reliant lifestyle.

Even with a conventional lifestyle it's obviously more efficient and the amount of energy

and environmental impact goes down radically as more people sharing. So it's more economic. It's more secure. It's more socially community building, but it's bad for GDP. So it is economic treason. And I was told when I did an Aussie straight presentation that might take in a boarder strategy was actually discussed in a brainstorming at the state department of planning amongst planners there when they were talking about how to get you know, greater density and said, oh you could encourage people to take in a boarder. Everyone in the room apparently laughed and acknowledged that actually yeah that actually could but went back to how do we convince Melbournians to accept more apartment blocks and infill development. And I believe that's because there's an intuitive recognition that if you actually had this happening it would actually contract GDP. You know as you take in the single mom, and she looks after your kids when they come home from school, and she's doing a bit of gardening and all of those things start to build it actually builds that economy and that reduces how much money people are spending in the outside economy. So this is subversive and if you hear about me being taken away and locked up. Okay?

Another is that a touchy subject in difficult subject is diet. God why would you tackle a subject like that? And there's so much information out there and the Retrosuburban diet is not a prescription. It's actually a statistical what I think people are likely to be on average eating, you know, a few decades from now who are living this lifestyle and where that food will be coming from as we build the parallel food system now because it was a little bit beyond what necessarily people are doing in their backyards. We hived off this ripped feeding retrosuburbia from the backyard to the buyer region and it's downloadable from the website, but it gives people who are sort of following this home based food then how does this actually fit into a larger picture?

How could we actually do something other than? and bullies? To feed people because we're going to be realistic that system is not going to just go away but it's quite possible that in a couple of decades 20% of the population or more could be getting their food in this way: garden agriculture.

I see about a quarter of urban agriculture, a little bit rural wild harvesting, urban wild harvesting and rural ag still providing a big chunk of a food, but you can see the cereal grains actually a lot less of the veggies more of it coming from urban areas and that the proportion this is different to the current average Australian diet. So there's a higher proportion of vegetables less dairy. Last night because that actually makes sense if you're in suburbia.

If we're doing a self-reliance thing out in central Australia boy, we should be eating a hell of a lot of meat as much eat meat as you can possibly eat because the country is full of it. Even where I live in central Victoria, the sustainable incentive is to actually eat more meat once we get down into urban areas basically, that's not quite so much the case and certainly for health. Also Australians already eat too much meat and too much dairy. So this is as I said, not a prescription but a sort of what I think people would evolve to come too driven by economics psychology and health overall as an average.

Although obviously people would individually be eating very different diet. Okay, just

show you that sprinters interpretation of that graph. This is the average Australian diet. Currently believe it or not, 25% of what we consume by weight is dairy, staggering given how concentrated dairy foods are. We're suggesting that to about 8% of the type in the Retrosurban diet and a lot of that would actually be goat dairy rather than cow dairy because cow dairy depends on irrigated pastures, which this country is going to have less and less ability to sustain. Goats are the obvious natural dairy animal for most of Australia.

It's hard to say that in the Dandenongs when it's drizzling out. It's interesting that the fruit is not a big increase because the current Australian diet includes a huge amount of fruit juice concentrate and fruit sugars that are added into other stuff. So in processed food, it's not just the fresh fruit people are eating. They're actually getting a huge amount of fruit products through processing. We're suggesting that the total amount of fruit might not change, but it'll actually be more of it will be fresh fruit and home processed. You can see the big increase in veggies that's suggested there and a very substantial increase in in grains.

The sugar consumption should probably drop to a tiny fraction and most of it would be honey unless maybe you're in Queensland. And you can see the bay leaf pig meat soils the big spike in extra legumes and we've added some few categories that are not in the Australian average diet. Wild meats and seaweed which we think are important foods, even if they're sort of tiny proportions of the diet.

So that's our guess as to how that might evolve so, Obviously what we ate is a really big issue and one of the interesting things going to Cuba in 2007, seeing the aftermath of the crisis there very inspirational things in the way Urban agriculture sort of transformed the food supply and all sorts of different changes, but the degree to which the hard culturally embedded patterns of this is who we are and this is what we eat.

That was a bit depressing how people really resisted change. They still all wanted to eat the temperate climate veggies that don't grow very well in Cuba and largely eat very few veggies and eat a whole lot of meat and grain including wheat, that doesn't grow in Cuba. So it's actually a long siesta Le Colonial Spanish diet.

Still it's going, you know hundreds of years later. That being said when I walked around the old city with? with the down with permaculture. Mr. Permaculture Cuba. What's his name?

Who? Roberto Perez, is it all the pigeons are back. I said, where did they go? And he said we ate them so in the crisis people did find that I am another sort of meat. Is it still made? But yeah, it was amazing how conservative people and we've found that to that all of the ideas in permaculture about novel foods, and it's still quite hard to actually shift diet and a lot of that happens with the way children are raised from a young age because the things we learn when we are very young sort of come back to us. I thought I was incredibly flexible and I discovered that breakfast is perhaps the most conservative meal of the day.

We still sold like we're back in the womb or something. I remember what we used to what we were raised on after four weeks traveling in rural Japan and having these oh soup for

breakfast. Every morning Su was still “this is fantastic” and I was starting to yearn for porridge or stuff.

Okay, last few things. There are for example designs in Retrosuburbia where we've tried to put together a lot of the patterns with examples and they're all very different houses. Ones are a federation cottage on a small site typical of say Ballarat, Bendigo Geelong, parts of Melbourne. This was inspired by a place.

I imagined in the Dandenong Zone. State red soil site luckily facing north and big open-plan design built in the 70s. There's the plan of it huge eucalypts to the south and to the west but open to the east and how I imagined it could be retrofitted both the building the garden but also there's elements in the design notes of the behaviour that this big space perfect space for people having meetings and gatherings because one of the things when we move down from the use of fantastic community facilities like this. Is there still a role for people just gathering in houses where they can do stuff and don't have to sign bits of paper and all that sort of crap and get the key from somewhere and there's a whole lot of like middle must things cook can be done at home and some houses obviously suit that.

More than others you can see this one's got the big under floor space and big bladder water tanks. Their tank up on the hill and these kids' cubby and look out which might actually function as a fire lookout to that. You don't want a hundred percent rely on your phone. So big internal chimney that might lose heat and how that can be adapted and an attached greenhouse. On the front goat stalls undercover with deep litter here and the cheese cave and under croft so making use of that that space sleeping loft added into the space over above the office so had fun with some of these designs of just it wasn't the intention in the book, too. Put these things together because they then become old.

There's a design to copy and it all depends on who are the people what's the situation, you know, it's silly to do a design unless you have a human context. There's no point to an away, but. Having written a book. I suddenly found all of these things wanted to come together like jigsaw puzzles. So I indulged myself and put a few of these designs in there.

One of the other tools that's in the book is this and you won't be able to sort of read all this but it just showing you the number of factors in looking at a property in assessing a property where we live or a property that we might be considering buying or joining a household in what are the good points and bad points about that?

In terms of retrosuburbia these are the built factors, the location services and properties. A lot of these things are things that real estate's would sort of, think about in valuing a house, but a lot of them are not like where's this? Yeah food storage, cool cupboards and cellars. So these are under resilience assets and retrofitting and in the building construction. There's one called downmarket assets is a photo in the book of Richard Telford's shed, you know, like a really crappy shed in the backyard that people would consider reduces the value of the property, but you can then fix it up and fit it out often without a council permit and turn it into a another room or something that you know, you might be able to see how that thing is a is an asset.