

CACE The case for a radical town planning approach

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The case for a radical town planning approach (as part of a holistic approach) to the climate emergency.

Town planning plays a critical role in environmental sustainability and it must be a fundamental component of our collective response to the climate emergency. Otherwise we are doomed to failure.

Therefore it is highly disappointing that there has been little emphasis on the short term and long term impact of our current planning and development practices in most of the discussions related to climate change.

For example, one short term impact of our current planning policy is the ongoing demolition of robust, retrofittable buildings and their subsequent replacement with often less-robust concrete structures. Many sources quote that cement production alone “is the third ranking producer of anthropogenic (man-made) CO₂ in the world after transport and energy generation.”(1)

Catastrophically, this approach to urban consolidation (which has had a less than negligible impact on reducing urban sprawl) has removed many hectares of green open space, mostly in the form of private gardens that provide many benefits such as heat sinks and permeable surfaces that prevent water run-off. In many cases these gardens also have the potential to grow some of our food and many are already doing so. In a low carbon society, reducing food miles will be critical.

Added to this is the fact that much of the new development that has taken place over the past two decades is built to a depressingly low standard. With a shelf life of only a few decades, these developments too will need to be demolished in the medium term, and of course this will be at the expense of further carbon emissions.

The long term impact of Australia's current development and town planning legacy is even more catastrophic when you consider the massive increase in car dependent suburbia and the loss of much of our food bowls close to our cities. When you factor in the loss of valuable biodiversity and irreplaceable habitat such as the valuable native grasslands on Melbourne's urban fringe or the thousands of hectares of eucalypt forest that are being destroyed to create developments such as the North Lakes and Springfield developments on Brisbane's fringe, we paint a bleak picture.

The need for systemic change

Australia must urgently end its addiction to property development and move towards a model of town planning that minimises new development and focuses on better utilising our existing built stock with priority given to occupying the hundreds of thousands of homes that lie empty across Australia.

This means that we will need to create a new economic model that is radically different from the current property and development driven growth based economic paradigm. There is no way around this if we wish to reach beyond zero emissions in the fastest possible time.

In the words of Professor Will Steffen, "the neoliberal economic system we've bought into is completely at odds with how the earth works. We have to change this value system that we operate under. We need a social tipping point that flips our thinking, before we reach a tipping point in the climate system."(2)

The proposal that I am putting forward is intended to be the starting point of a wider conversation on the town planning response to the climate emergency. I expect and hope that this will grow as more minds grapple with the ideas and issues.

However, it is important that a degree of vigilance be put in place to ensure that a rapid transition to beyond zero emissions remains the central premise and that the urgent and radical ideas laid out here are not appropriated by ideologies that run contrary to addressing the climate emergency (as is too often the case).

For anyone reading this who may not be persuaded by the seriousness and urgency of what we are facing, it is worth reinstating that there is general consensus that a "two degree rise is disastrous if not game over". Right now it seems almost impossible to think that we will achieve anything less than a two degree rise. According to climate change researcher, Barry Smiler,

“More than half of the greenhouse gases that have been generated have been released in the last 30 years, and the release rate is rising because there has never been a year in which less fossil fuel was burned than the year before. CO₂ takes 10 years to begin causing full damage so the effects we see today are the result of gases released only before about 2010. We are already at +/- 1C over baseline. The greenhouse gases already released will raise planetary temperature by an additional 2-5C and possibly more (total 3-6C) in the very near term. “

Without wholesale systemic change (and behavioural change, but more on that later) “this release rate is virtually guaranteed to continue for at minimum the next 5-10 years due to social inertia, political push-back, and the sheer time to get anything done in this world” (3).

Eight town planning steps that will work towards rapid carbon drawdown

Based on this knowledge, I have put together a list of eight steps that should be given serious consideration:

1. End all housing development on or beyond the urban fringes of our towns and cities, unless that development is part and parcel of a wider project to drawdown carbon into the soil, either through regenerative farming practices, re-wilding (in cooperation with First Nations people), biomass planting projects, and bush regeneration. Any such housing projects would endeavour to use recycled materials as well as carbon neutral and/or carbon negative building materials such as hemp and bamboo.

2. Urban consolidation does have net benefits if it is done right and if it is not used as a green light to raze entire neighbourhoods to the ground.

Therefore, any densification that takes place must not be at the expense of buildings that are robust and retrofittable. Housing stock that is not deemed salvageable can be replaced, but only with higher density co-housing style developments that are preferably run as cooperatives. Existing gardens would (as much as possible) be incorporated into any new developments and those gardens could be a resource for the new communities that are created.

3. In terms of transport, all existing proposed new road building projects will not proceed unless there is very good reason. Our focus from hereon will entirely be on improving and interconnecting walkability, public transport networks and bicycle pathways.
4. The principle focus must be on ensuring that empty houses and units in our cities and towns are habited before looking at creating other housing options. If need be, these homes will be compulsorily acquired. In Melbourne alone there are currently up to 82,000 empty homes.
5. New economies may emerge in our regional towns based around the need to drawdown carbon, either through regenerative farming, biomass planting or re-wilding. Therefore, some regional areas may grow as a result and once empty houses are filled, new carbon neutral developments should go ahead (as long as they linked with land use practices that will sequester carbon).
6. We will need to look at retrofitting the existing built spaces that are currently not used for housing, such as converting double garages into habitable units (there are a lot of them in the relatively low- dense outer suburbs) and converting disused office space. This will help to increase densities without the need for additional development.
7. We will need to encourage other types of housing such as yurts and tiny houses to add to the housing mix. These have the advantage of being able to be slotted into existing communities with minimal impact on the land and on surrounding flora and fauna.
8. We could look into redeveloping land in our cities that has previously been developed but that is now left vacant. This is known as brownfield site redevelopment. It is a slow process but it can have positive net benefits if done well. This should only occur in addition to the above seven points and only if there is a human need for this additional development and/ or if it can be achieved without having an impact on our urgent need to draw down carbon.

Town planning, Population and Mutual Aid

Our response to the climate emergency must involve working both at the local level and at the international level and of course radical town planning policies will need to be a central component of that approach.

What is important is that we share our knowledge with the rest of the world as part of a wider program of mutual aid where ideas, resources and knowledge are shared freely across borders. This will enable communities across the world to be best equipped to create resilient, regenerative communities that draw down carbon and enables the re-wilding that is required to start to reverse the sixth great mass extinction.

In areas of high fertility, populations will start to stabilise once women have access to education, become empowered and have access to universal healthcare and contraception. From the perspective of Population, Permaculture and Planning, this is a critical issue. It is also a critical issue to the author of Drawdown, Paul Hawken who places educating girls and family planning at six and seven respectively in his list of solutions to mitigate climate change (4). It was the author himself who said that a combination of those two points would have a ranking of number one.

If however you do not place much importance on the population issue, be assured that the empowerment of women (as well as access to vital services) must be central to any international collaborative approach, otherwise we will fail to create the equitable resilient communities that are needed. Therefore, the issue of population need not be a point of contention for those who are reluctant to tackle the issue, as the approach that is needed to reduce population growth in an equitable and non coercive manner is also crucial for a whole range of other reasons in the broader goal of creating social and environmental resilience.

Therefore those people who are reluctant to mention population in their discussions on climate change can talk about the issue in this context with the full knowledge that it will not deter from the holistic approach that is required to tackle the climate emergency. It will also help to create a united front between activists who do see population as a priority and those who don't. Finding common ground and a united approach is absolutely critical and this feeds into the importance of working towards behavioural change (again, more on this later)

In terms of population growth in Australia, much of it is driven by immigration. Under the current neo-liberal model, migration to Australia is put in place largely as a means to perpetuate and justify our current unsustainable planning and development approach. In a post neo-liberal society, population growth will be absorbed mostly by carrying out the aforementioned eight steps.

It is also likely that the process of international mutual aid will result in fewer people feeling the need to migrate as communities become empowered to work and collaborate at a local level. However, for people who do migrate to Australia it will be with the knowledge that they are joining a society that is dedicated to tackling the climate emergency and we (and the world) will very likely be all the better for it.

As people have an impact wherever they live, the environmental impact of migration may not be regarded as a major issue. However, this is only true if people migrate to places where they can inhabit and retrofit existing structures and existing infrastructure as opposed to migrating to areas where existing housing and infrastructure is lacking (thus forcing further encroachment into non human habitat).

Fortunately there are many parts of Australia and the world where there is vacant housing and often vacant neighbourhoods. In China for example, there are entire cities that are empty of people. These ghost cities are a legacy of a totally unsustainable approach to planning and development. However the best thing that we can do now is to work as much as possible to ensure that these places are inhabited before any additional developments take place.

There is of course the issue of climate refugees and the fact that people will in all likelihood be forced to migrate as the climate emergency intensifies. It is impossible to predict with certainty the areas of the world from where people will be forced to flee and the kind of scales we are looking at. We will need to work towards a global approach to housing refugees, mostly to reduce the length of journey that people need to make and to prevent certain areas from being overwhelmed. Housing refugees will likely be our number one humanitarian and town planning requirement and the eight approaches that I have listed can play a substantial role in making that happen, at least at the beginning.

Behavioural Change

It is crucial that the climate emergency response is undertaken with the understanding that we must work to change our behaviour. The climate emergency is as much caused by humans reflecting their inner trauma outwards as it is anything else.

What I mean by this, is that unless we change the collective behaviour that led to the climate emergency in the first place, we will not only be doomed to fail in the medium to long term, we will also fail to persuade the vast majority of

people to adapt their lives to tackle the climate emergency in the short term. This is why it is essential that we make the pursuit of finding common ground a priority as opposed to perpetuating the politics of division.

By looking for common ground we will help to reduce the cognitive dissonance that gets in the way of tackling more divisive issues. Further to this, we will need to teach critical thinking and embrace nuance; all with the understanding that we will not overcome the climate emergency with one set of values alone. This means that we will need to be comfortable with having our own ideologies challenged and also be willing to change our worldview when it is appropriate to do so.

This will mean identifying less with our opinions, and more on fundamental issues such as our connection to nature and our desire to see a world that our children and the children of all non human animals can inhabit. For this reason, teaching behavioural change through holistic activism has become a priority for me. I have established the Holistic Activism movement (5) as one inroad into this topic and would welcome anyone who would like to join me on this path.

In the meantime I can only hope that the town planning steps that I have outlined in this fact sheet can play some kind of a meaningful role in a wider ongoing conversation about the immense tasks that lie ahead.

References

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