

— Dan Hill

HARBINGER

Sowing Seeds amidst Systems Collapse in Australia

THE FOUR HORSEMEN AND A RIVER OF DEAD FISH

Reflecting on the patterns of the Millennium Drought back in 2007, and the choking of the Murray River ecosystem, the Australian environmental scientist Tim Flannery said that “Australia is a harbinger of what is going to happen in other places in the world.”

After the 2019-20 bushfires in Australia, in which it is estimated three billion animals were killed or harmed, followed by the vast, relentless flooding of 2022, we might also take Flannery’s perspective, positioning Australia as a particularly intense front line in a global climate crisis, with looming extremes of fire, floods and heat. As I write this, in March 2023, a river of dead fish¹ spanning tens of kilometres is moving along a stretch of the Darling-Baaka near the town of Menindee. It comprises perhaps millions of slowly rotting corpses, producing quite a stench in the 41C heat. Harbinger indeed.

Yet noting Andreas Malm’s gloomy intonation that “no horseman of the apocalypse rides alone,” we might also add neoliberal economics as a fourth horseman alongside fire, floods and heat, pushed to the front as the leader of the pack. As is increasingly understood, the climate crisis is the environmental ‘external-ity’ of a broader crisis of untrammelled capitalism, embedded in earlier colonialism, its patterns of inequality encompassing not only society, but global ecology. Australia’s rotting

biodiversity is symbiotically linked to its low economic complexity and increasing inequality, merely several sides of the same hyperobject.

And what happens in Australia does not stay in Australia. Digging up coal here leads to coal burned elsewhere which shifts the impact of the El Niño Southern Oscillation here ... and everywhere else. We now understand the global interconnectedness of systems, cultural or otherwise, across a shared landscape of global cities and what Val Plumwood called their “shadow places.”² This deadly entangling of fire, flood, heat and neoliberal economics is increasingly abroad, in varying textures and patterns, in California, Spain, Indonesia, Kenya, Sweden, the UK, Zimbabwe, Japan, Brazil, India ...

If Australia is a harbinger, what might we look for and where might we look? The Australian town apparently most at-risk from the climate crisis lies a couple of hours drive north of Melbourne. Shepparton is a town of around 70,000 people, traditionally oriented around farming and manufacturing, both before and after European invasion, due in part to the tangle of rivers that weave together here. The town is diverse culturally, due to migration into those employment sectors since the mid-19th century, and with the highest number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people outside Melbourne in Victoria.

That recent “at-risk” status is conferred upon



the area by the Climate Council, who suggest that as 89% of Greater Shepparton's properties are at high risk of being uninsurable by 2030, largely due to the likelihood of climate crisis-exacerbated flooding from said river systems. Riverine inundation is counterpointed here by heat, drought, and bushfire smoke, and the social, health-related and economic costs triggered by these patterns will far outweigh the loss of housing value.

The Climate Council's "Uninsurable Nation" report³ of May 2022 was itself a harbinger. In October 2022, widespread flooding led to 4000 properties isolated or inundated in Greater Shepparton, a focal point amidst the 35,000 homes damaged in the towns that punctuate the many rivers that define this part of Australia. In the Shepparton News,⁴ 80-year old resident Darrel Kay said, "I've been here 52 years and it's the worst I've ever seen it."

Yet inundation is precisely what these river systems are supposed to do, beneficially and regularly flooding the land to move nutrients around its ecosystems, not least in order to produce that fertile land. It is Australia's "model" that leaves Shepparton stranded, predicated on those patterns of extraction and exploitation, individual gain rather than common wealth.

Many Greater Shepparton residents end up living in tents during the clean-up of the town after the October 2022 floods, only to "recover into" a broader systemic failure. The model of private housing dominating over affordable and social housing, alongside the concomitant privatisation of public resources, spaces and

capabilities across all areas and over several decades, has left an entire town at risk. Two years before the floods, the Council's Affordable Housing Strategy⁵ had stated that "More than 800 homeless or marginally housed people are estimated to live in Greater Shepparton, including people who are sleeping in tents on the riverbank or in their cars ..."

At Melbourne School of Design, we are actively working with local stakeholders on alternative possible futures for Shepparton, as a form of participative action research using an integrated "strategic design" approach, led by Rory Hyde. One of our students, Sophie Tuck, discovered a town plan for Shepparton from 1946,⁶ archived in the State Library of Victoria. Typical of the age, with its forward-looking "eyes on the horizon" zeal, inadvertently serving as a kind of urban planning "sliding doors" moment. It describes how Shepparton might have grown, predicated on tree-lined green streets encouraging children to walk to local state schools, a town of cooperative building societies and council housing, of light industry connected to bold civic centres and convivial neighbourhoods by public transport, and an invitation for criticism from "everyone." (In the interests of truth-telling, it is of course highly unlikely that this invitation was meaningfully extended to the local indigenous population.)

Yet Shepparton grew in another direction, *actually* typical of the age: aside a monumental lake being built, the plan was largely outrun by privatised logics, driving a low-density sprawl outwards into what is otherwise agricultural land, biodiversity buffer and flood plain. And as the town's population continues to grow, councillors and planners sketch out the town's expansion further still. The resulting increase in property value means farmers are increasingly likely to sell their land to property developers, the apples and pears that have been grown there since the 1830s producing less short-term income than the immediate return from selling the land outright.



BUILDING MANSIONS IN A GRAVEYARD OF PEARS

In February 2023, we find ourselves standing on this mooted expansion, in a flourishing pear orchard in rich soil, the Broken River a few hundred metres away in the background. Look to the right and we see a ‘SOLD’ sign. Look to the right again and we see a tractor, churning up the soil where a large wing of the pear orchard stood a few days previously. Walking over, we stand next to neat funereal piles of pear tree. Thousands of pears lie discarded at our feet, sinking into the rich, russet soil. This soil will never be this good again if the typical Australian property development play occurs here. The soil will also not be soaking up the inundation when the nearby river does what rivers are supposed to do. Recalling Aldo Leopold’s land ethic – “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise”⁷ – such an outcome is clearly *not right*.

The kind of houses likely to be built here can be glimpsed at any of the suburban expansions nearby: vast (Australia builds the largest homes in the world, on average) and thus hugely expensive to run in extreme climates; poorly constructed, with carbon-intensive material use; dominating newly constructed hardscape, generating urban heat island effect on what was previously biodiverse landscapes; car dependent, with virtually none of the nearby social infrastructures that are required to cultivate community. They are cheap to build and buy, but increasingly expensive to live in.



For individual households, it can cost twice as much to live in a three-bedroom house versus a one-bedroom apartment, due to increased

energy and other utilities, transport, insurance, maintenance costs. And yet most households here are single people or couples without children, facing the fact that 75% of the dwellings are over-sized 3, 4, 5+ bedroom houses. There are essentially no townhouses or walk-up apartments available in the town, thanks to a housing market running on an autopilot, hardwired for capital gains. The Committee for Greater Shepparton reports that 80% of the several hundred new residents they ran surveys with would prefer to live in “low-rise, medium-density” dwellings in and around the centre of town, rather than large standalone plots at the edge. Yet these dwellings simply do not exist. Developers don’t develop them; builders can’t build them.



Infrastructure Victoria estimates for the cost to government of such “greenfield” development, in terms of the infrastructure required to be added to such developments—schools, health-care, telecoms, utilities, transport etc—vary between \$150,000 and \$250,000 per dwelling for Metropolitan Melbourne. There are approximately 10,000 houses planned for Shepparton in the coming decades. Adjusting for the regional context, this could still mean a cost to the state — and therefore all of us — running into billions of dollars.

None of these costs are not discernible on the sticker price of the new homes constructed nearby. Nor do these estimates include the “societal” costs of producing this form of development, in terms of diminished public health, social fabric, environmental, educational and economic outcomes, associated with these

forms of development. All told, this is billions of dollars of “lost shared value,” which could otherwise be invested in more productive, civic or regenerative models.



Despite all this, the private sector remains positioned as the de facto provider of housing, leading directly into a cul-de-sac of homogenous, unsustainable and unaffordable housing. We need only need to look down the road to Melbourne to see the likely impact: a 22-fold increase in property prices between 1982 and 2022, multiplying four times faster than wages. This is followed by 2022’s 20% rent increase across the city, with availability and affordability reported as falling dramatically in the last five years. Homelessness is increasing, with the fastest growing groups being single women over 55 years old. Victoria already has a vanishingly small proportion of public or “social” housing in its housing stock, at around 3.4%—below the OECD average and dropping for decades. We can only assume that these must be the intended outcomes of policymakers; or in other words, as the management thinker W. Edwards Deming allegedly put it, “every system is perfectly designed to get the result that it does.”

SEEDS OF MUTUALISM, MUNICIPALISATION, AND SHARED COUNTRY

Yet because of this slow-motion crash, happening in plain sight around us, seeds emerge in the widening cracks. There are sticking plasters, such as the rural town of Bega in New South Wales that has given up waiting for the government or market to produce affordable

housing, and has fundraised in order to start acquiring caravans and vacant properties⁸ to house its homeless community themselves. Elsewhere in North Sydney, a “pirate” bus service,⁹ again crowdfunded by community, fills the gap in mobility provision left by privatisation of public transport. But crowdfunding is rarely equitable or democratic, nor can sticking plasters possibly suture across gaping wounds in society and ecology. Our systems themselves are stuck.

As David Graeber and David Wengrow make clear in *The Dawn of Everything*, taking a genuinely broad sweep of history and geography reveals that it is atypical for our cities and their wider governance systems to have become stuck in this way. Instead, they describe “from the very beginning, a conscious experimentation in urban form,”¹⁰ a rich variation of hard and soft infrastructures forming and reforming everyday life for most of human history. Of course, the context of contemporary Australia is a long, long way from these vivid pre-histories. And yet, the diverse societies of First Peoples in what we now call Australia are the longest continuous civilisation on Earth, dating back over 67,000 years, and have continually demonstrated how to adapt human and non-human life to changing circumstances, whether previous climate changes or European colonisation. They barely feature in Graeber and Wengrow’s otherwise exhaustively researched book.

In Shepparton, one of the local Indigenous Elders, Uncle Paul Briggs, has led the production of a Regional Prosperity Plan, via the Kaiela Institute,¹¹ a “First Nations-led analysis and policy think tank.” The plan is so forward-looking that it might essentially leapfrog the Treaty negotiations currently underway in Victoria, the first to happen in Australia.

The Plan starts from First Nations principles, in design and delivery as well as ethos, moving on from the “deficit” or “market failure” positioning usually applied to shared civic assets, such as public housing, public transport,

public schools, and increasingly public space. Instead, the Prosperity Plan aims to directly produce “parity between First Nations and the broader non-Indigenous people,” at the heart of a new economic strategy based on shared value.

By better understanding Indigenous Australian emphases on the profound kinship relationships bound up in the concept of Country, perhaps we might open up newly complementary and constructive lines of enquiry between the ideas and practices of communal luxury and those embedded within indigenous knowledge systems? As Margo Neale puts it, “Indigenous People think of Country as they would a family member,”¹² reflecting a deeply complex and relational approach to culture and nature, a different framing for our notions of luxury and abundance.

Our work with Shepparton sketches out a participative, diverse housing strategy which works in tandem with the ideas of designing with and for Country by gently densifying and diversifying the Town. The housing typologies proposed suggest both cooperatively organised and self-build strategies at varying scales; circular material and new fabrication methods used by new construction companies organised as locally-owned social enterprises; actual public housing and shared social, cultural and green infrastructures. Each strategy is designed to sidestep the “business-as-usual” extractive property developer model, forming numerous threads that can be woven together in place.

How could we use the apparent need for housing to stimulate the creation of a First Nations-owned local construction sector? An analogue might be the super-local community-owned fabrication project WeCanMake¹³ in Bristol, UK, yet here framed through an anti-colonial lens: local biomaterials, circularity and regenerative farming practices, as well as the Prosperity Plan’s equity agenda. Further examples might include the global Wikihouse movement, aligning contemporary

technologies with self-build organisational forms, or the Accessory Dwelling Units¹⁴ cropping up in backyards and vacant garages in Los Angeles.

In the UK, which is usually a few cycles ahead in terms of neoliberal self-harm, councils have started building actual public housing again for the first time in decades. John Boughton's book, *A History of Council Housing in 100 Estates*, ends with a list of inspiring, and recent, council-led projects.¹⁵ Each learns from the past to forge a new future for genuine public housing, the likes of which have not been seen in Australia for decades. This, too, could be a harbinger, so how might we speed up the arrival of this next wave here? Through our research and advocacy, we are connecting such ideas to the progenitors of local, co-operative-inspired projects, like Melbourne's Nightingale,¹⁶ as well as exploring the viability of public housing healing over council-owned car parks, for instance. But as these models tend to rely on precise alignments of density, propinquity, capital and projected land value, as well as particularly capabilities, how these urban models play out in a regional setting is not clear.

Cooperative housing proper in Europe has undergone its own renaissance in recent years, with cities like Zurich, Barcelona, and Berlin all developing "true third ways" between private and public housing, despite also being caught up in neoliberal vortices. The previous waves of communal housing models, produced in Vienna or Oslo for example, continue to be in high demand, reinforcing the need to look beyond the private sector towards a variegated landscape of public, cooperative, and private. But again, what could a Swiss or Swedish-style co-op be in a regional Victorian setting?

These might present as "weak signals" in an Australian context, but elsewhere we see a burgeoning interest in mutualism and cooperativism, playing out not only in self-build, but also in shared spaces and infrastructures, like renewable energy microgrids, streets and

schools, cargo-bike sharing networks, care blocks, or simply shared community gardens, just as new housing schemes by British councils in Enfield, Midlothian and Bristol suggest a renewed vigour for municipalisation. In Sweden, we would elide the everyday communal benefits of state-led approaches under the banner "public luxury." How does that emerge in countries where the very idea of "the public" has been hollowed out?

In all these possible futures, our work can be situated within the context of the Regional Prosperity Plan, by imagining and analysing further forms of value: the hundreds of millions of dollars that the town could save, share, and reinvest locally, by building effectively, sustainably, and equitably—and with quality and care for all. Can we "solve" the housing crisis by "solving for" local jobs, environment, health, culture, and equality at the same time? Again, these are not separate problems in neat silos. They never were.

Inspiration may be best drawn from the rivers themselves, recognising their varied yet holistic forms of value, well beyond the simplistic metrics of contemporary governance, and seeing inundation as a regenerating and replenishing act, part of their systemic interactions with ecologies and culture, celebrated by, and interacted with, by the local language groups of the Yorta Yorta nation in complex kinship relationships.

It says much that the "Australian model," from colonisation to neoliberalism, has instead transformed this regular inundation—something to celebrate and honour—into "a natural disaster," and something to fear or repel, ignore or forget. We believe there are other trajectories ahead of us, understanding the values, practices, cultures, structures, and infrastructures involved in gently densifying the existing town and carefully regenerating the lands around. This means cultivating new forms of urbanity, such as 21st century versions of the streets, squares and schools glimpsed in the 1946 plan, not built around

emptily grand civic gestures but patterns of everyday life, shared care, and reciprocal abundance. With Shepparton's pears in mind, perhaps the harbinger is William Morris' proposal for Trafalgar Square: digging it up to lay out an apricot orchard.¹⁷

This act, Kristin Ross outlines, is about the future but "harkens back to the chronotype of a society of simple reproduction and the cyclical nature of its processes." It evoked Morris' re-evaluation of the so-called "lesser arts" and the pleasure this work takes in producing the everyday necessities of life. Morris' contrast of the "senseless luxury" for the few and the shoddy goods of mass production is patterned throughout Australia's over-sized houses and the degradation of the environment in which they stand.¹⁸

By reimagining the Town in this way, as intrinsically respectful of its surroundings, and of the care necessary to build the everyday infrastructures which make it possible, perhaps we might simultaneously open up a more meaningful relationship with the Country the town sits within.

"The river valley and the square: they are different, but complementary, facets of an authentic contemporary Australian urbanism. Without the first, our lives are too shallow; without the second they lack purpose. Together they may just possibly allow us to be at home."¹⁹

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