

Planning for Purpose: How Queenslanders Might Flourish in the Challenging Times Ahead

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Winner of the 2024 David Marlow Challenge:

Given climate change, how can Queensland's planning systems be rendered fit for purpose?

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Regrowth on an old fenceline, Wet-Dry Tropics, Far North Queensland
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Disclaimer

This paper was submitted to The Royal Society of Queensland on 31 December 2023. Since that date, the circumstances of the Toondah Harbour proposed development, a case study in this paper, have changed. Walker Corp withdrew their proposal after a public announcement that the federal Minister was of a mind to refuse (<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/apr/18/toondah-harbour-project-walker-corporation-moreton-bay-tanya-plibersek>).

Further, Lang Walker AO passed away on 27 January 2024 (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-01-28/property-developer-lang-walker-dies/103398278>). The text of this essay has not been changed to reflect the current circumstances. Toondah Harbour remains a valid archetype for the central arguments of the essay, which seeks to support alternatives to capital-centric growthism.

Editor's Note

This Opinion Paper is published in these *Proceedings* as a contribution to the Biodiversity, Natural Resource and Land Planning Theme of most of the articles included; and further, as a prize-winning essay and a stimulating contribution to the Society's commitment to community outreach and in building a stronger bridge to citizen science. The terms of the award did not stipulate that the successful author should follow the Society's *Guide to Authors*. For the above reasons, while the formatting followed RSQ guidelines, the text follows the original oral presentation style of the author, which has been retained, while respecting the intent of the donor.



FIGURE 1. Google Earth imagery of Redlands area, South East Queensland, showing the high-tide line of suburban sprawl (Retrieved by the author in October 2023; licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

The Challenge

Given climate change, how can Queensland's planning systems be rendered fit for purpose?

Obviously, the correct answer is “They can’t be,” and we can just leave it there and head to lunch ... but, if that is to be the answer, surely more is demanded. How is it that in an advanced society such as Australia, it is nearly impossible for citizens to recognise and respond to a shared threat like climate change? Why is it that our institutions appear to have so little ability to protect the public interest? And, given those problems, is there a credible alternative vision or course of action that could benefit us in these challenging times? I’ll take a punt.

The following assembly of thoughts is an invitation to briefly set aside our cultural common sense so that, by stepping outside the norms of ‘business-as-usual’ (BaU), the possibility of novel insights can be established. Dysfunctional systems are rarely set right by using the same assumptions that created the system, so it’s important to get outside the planning framework far enough to create space for new perspectives.

Orientation

Queensland’s planning systems are situated within the globalised, interconnected project of modern civilisation and reflect the urban cultures that have gained prominence in the last 200 years. Clearly, the planning systems comprise governance artefacts such as laws, codes, regulations, standards and certifications, and they involve a wide range of actors including private businesses, governments and agencies, financiers, researchers, renters and homeowners.

As society goes about its business, raw materials and manufactured goods are brought together and arranged to form the fabric of the built environment. As society operates on and through this fabric, its performance is evaluated against the whole set of aspirations and expectations of society. Does the built form advance the socially desired function? So, in turn, the planning systems are reviewed and adjusted to better deliver the outcomes sought. Through this feedback loop, the planning systems function as an adaptive algorithm, continually shifting to better express a society’s values.

The planning systems can thus be understood as a forum for our ongoing struggle to reach agreement on core societal values. For example, in legislation concerning tenure, we see the contest between protection of individual freedoms and the imposition of limits necessary to achieve common purposes. Competing ethical values are highlighted by codes sketching out a murky terrain between profit maximisation and minimum standards of public safety. And a foundational lattice of cultural narratives is revealed in the Acts and Ministerial decisions pegging out the asymmetrical conflict between developers and mute nature.

Planning and Purpose

I’m interested in planning, not plans *per se*. It’s often said that “Plans are useless, but planning is essential.” For me, this pithy observation helps shift attention towards all the things that can happen when people undertake a planning process together. If the right conditions prevail, a planning process can support a habit of cooperative dialogue. Although (as suggested above) there are always tensions and contested ideas within a group, a planning process can build and reinforce sociality.

The Challenge positions climate change as a point of common agreement around which society’s public and private interests must be woven together for mutual benefit. But if that were generally accepted, there would be little need for this essay. Instead, not only is the phenomenon of climate change still debated, and humanity’s role in its dynamics questioned, it is painfully clear that nations, states, local governments and neighbourhoods are continuing to postpone the heavy lifting required to either mitigate or adapt to the compounding catastrophes of climate change.

If not in the existential threat of climate change, where is a shared purpose to be found? Does our society even have a shared purpose? Can it be observed? William James (1904), firmly pragmatic, advised that to know a thing, it is best to look at what it does. And what better place to start than at a little horror show called Toondah Harbour.

By Their Works You Shall Know Them

Toondah Harbour is a proposed foreshore development at Redlands, South East Queensland (SEQ).



FIGURE 2. DALL-E impression of artist's impression of Toondah Harbour development (<https://openai.com/dall-e> (2025); licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

For some, Toondah Harbour is an aesthetic, ethical and environmental disaster. It has been bitterly opposed by locals since before Thatcher told us there was no such thing as society. It has been thoroughly critiqued by experts around the table, left for dead more than once, and yet here it rises again, like some mud-caked marsh zombie that smells of rotten death but just won't resign itself to the hazardous waste bin of bad ideas. Even as this essay is written in the last days of 2023, the development is being put forward to the Commonwealth Environment Minister for final approvals.

Why is something so appalling as Toondah going ahead? Because Toondah Harbour actually appeals to many (many) people out there. For a good number of our fellow citizens, Toondah is the bomb. It looks affluent, offers a great lifestyle, is sensibly designed and complies with all the building efficiency ratings.

The developer, Walker Corporation, is giving us a mixed-use, mid-rise neighbourhood with residential over retail, plenty of parking on the kerb, and convenient moorings for our yachts. It's clean, safe, modern, and it's very easy on the eyes.

Sure, there will be some impacts to the mudflats that support a couple of endangered birds. Walker

says the proposed development will impact only 0.29% of their feeding grounds. That doesn't sound like much.

The voters in Mayor Karen Williams' electorate appear to be keen on the housing, the jobs and the amenity of a community-building initiative like Toondah Harbour. Karen is a staunch proponent of the project, and she has been returned to office at every election for the past 20 years. A lot of people like Karen and she likes Toondah.

Here's the take-away message from the BaU crowd: Toondah Harbour is just the sort of development that Queensland needs if we're going to maintain our great lifestyles and, above all, a strong, growth-oriented economy. The Queensland planning systems have played a vital role in making sure that not only will regulations and politics favour the Toondah proposal, but there will be many more excellent developments just like it proposed in the future.

Toondah Harbour is literally a concrete expression of our *de facto* shared purpose.

Perhaps if we reflect on the nature of that shared purpose and its very recent origins, we will find some of that critical space needed for novel insights to arise.

The Mystery of Civilisation

Trying Something New

Civilisation is quite a modern development in the scheme of things. There's a clear trail to our hunter-gatherer ancestors back at least 250,000 years, which is enough time for about 8000 generations. Once the Holocene settled in, horticultural societies emerged as a balance between the precarity of nomadism and the risk of sedentary settlement. It was only about 6000 years ago that people living in Mesopotamia went all-in for permanent settlement, specialisation of labour, hierarchy and mass agriculture, thus establishing the basic pattern of civilisation. Was this an evolutionary leap?

The funny thing about 'survival of the fittest' is that it is only useful in retrospect. Far from being an essential rubric for the future, it is a simplistic assessment of the past, a just-so story. From the perspective of a given species – on the spectrum from Darwin's barnacles to Barnaby Joyce – survival depends on understanding and responding to an ever-changing environmental context (i.e. that which is outside themselves). It appears that the environmental context for life is infinitely large, irreducibly complex. As events unfold, what may have appeared to be cunning evolutionary innovations can also turn out to be lethal burdens. The fitness of yesterday is of little use for tomorrow.

In any event, our culture seems intent on casting the emergence of city-building civilisations as an

inevitable and necessary step forward on the great arc of 'progress'.

So unassailable is this cultural bias that the caves-vs-cities question is one of the most dependable weapons in the cultural arsenal, deployed like a norming taser to short-circuit any hint that Modernity might not quite have it right. Judging from the exquisite artistry and metaphysical sophistication of the works in Arnhem Land or Lascaux, I'm not entirely sure what was so bad about the caves, but that's for another day.

Starting in Ur, fast-forward 400 generations and the world has seen about 20 great civilisations rise and fall, each one following a remarkably similar lifecycle. Why did these people come together? What were they trying to do? What was their shared purpose? And if civilisations inevitably collapse, why do some human societies decide to give it a go, again?

Avoiding Uncertainty

According to pop-sci historian Noah Yuval Harari (2011), all civilisations (i.e. city-building societies) promise to deliver three benefits to their citizens:

1. Avoiding starvation, enhancing food security.
2. Avoiding disease, maximising lifespan.
3. Avoiding violence, providing safety.

These three aspirations are common sense. No one wants to starve, get sick or be murdered in their sleep.

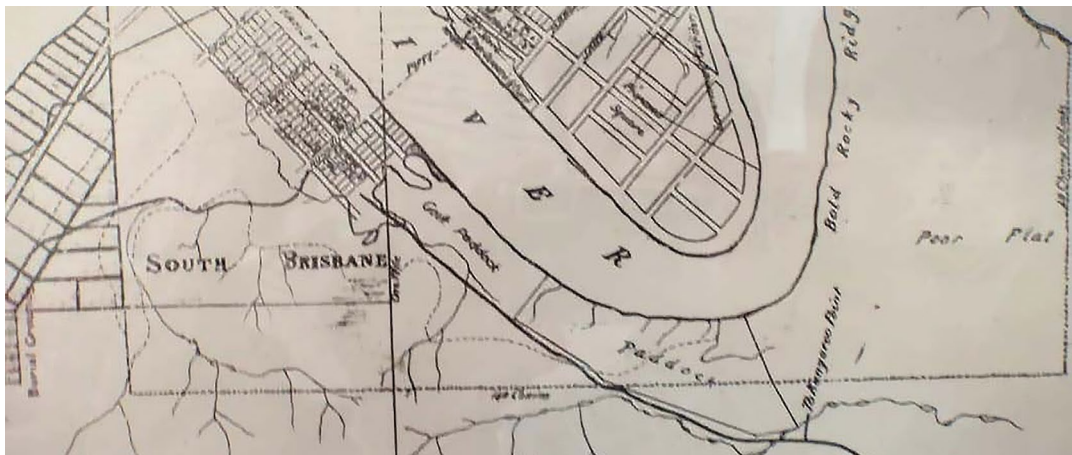


FIGURE 3. 1840s map showing the paddocks at Woolloongabba and South Brisbane (Map courtesy of John Oxley Library; <https://mappingbrisbanehistory.com.au/brisbane-history-essays/brisbane-southside-history/first-australians-and-original-landscape/indigenous-sites>).

Furthermore, a large group of people cooperating towards shared goals can be a formidable hedge against uncertainty. Whether they are farmers, pharmacists or fighters ... more people operating in a bigger cooperative network is a big deal. Civilisation, as a solution pattern, would seem to be quite a useful sort of evolutionary innovation. But perhaps there's more to the story.

Guns, Germs, Steel (and Capital and Coal)

The modern era is defined by a particular convergence of circumstances in Western Europe which resulted in a 15-generation grease-fire that jumped us from petty feudalism to triumphant global empire before the rest of the world had a chance to put the silver away.

The Enlightenment set the stage for this spectacular phase of the human experience. Descartes made the big play by comprehensively splitting the mind from the body, delineating the inert object from the pure subject. He also obsessed over the philosophical conditions for certainty, framing up the "scientific method" as a way to cope with doubt about the material world. These two contributions are central to our culture's commitment to objectivity, in both the scientific sense and in the materialistic sense.

Descartes produced an extraordinary body of thought, and there's lots to admire about the works of his contemporaries including Hobbes, Pascal, Leibniz and Spinoza. But it's also true that these European thinkers behaved like brutish disruptors, showing little appreciation for what was already in play. Other cultures had already achieved far deeper insights to the human condition and had realised astonishing levels of refinement in both material comfort and in the sophistication of their wisdom traditions. Had things gone differently, the Europeans might have just rejoined the cultural collegium as junior members. But something very different happened.

No sooner had Descartes put the finishing touches on his propositions than the second wave of capitalists weaponised them to accelerate the era of 'primitive accumulation', a period of mass disenfranchisement that included the Enclosures, the conquest of the Americas, industrial slavery in Africa, the subjugation of India and destabilisation of China. Although the Church

had already started the process of dispossessing heathen cultures of their lands and liberty (ca. *Dum Diversas*, 1452), Descartes provided a powerful secular justification for the notion of racial hierarchy in which Europeans (conveniently, objectively) represented the most advanced expressions of the ideal.

Voltaire then set the idea of progress at the centre of society. He showed that reason, tolerance and freedom could advance the human condition in ways that dogma and religious authoritarianism could not (though, in a deeply ironic twist, Voltaire may have actually appropriated *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* from the Wendat-Iroquois people (see Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). Through Descartes, Voltaire and their peers, the supremacy of European thought became accepted as 'scientific fact', at least in Europe, according to European standards. Again, this might not have been an issue if things had gone a bit differently.

But while the salons were buzzing with self-congratulatory intellectual glory, a different cast of characters was getting a taste for the concept of unlimited capital accumulation. Corporations appeared and the innovation of stock markets opened the door for everyman to find their fortune by pooling capital to reproduce more capital. These were men of action, prepared to cherry-pick ethical justifications from anyone – Adam Smith to John Locke to Jeremy Bentham – as long as there was money to be made. It was all about private material gain. Survival of the fittest? Yes.

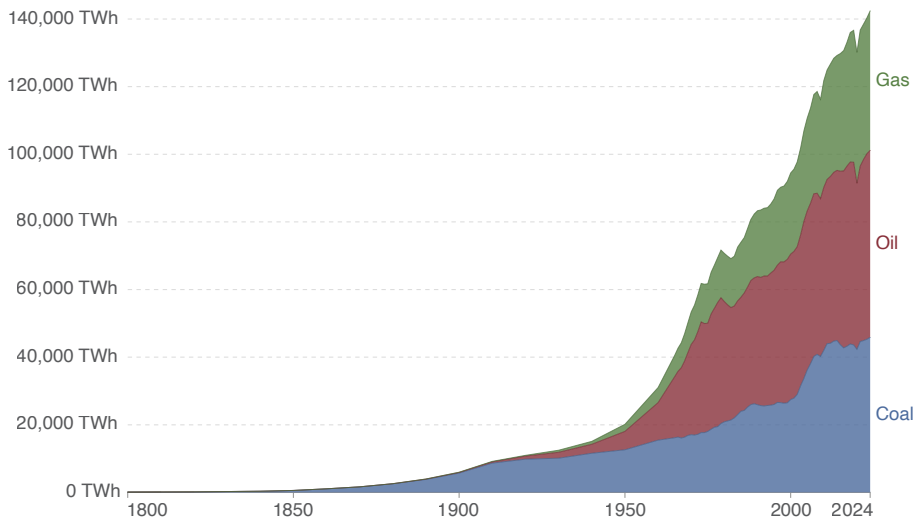
By the close of the 18th century, Europeans were rather pleased with themselves: convinced of their moral and scientific superiority, hyped up on the new-found power of capitalised corporations, they were increasingly uninterested in other ways of knowing and being in the world. It was enough to marvel at the majesty of their own brilliant achievements.

And then they cracked the lid on one of nature's biggest cookie jars: fossil fuels. The six or eight generations from then to now have experienced an unrelenting acceleration in practically every material dimension. No limits.

It's against this historical backdrop that we come to confront the deadliest of our cultural addictions: growthism.

Global fossil fuel consumption

Measured in terawatt-hours¹ of primary energy² consumption.



Data source: Energy Institute – Statistical Review of World Energy (2025); Smil (2017)

OurWorldinData.org/fossil-fuels | CC BY

FIGURE 4. Global fossil fuel consumption, measured in terawatt-hours of primary energy consumption (Our World in Data, 2023; Smil, 2017).

Socio-Economic Trends

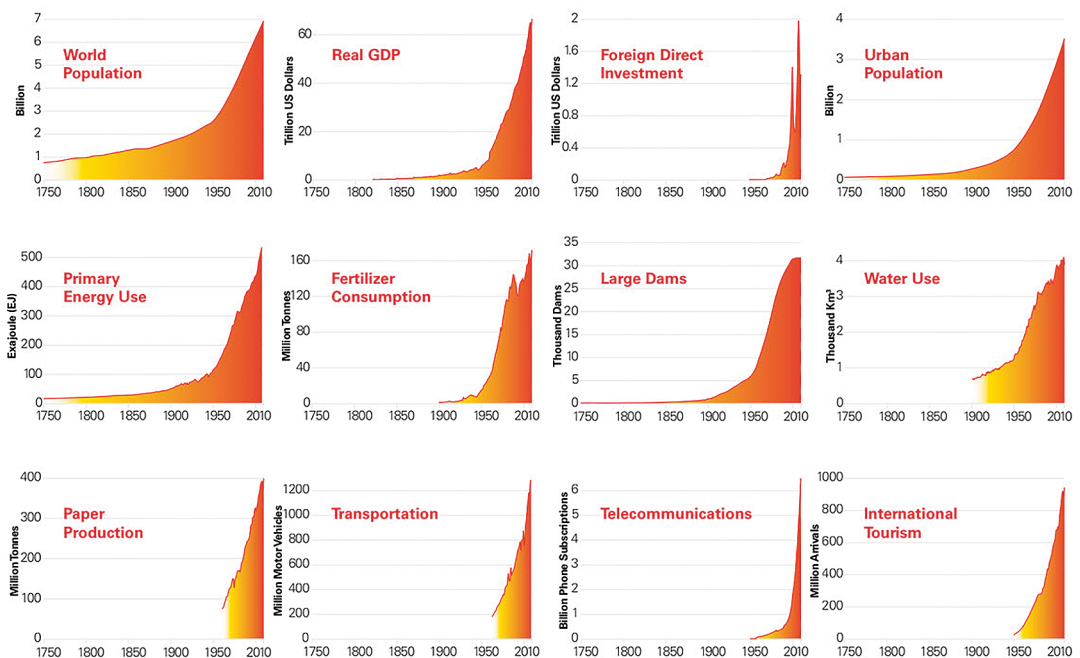


FIGURE 5a. Graphing the 'great acceleration' of the Anthropocene: Socio-economic trends. (Angus, 2015; graphic treatment from Leurs, 2020).

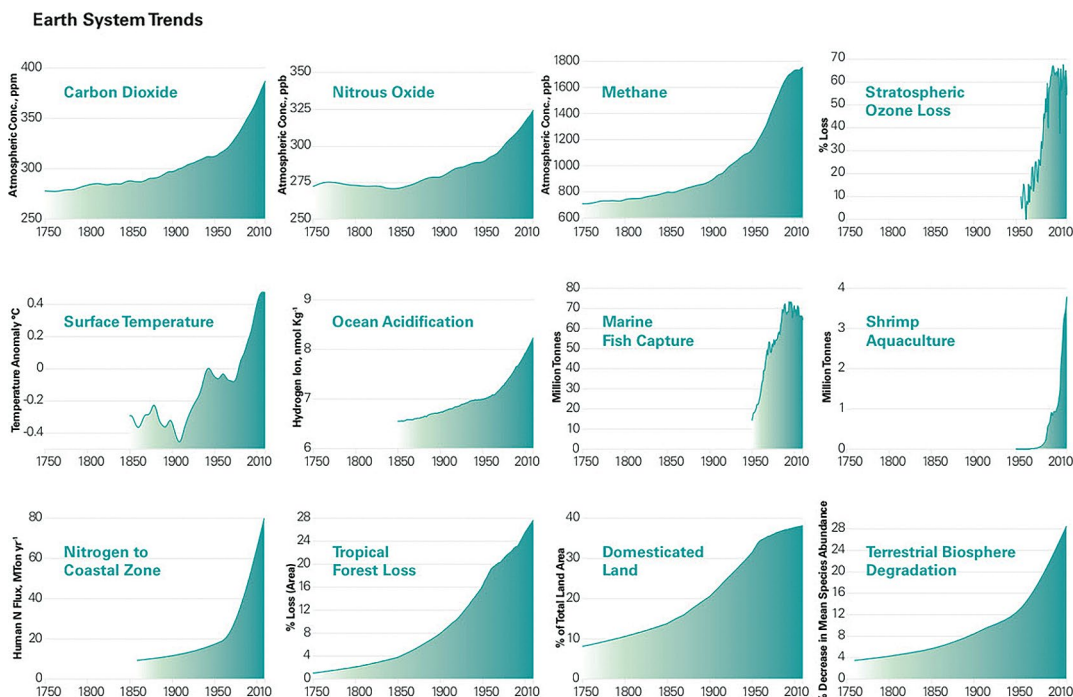


FIGURE 5b. Graphing the ‘great acceleration’ of the Anthropocene: Earth system trends (Angus, 2015; graphic treatment from Leurs, 2020).

Dark Growth

Too Much of a Good Thing

Over the past 200 years, that once-fine set of Enlightenment values has been broken on the wheel of economic growth. Our collective imagination has shrivelled to the dimensions of capital reproduction. We don’t know why the world needs more capital, but it is the one thing we can all agree on. “There’s just not enough money” is a constant refrain.

In 2023 there was a bit over \$450 trillion dollars in capital value sloshing around the planet. Apparently, we need more (at least, according to the 13% of humans who control about 85% of that value).

The reproduction of capital has become a singular point of interest, of shared purpose. And bless our little social hearts, agreeing with one another actually does feel good: there’s a nice morsel of dopamine that comes along with tribal affirmation, and who’s not up for a bit of comfort in these trying times? So, we smile to each other in the noxious,

sputtering glow of the last of the oil, burning our life energies one day at a time to power the engines of finance, chanting gibberish memes loosely based on some long-forgotten promise of emancipation from material precarity.

Despite some minor quibbles, all of us children of Modernity have been conditioned to expect progress through growth. We vote for a growing economy, innovating better solutions, scaling up, more jobs, better opportunities and a positive view on the future. Who doesn’t like to hear about a bit of growth on the balance sheet? We’re all cheering for the home team here.

For those with more mature tastes, *economic-growth-as-salvation* may seem a pitiable belief system. But woe to those who underestimate its determination to persist. We’re talking about a planetary-scale monocrop of the mind. Do not for one moment suppose that it can be displaced except through the fiercest of struggles.

Table 1. Global wealth distribution (Neufeld, 2023).

Net Worth	Number of Adults	Share of Adults	Total Wealth	Share of Global Wealth
More than \$1 million	59 million	1%	\$208.3 trillion	46%
\$100,000 to \$1 million	642 million	12%	\$178.9 trillion	39%
\$10,000 to \$100,000	1800 million	34%	\$61.9 trillion	14%
Less than \$10,000	2800 million	53%	\$5.3 trillion	1%

Limits to Growth?

How difficult is it for us to discuss limits to growth? To consider the possibility that too much growth is too much of a good thing? It can be really hard politically, socially and economically.

The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) developed a position statement and 10 principles to guide planning in the context of climate change. Not one of the 10 principles could even remotely be considered a caution against continued growth. Indeed, the word growth doesn't appear once in the entire position statement.

It's as if the crisis of anthropogenic climate change is entirely unrelated to land-use change or settlement patterns – something like the Cancer Council providing smokers with 10 ways to get the most out of their time in the oncology ward but failing to suggest getting off the smokes.


The PIA is hardly alone in this regard. Over at the Business Council of Australia (BCA) they released a discussion paper at the same time as

PIA's statement, the entire point of which is that Australia is going to be left behind if it doesn't "make the big shifts to move into the fast lane". This warning is interwoven with a deep concern for the environment and the need to shift towards low emissions ... without of course suggesting that less material throughput would be the fastest route to lowering emissions.


The Local Government Association of Queensland's *Action Plan* (2022), released a year later, mentions the word "growth" five times, always in the context of enthusiastically planning for more of it. What Mayor has gotten elected on a platform of slow or no growth? Or a campaign for steady-state economics, or a commitment to reducing their region's material throughput?

Dialling the focus out, see what the engines of economic growth have manifested. Cast your eyes over the wretched spectacle of fracking, spreading like a dark, fungal growth across the Surat Basin, or the ulcerating scars of coal diggings behind

Nearly one in four Australian jobs
are in emissions intensive sectors



But by planning now, laying out a roadmap to reduce our emissions and acting early, we can create new jobs and new, innovative export industries. We can remain internationally competitive and **accelerate the rate of growth in our economy.**



Living on borrowed time

15

FIGURE 6. Business Council of Australia's uncritical support for accelerating economic growth (<https://www.planning.org.au/documents/item/11208>).

Bowen, or the cancerous suburban conurbations creeping along every remaining reserve in Queensland's south-east corner. Not only is it impossible to pull this machinery up with the laws and policies on hand, but the 'capital-reproduction solution pattern' is constantly innovating new ways to persist.

The winners in this system are busy round the clock ensuring that threats are neutralised and obstacles surmounted, that permits are granted and activists are jailed, that investment capital flows freely, jobs are promised, and treasuries are kept on a drip-feed of resource royalties. And this is essentially a blind process: people simply adopting the goals and purposes of their culture, cooperating to smoothly extend whatever winning formula is winning now, no matter how daft it may appear over the longer term.

Given that our cultural purpose is now attenuated to the mere reproduction of capital, which sort of planning instrument do we think is most appropriate to bring about the social and environmental goods we're so obviously in need of?

Narrower Scope Solutions?

In the opening sections of this essay, I have moved well outside the usual framing for discussions about Queensland's planning systems. It's reasonable to ask if this widening of the discussion is really necessary. Don't we risk making the argument so broad that it loses focus?

That's a reasonable objection. I leave it to others to propose narrower scope strategies and, with full respect, acknowledge that there is no perfect singular solution. All contributions count.

There are two specific lines of argument I'd like to highlight here, however, and use them as illustrations of how quickly we end up back at the problems outlined in the opening sections.

1. A Couple of Bad Apples?

Our society is not fundamentally flawed. We're doing well and learning as we go. Regrettable developments like Toondah Harbour are likely the unfortunate product of a few rogue actors. So, do we simply need to focus on laws and punishments to discipline these individuals?

Okay. Meet the man behind Toondah Harbour: Lang Walker AO. Is he our bad apple?

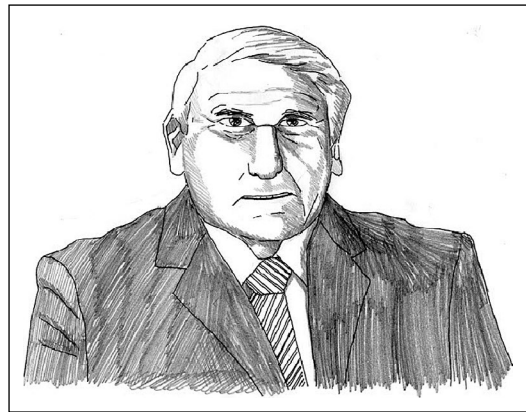


FIGURE 7. Artist's impression of Lang Walker AO (VDog, 2025, by permission; licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Toondah is pocket change for this fellow: a rounding error in his portfolio. Lang has interests elsewhere. He bought an entire island in Fiji and turned it into a private luxury resort. He enjoys his \$35 million sailboat, scoots around on his \$15 million private jet, and has the Prime Minister's special number on his mobile.

Lang is what we like to call a 'self-made man'. A real Australian success story. It started in the 1960s with his father's earthmoving business. Lang earned a clear view of the real world: he knows how to load a tipper; and he understands what good roadbase feels like between your fingers, especially when it comes from your own quarry.

He's whip smart, slick as emu oil, and could run two laps around any of us before the ink was dry. He has skills. He dodged two recessions, and both times came out with even larger piles of cash than he went in with. Lang invested his lifetime learning how to cultivate connections and how to pull strings in the networks that matter. He is an impressive individual. He gets things done. Our culture rewards people like Lang. What Lang says and thinks matters a lot.

Why does he want to develop Toondah Harbour even though it makes no sense in a world of rising sea levels, massive refugee displacements, global food insecurity and the overwhelming urgency of reducing our culture's material excess? I'm not sure he's thought of it that way. Lang Walker emerges from a system that has tuned him for a specific set of values. He can see the concentration of wealth in

South East Queensland (SEQ), the desirability of waterfront property, and he knows how to move his capital through that matrix and emerge with more capital. That's the game he plays.

If little Lang had been born into a democratic socialist society, he would (probably) still have risen to the top of the top because he's just a very exceptional sort of person. He can't help it.

But instead, he was suckled on industrial-strength neoliberalism, with the cult of colonial capitalism framing just about every social norm that the young lad would encounter. It was inevitable that he would author a commercial success story, birthing a corporate colossus that will continue grinding up the real world for many years to come.

Lang doesn't waste time navel-gazing: he memorised the rules of the game early and has spent the rest of his life playing to win. I, for one, would not fancy my chances playing against him.

Sure, we can propose to render rich people for their fat: boiling down Jeff Bezos alone would give every person on the planet a sweet AU\$30, but unless the system is fundamentally changed it will keep churning out little Lang Walker Wannabes. This is not a problem of a few bad apples.

2. Too Many People?

Few questions about humanity's shared future raise such emotional responses as the question of population. But, despite the endless armchair expertise that is expressed on the subject, there seem to be very few well-considered responses. I think that's because the real question is not how many people there are, but how they choose to live.

Are we talking about 'too many people in SEQ'? There is no shortage of technical debate around low density/high density zonings, in-fill developments, traffic congestion, urban sprawl, and infrastructure strain. These issues are all connected to settlement density, and they demand to be addressed. But, in the context of this Challenge, we are considering climate change, a global phenomenon with a sobering range of potential consequences. And anthropogenic climate change is clearly a result of human activity (World Meteorological Organization (WMO), 2025).

It's at this point that population activists will jump in and declare, quite emphatically: "There are too many people!"

Next time you're in range of such a declaration, try an experiment: calmly ask for the ideal number. Simple question: "What is the ideal number of people on the planet?" You'll be lucky to get an answer. Even the most ardent population control campaigners seem to skip past this detail, settling for the more intuitive assertion: "I don't know what the number is, but it's obvious there are too many people."

Rather than simply disagreeing, try this. Ask: "Too many people ... for what?"

If your interlocutor is game, you'll explore a couple of explanations but will likely end up at some form of *there are too many people for everyone to live like we think everyone wants to live*. That is, we know that if the world's current population were to adopt the material lifestyles of the average American/Australian, it would require at least four more planet Earths to provision the resources and handle the wastes involved.

Of course, there are not four extra (empty) Earths handy for harvest, so the conversation starts to get a bit awkward. The population control advocate doesn't want to lower their own material footprint and knows there's not enough material for everyone else to enjoy similar comforts. So ... the only option is 'less people' ... and how is that to be achieved? Ahem?

The dilemma swings around that idea of 'material comfort'. It's an expression of the desire for certainty and an aversion to risk ... just the sorts of things that civilisation has promised to eliminate from our experience.

The problem of materialism is our culture's cross to bear. There's a rich exploration of this topic in the world's wisdom traditions: materialism is nothing new. We simply need to see our cultural dilemma as this class of problem, and we will immediately discover a wealth of strategies and learnings that have been encoded in other cultures from as far back as we know. Start with the Windigo cannibal myths, as discussed by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), and continue to the narcissistic Emu story, recounted by Tyson Yunkaporta (2019). Both are examples of how other cultures have encountered the ever-present risk of materialistic greed and put strict cultural guardrails in place to help people stay on the healthy side of life. Our culture has crashed through the rails like drunken adolescents: an insane global mismatch

between population and per-capita materiality is the direct result.

Personally, I would be enchanted to participate in a sort of phase-change which results in a proper hive mind. For example, the beautiful blue-green Earth might be overjoyed to be home to 20 billion ‘neu-human’ souls ... assuming they were living in a material ephemerality that weighed no more heavily on the planet than the wingbeats of 20 billion bogong moths.

On the other hand, if material consumption continues to be promoted as the totalising goal of human existence, it’s hard to imagine any safe number of people. A few thousand hyper-materialists driven to rage at their own impotence as they stuff more and more stuff into the unfillable god-shaped holes in their hearts could probably wreck the whole joint within a generation. It could be argued that they already are doing exactly that.

From those two extremes, it’s easy enough to see that working out the ‘ideal number’ of people is working on the ‘wrong end of the pineapple’.

Let’s flip it around and ask, “What’s a reasonable minimum of material throughput required for people to live flourishing lives?”



FIGURE 8. Step 1: Orient the question of the pineapple properly (Photo graciously shared by ace tropical gardener Nick; <https://bsky.app/profile/knockaboutwok.bsky.social>; licensed under CC CAC-NC 4.0).

Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter!

Stepping Back: Jumping Better!

Geoff Edwards, the scholar, practitioner and veteran of various Queensland policy processes, suggested that there are three central issues that confront any proposed reforms to the planning systems (personal communication, 2023). Inspired by Geoff’s insights, I propose to step back from the broad assessment provided in the first half of this essay and offer a somewhat more tractable summary drawn from that context.

Any proposal to reform Queensland’s planning systems needs to address three meta-structural issues:

1. **Science Needs to Guide Our Decisions.** In other words, it’s time to act a bit more rationally. And to do this, we need to recognise that we confront both problems and dilemmas. Science must absolutely be applied to our problems ... but our dilemmas are going to need old-school wisdom and judgement.
2. **The Idea of Unlimited Capital Growth Should Be Quarantined and Treated as a Super Virus.** There’s no way to put lipstick on this pig: capitalism has captured our social DNA and is relentlessly optimising the world to reproduce capital. Our public institutions have been captured by private interests. The capitalist mind-virus must be isolated and neutralised.
3. **Rebuilding Our Society and Culture Needs to Be a Self-Conscious Project.** Governance systems arise from cultural narratives. We will need to commit to a shared purpose if our institutions are going to recover and re-establish themselves to serve the public good. Objectification of us and the world has exceeded the limits of utility.

The Toondah Harbour Test

Further, any proposed reform needs a way to express what success looks like. What could be better than what we have now?

The ‘Queensland planning systems’ are a big space. Defining, mapping and modelling the systems (if we could even agree on the edges of such systems) would be difficult, and the predictive power of the resulting model would be exceedingly difficult to test. So, if it’s impractical to model the

planning systems with sufficient accuracy, how are we going to test the various proposals for change and improvement?

Dealing with this sort of complexity is a challenge. A proxy indicator can be used, in the same way that an ecosystem scientist will confront the daunting complexity of a wetland environment by taking the presence or absence of frogs to give an indirect assessment of water quality.

The Toondah Harbour development will serve as such a proxy. This development represents much of what can be seen as outright failure of Queensland's planning systems. Much like the absence of frogs can indicate a sick wetland, the presence of a Toondah Harbour just about certifies that the planning systems (and the society they express) are very, very broken.

An Alternative to Growthism Human Capabilities

One of the best frameworks for an alternative to growthism is found in the work of Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen. In *Well-being, Capability and Public Policy* (1994), Sen positions economic growth as just one strategy in the larger objective of maximising human capabilities. Yes,

a growing economy can be a good thing, but only insofar as it serves the ultimate purposes of society and the individuals within it.

Sen has provided an excellent foundation for further discussion on what an ideal life requires, and how society balances notions of individual freedom with group needs. Sen (1994) elaborates human capabilities as a valid purpose around which a culture should be centred, and through which our social structures should emerge. An alternative society will ensure it maximises human capabilities, providing the opportunity for individuals and communities to flourish. Sen thus offers us an alternative *raison d'être* for society. This is a profound contribution.

Instead of blind material and capital accumulation, Sen emphasises the importance of sufficiency for purpose. This provides space for flourishing. Unlike growthism, the idea of flourishing carries a sense of self-limit, or the instinct to *avoid increase past the point of benefit*, as Sen might say. Flourishing invites expansion into care, skill, consideration and mastery. We call a tumour a cancerous growth, not a flourishing. A concerto, having drawn us into a breathtaking moment of utter enchantment, may end with a flourish ... not a growth.



FIGURE 9. Toondah Harbour as a mirage of an illusion (Visual: DALL-E derivative of Walker Corp artist's impression of a speculative real estate play; <https://openai.com/dall-e> (2025); licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

I believe that the idea of flourishing also embraces the difficulties, obstructions, limits and pain that come along with the experience of a full life. Even the reality of death becomes a welcome and necessary point of closure, as worthy of respect and celebration as the moment of birth presents a point of miraculous beginnings. Flourishing connects to the *real* world through alignment with the cycles that all life breathes through. Growth, in the old moral sense, also contains some of this nuance, but I reckon growth has become too colonised by the metaphors of capital reproduction to serve us well at this point.

Sen is a product of our culture: he is committed to the idea of Progress and is firmly situated in the best of our Enlightenment values. However, I also see that he creates a bridge to the wisdom traditions of Indigenous and non-Western cultures. For example, Graeber and Wengrow (2021) give a fascinating account of the exchange of worldviews that occurred between the early French Jesuits and the Wendat philosopher Kondiaronk (ca. 1680s). Kondiaronk was absolutely baffled by how men who claimed to be ‘civilised’ appeared to be so utterly greedy and materialistic. It was incomprehensible to him that the people of a society could tolerate the suffering of poverty and hunger amongst their fellow citizens. How barbaric! This ethic is also reflected in the way Indigenous Australian cultures ensure that material resources are shared: the basic capabilities for a full life are available to all, without ‘means testing’.

Sen, in his gentle yet insistent way, is pointing in a similar direction: the capability to be fully human means firstly that we must take care of one another.

Capability to Flourish

Per Sen, people need the basics. They need a minimum of caloric intake to achieve biological function. They need opportunities for social connection, and they need sufficient geographic stability to feel ‘at home’ with the other-than-human world (a relationship that takes a bit of time to develop). Perhaps, most critically, people need a sense of individual and collective purpose as well as the freedom to participate in the construction and maintenance of that purpose.

How does that relate to population numbers and settlement density?

It sets the stage for a discussion of what a decentralised landscape in SEQ might look like. In a nutshell: one doesn’t need a lot of pineapples to flourish in this world; one simply needs a sufficiency.

Flourishing on the Land

Not Cities: Villages

There is no theoretical or demonstrated success pattern for human populations to thrive at urban densities. The older and larger cities of the world may provide many lessons for urban planning, but they do not explain how we deal with South East Queensland, much less the prickly question of Toondah Harbour. And there is simply no relevant experience or theory to assure the long-term viability of phenomena like Lagos, Bengaluru, Beijing or Dhaka.

Cities have a troubled history, especially in relation to their material requirements.

The current crop of mega-cities are reliant on the uninterrupted material flows of truly staggering amounts of energy and waste, shifting around in a daily flux that is vulnerable to shock, and which requires an increasing proportion of resources to stay ahead of a mounting maintenance load.

There are valid arguments to suggest that per-capita energy use is more efficient at an urban scale, but the fact is no city has yet managed to reach a population of one million and hold that steady for longer than a few hundred years. It is not clear that mega-cities and urban sprawl are a winning formula.

On the other hand, we have the horticultural village (‘horticultural village’ in the anthropological sense; There’s a reasonable definition on Wikipedia at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horticulture>, but of course, this is history). What could it be like? A largely self-sufficient community reliant on low tech and high sociality. Just permanent enough to buffer against minor climate variations, but ephemeral enough to not kill its inhabitants in a vain attempt to resist overwhelming environmental change.

Contrast this to SEQ. There is practically no habit of mutual problem solving embedded in the urban culture ... unless of course it is routed through the marketplace. We are far more dependent on the tech and built infrastructure than we

are dependent on one another. Our society has engineered a concrete carapace for itself. Without it, the people are quite helpless. There is no real capability for Brisbane to decamp and seek a better location. Brisbane can only degenerate and disperse. What would ‘our culture’ look like then?

Don’t get me wrong: cities might be a good evolutionary gambit in some set of conditions. It’s just that at this point in the Earth’s history they appear to be a self-defeating exercise. Queensland’s planning systems are not going to respond meaningfully to climate change because there is an immovable city full of grumpy, frightened children in the way.

Aside from other advantages, think about it just from the point of view of structural resilience: a village of 1200 people can decamp from their built infrastructure if needed. What they carry with them is their habit of co-dependence, their reliance on one another to meet challenges together.

They carry with them an intensely refined set of protocols for dealing with disagreement and uncertainty. Horticultural villagers are, of course, context dependent: they have grown used to the particular soils, waters and ways of the land where they live. So, decamping would be a shocking affair. However, because they are masters of operations at village scale, they literally embody their society and can redeploy it as a shared, portable solution pattern.

Demand for a Decentralised Future?

Compelling visions for a decentralised settlement policy for Queensland have been put forward even in relatively recent times (Boyden & Dovers, 2020; Roberts, 1984). In the paper by Stephen Boyden and Stephen Dovers, cited by David Marlow in the background paper to this Challenge, a *Phase 5* landscape is proposed. This refers to a village-scale settlement pattern that promotes “a truly bio-sensitive society that satisfies the biological needs of all sections of the human population and of the ecosystems of the biosphere on which they depend”. This is in close alignment with Sen’s recommendations for human capabilities.

There’s a fair bit of human labour involved in a horticultural village ... you know, what they used to call ‘sweat equity’. Yet, for all its grittiness, there’s something powerful and profound about that mixing of sweat, blood and tears with the physical foundations of our settlements.



FIGURE 10. Farmers are the original masters of fashion! (Visual: DALL-E derivative of a lovely photo of a stylish woman of the land; licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0; <https://www.istockphoto.com/portfolio/xalanx>).

There’s no doubt that our ancestors lived amazing lives. Horticultural villages have perhaps been our most stable organisation pattern. They certainly seem to be an efficient arrangement for the production of culture. Think of the great works of humanity, providing insights to the nature of love, despair, loneliness, contentment, curiosity and joy: most all of these were authored by people camped up in horticultural villages, eating simple, nutritious diets, wearing basic farmer-chic outfits, and dealing with life’s unavoidable uncertainties as best they could.

How Big Is a Self-reliant Horticultural Village?

What might a decentralised horticultural village settlement pattern look like? Where are the edges of such a proposition? Is each village required to develop a small-scale metallurgical capability? Or to grow, spin and weave its own cloth? How much of the ‘modern world’ would be desirable or possible?

How Much Stuff Is Required for Humans to (Truly) Flourish?

These questions are difficult to approach, but that's illustrative of another difficulty in our mainstream discussions: how are we to plan for resilience at expanding levels of climate catastrophe? What assumptions can be made about the ongoing availability of food, manufactured goods, electrical power, liquid fuels, medicines or technical expertise? Pushing into these questions can yield a bounty of learnings relevant for the likely future.

There have been some excellent modelling efforts to test the capacity of agroecology and regenerative agriculture to provide subsistence nutrition to human communities (see, for example, *Greening the Desert Project*, Miatton & Risheq, 2015). However, there are so many open questions around the system boundaries of a 'self-reliant community' that I will only offer a very rough estimate of the land area required for a decentralised settlement pattern.

The key variables would be land type, climatic regime and resultant population density. Along with lifestyle demands of course (i.e. material throughput) as this is the main variable in our current culture.

The horticultural village assumes a high degree of sustenance gardening, complex ecological arrangements to promote local self-sufficiency, low dependency on materials and technologies that cannot be locally sourced, and governance systems that reflect the community's primary dependence on the land.

I selected a handful of nations for their various relations to our conditions. For example, Argentina and Iraq share a lot of landscape features with Queensland. Bhutan and Iraq have communities succeeding

with high degrees of material self-sufficiency. Switzerland is thoroughly developed but also achieves high levels of self-sufficiency in agriculture.

For each country I have taken total population and divided it by total land area to get a gross density. Using available estimates, I subtracted the percentage of the country that has been deemed 'unusable' in the gross sense (e.g. boulder fields and glaciers in Switzerland and Bhutan, wetlands and desert in Argentina and Queensland). I did not pull out the area of existing urban settlement or existing conservation reserves.

This gives an extremely rough figure for the net population density spread evenly across the landscape. In terms of settlement density, this would suggest that Australia as a whole is well underpopulated, and Queensland is especially so. We are, of course, the 'driest inhabited continent in the world' and confront ancient, depauperate soils, so there are mitigating factors that help explain our sparse population. But I'm not sure if the people in Argentina or Iraq have twice or 10-fold better water security or that our soils can't be rebuilt.

Basically, Queensland could handle a lot more people – if they were living lightly on the land and patiently increasing its abundance and their own flourishing instead of being strapped like suicide bombers to the side of a planet-eating economic system.

Flipping the population density over, here's a net figure for the amount of land provided per person in each country. As you can see, the Iraqis are only using 0.6 of a hectare to provision the needs of a person, whereas Bhutan and Argentina budget a bit over 4 hectares per person. My proposed 3-hectare figure is in range.

Table 2. Approximation of net population density across a selection of comparable lands.

	Switzerland	Iraq	Bhutan	Argentina	Queensland	Australia
Population	8,700,000	43,500,000	777,000	46,000,000	5,500,000	26,000,000
Total area (km ²)	41,000	438,000	38,000	2,800,000	1,850,000	7,700,000
Pop./km ² (gross)	212	99	20	16	3	3
Unusable land	30%	40%	15%	30%	60%	70%
Net usable (km ²)	28,700	262,800	32,300	1,960,000	740,000	2,310,000
Net density (pop./km ²)	303	166	24	23	7	11

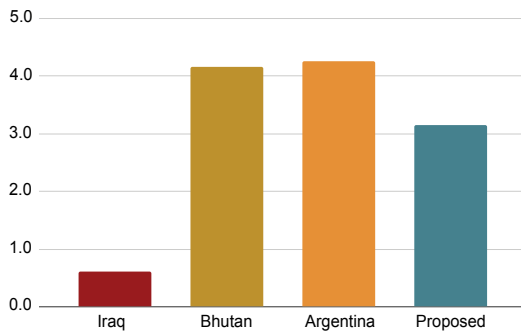


FIGURE 11. Amount of land provisioned per person.

How Much Flour in a Flourishing?

With a 3.15 ha/person allowance, what might be a budget for the various provisioning services? Running the figures this way helps us imagine the practicality of a given settlement density. Provisioning services come in two forms:

- the *land for production* (as in a plot of yam daisy) (see Bruce Pascoe (2014) who has brought the concept of Aboriginal ‘horticulture’ into wider public view) but only at very low and mobile ‘non-settlement’ densities; and
- the *land as spatial asset* (as in enough space for a home and a village centre).

Again, the available data is sparse and all over the shop, betraying a lack of research focus on the question. From what I could gather, and using my own intuition, Table 3 presents some individual and collective figures for a self-reliant village of 1200 people.

This is a step towards a notional ‘land budget’ that could be provided to each settlement. In this case, we visualise about 4000 hectares to support a population of 1200 people.

Extending this in the most simplistic way possible, we could say that to shift 25% of SEQ’s current ~4 million population into about 1000 horticultural settlements would take something like 34,650 km² of land.

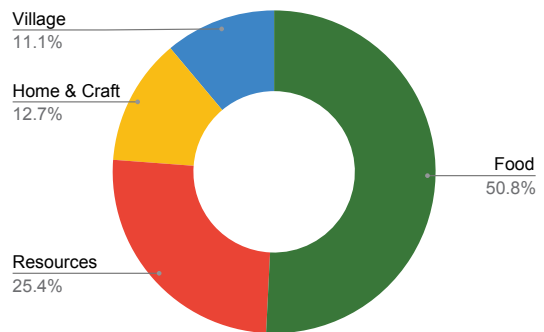


FIGURE 12. Deriving an estimated settlement size from areas required for types of provisioning.

Table 3. Details for deriving an estimated settlement size from areas required for types of provisioning.

Needs	Per-person	Ha	Settlement size
Food	horticulture	0.2	1200 population
Food	grains/cereals	0.5	
Food	livestock	0.7	Settlement density
Food	orchard	0.2	
Resources	timber	0.5	
Resources	fuel	0.3	
Home & Craft	dwelling	0.1	3780 ha
Home & Craft	craft	0.3	
Village	common area	0.1	
Village	logistics	0.25	
ha per person		3.15	37.8 km ²
Family		4	
ha/per family		12.6	

31.7 pax/km²

This area is currently home to about 1100 people. I've made a lot of outlandish assumptions here, but that's essential. These settlements cannot be pre-designed or pre-determined. The whole point is that they are to be established by particular people in particular circumstances. What these new settlers need to be prepped on is not a specific material technology, but rather the skills to develop a set of individual and social purposes which will bind the community together and maximise its chances for flourishing.

I am pretty confident we're going to find ourselves leading lower-energy lives soon enough. These proposed villages would be one way to render our planning systems fit for purpose ... by shifting our purpose to more explicitly align with the conditions of our foreseeable future.

This is not a 'return to the caves'. It is a voyage of cultural transformation. The Ayn Rand enthusiasts need not fret: humans will still compete,

and excellence will still rise to the top. It's just that instead of rewarding the materialistic nonsense of Modernity, people will be striving to complexify a fundamentally biophilic social context. Surfing life's uncertainties, participating deeply in its unavoidable ecstasy and despair, tending to ever-deepening networks of connection across the human and other-than-human realms ... this is how people of great talent and skill will be investing their time. These will be the grounds on which social status is measured and cultural merit is assessed.

In this congenial alternative future, I fully expect that we could visit those villages and find any number of young people trying to out-do one another at the '4-D poetry slams' and 'regen agriculture festivals' of the day.

One of the most promising talents could be a young Lang Skywalker. I'd love to see him succeed in that alternative cultural framework: we'd all be winners.



FIGURE 13. Shown here is an idea of what a settlement zone for 1.1 million people might look like, if they were living largely self-sufficient lives of material simplicity (Visual: Author; licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



FIGURE 14. Horticultural production under extreme conditions in the Dead Sea Valley, Jordan (Photo: Rawan Risheq; <https://www.greeningthedesertproject.org/support-species-for-a-dryland-food-forest-a-practical-example>).

Does It Pass the Test?

Now I will submit the horticultural village proposition to the Toondah Harbour Test.

Given the vision for decentralised horticultural villages, explain how it interacts with the three meta-structural issues in such a way that Toondah Harbour is not repeated.

1. Science as Oracle

Climate change impacts are arising more rapidly and intensely than anticipated. We are past the point of debate: from here forward, science should be the fundamental discipline driving decisions across society.

Response	Pass/Fail
<p>There is no doubt of science's utility in explaining the physical causes of the climate crisis. Science is perfectly capable of charting the deadly course we are on. A rational assessment of the situation would suggest that urban settlements are at increasing risk from climate impacts on their brittle support systems, as well as being vulnerable to contagion, social unrest and mental deterioration.</p> <p>The decentralised proposition represents an important risk mitigation strategy. It lowers the intensity in urban areas (~25% reduction of SEQ population) and it creates a mosaic settlement pattern with much higher competency for dealing with local provisioning.</p> <p>In seeking a flourishing life, individuals and communities will naturally seek to enjoy the enormous benefits that flow from the proper use of science and its objective methods. However, science will also need to find its place as just one of a range of tools that can be deployed. Science in its proper place is as important as economics in its proper place.</p>	<p>Flourishing does not depend on a single modality.</p> <p>Science will be a critical contributor to our survival, but it is not sufficient in itself.</p> <p><i>Provisional pass</i></p>

2. *Unlimited Capital Growth as a Super Virus*

There is no way to ‘harness capital’ or ‘leverage the market’ to reliably deliver public goods. In every context where capital is allowed to seek speculative returns, capitalist priorities capture and suppress all competing interests.

Response	Pass/Fail
<p>The decentralised flourishing initiative is to be achieved with public funds issued by the sovereign Commonwealth of Australia. The fiscal debt resulting from this investment will be simply zeroed out, as is the prerogative of the nation state.</p> <p>All works are to be paid at fair prices without concern for low bids. The central concerns are safety, quality, and fitness for purpose.</p> <p>Since there is no scarcity of funds, only natural shortages (of material, time, talent, etc.) need to be dealt with. Price gouging can only occur where there is insufficient social buy-in to the initiative, so public support needs to be secured in the first instance. Once there is a clear public mandate, the project can be run as a commons, and the people themselves will police the acceptable limits of compensation.</p> <p>There is no prohibition on commercial activity, but the initiative does not depend on investment capital. It does not depend on ongoing rates income. It does not seek to generate export income. Communities will be subsidised as needed, but there's only so much that money can buy; self-reliance will arise from engagement with the land and the community itself.</p> <p>This is the first step towards a post-capitalist economy.</p>	<p>The decentralised flourishing is not dependent on, or beholden to, investment capital or ongoing profit.</p> <p>Money facilitates transactions of use-value.</p> <p>There is no speculative real estate market.</p> <p><i>Pass</i></p>

3. *Society and Culture as a Self-conscious Project*

Governance systems arise from cultural narratives that have become a shared purpose. We will have to commit to a shared purpose if our institutions are going to recover and re-establish themselves to serve the public good.

Response	Pass/Fail
<p>The flourishing is a proposal for a new shared narrative. It affirms the material needs of all living beings, while at the same time cautioning that the profound essence of life is not found within material excess.</p> <p>The flourishing is aimed at outcompeting the consumerist and materialistic basis of our current culture by offering <i>improved material security</i> for the essential physical enablers of life while reducing the role of materiality as a foundation for a life well lived.</p>	<p>Flourishing is an alternative organising principle for our culture.</p> <p><i>Pass</i></p>

Conclusion

A decentralised collection of horticultural villages sufficient for 1.1 million people in the backblocks of Queensland will require tremendous changes to our society.

In that society, the accumulation and display of material excess will seem like a sort of personality failure, or arrested development. Enthusiasm for unlimited growth will be treated as a sociopathic disorder. The concept of Toondah Harbour will fail to excite public interest or private support.

Because our common purpose will have shifted away from the reproduction of capital and towards

a far more holistic and congenial constellation of pleasures, the planning systems that arise from that alternative society will be far more fit for purpose to navigate climate instability.

With the flourishing of horticultural villages, Toondah Harbour would not proceed.

Calls to Action

The flourishing and the decentralised settlement pattern of horticultural villages seem like something well outside our ability to discuss in public. This is a problem, because we are suffocating in the confines of our current culture. Not one in a

thousand across the Gold Coast's 270,000 households is going to vote to significantly reduce their material privilege, no matter how inspiring it may sound. But here's the thing: materialism is driving us into a condition of material insecurity anyway. If our consumer habits don't kill us directly, the collapsing ecosystems and climate chaos are going to present some trying times indeed.

There is no silver bullet solution. So, what we need are a bunch of tactical actions that can at least prime the space for a larger public conversation to occur. Change is needed at every scale. Try using this succinct argument from Dr Peter Sutoris (2021) as a way to open conversations about our shared future and the potential for change:

Ultimately, degrowth is inevitable. We will either choose this path voluntarily, or we will be forced into it violently and uncontrollably as a result of environmental disasters. If we want to prevent the suffering and tragedies that accompany such drastic shifts, we must bring about a culture of degrowth. And where the cultural winds blow, the political winds will follow.

Given the audience for this essay, can I suggest a work plan to engage with the leadership of various professional and representative bodies to get some of the groundwork in place for a change of culture, towards a decentralised flourishing. Here are some examples:

Planning Institute of Australia/Queensland

1. Re-visit the Planning Principles statement and connect the consequence of climate change with the driver: our cultural fixation on unlimited growth.
2. Set up a special interest group that supports and promotes research into radical resettlement scenarios.
3. Develop precautionary principles for public and private infrastructure so that there is more appreciation of the catastrophic system disruptions associated with extreme weather, e.g. Natural Hazards Research Australia (NHRA).
4. Partner with the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) to model a self-reliant horticultural village.
5. Sponsor research funds and awards to showcase work that extends prior proposals for a decentralised settlement pattern.

LGAQ

1. Introduce a new Special Project to sit alongside the Queensland Climate Resilient Councils (Q CRC). The new project would be dedicated to developing Council-scale strategies to encourage steady-state economics. The idea would be to provide coherent options to the growth treadmill that most Councils are stuck on, e.g. Center for the Advancement of the Steady State Economy, Transition Towns (<https://steadystate.org/tag/transition-towns>).
2. Sponsor awards for innovation towards higher quality of life for lower material consumption.
3. Introduce a standardised community wellbeing survey that focuses on the themes of human capabilities and flourishing as opposed to material affluence. Publish this as a headliner to show the public's year-on-year interest in something other than the jobs-growth-consume triumvirate.

Business Council of Australia

1. Work on a way to define an upper limit for the amount of capital it takes for all Australians to enjoy a full life. Call this the 'MaxCap'; that is, the point at which additional capital serves no further utilitarian (human capabilities) purpose.
2. Fund researchers to work out how that economy could deliver the goods and services that are needed for a fair standard of living and show that further economic growth will be increasingly counterproductive.
3. Support a tax system that serves to remove excess capital from private funds so that speculative and distorting investment is reduced.
4. Show how these two strategies align with the principles that are presented in the 2021 Economic Future discussion paper.

SEQ Community Alliance/Royal Society

1. Workshop a handful of vital metrics that can act as a proxy for testing the public's appetite for supporting and/or living in a network of flourishing horticultural villages.
2. Package these metrics and promote to the public and to the policy makers. Don't stop.
3. Inspire/nudge an eminent professional to develop a thorough instrumental critique of the planning systems in Queensland so that those immersed in the profession can better grasp the outlines of opportunities to bring the planning systems back towards their original public-good purposes (particularly in the context of climate change).



FIGURE 15. Demonstrators take part in the Global Climate Strike on 24 September 2021 in Manhattan, New York City (Visual: DALL-E derivative of an excellent Spencer Platt photo; <https://openai.com/dall-e> (2025); licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Conclusions

Reviewing the Map

I have positioned a network of decentralised horticultural villages in Queensland as the appropriate outcome of planning systems that are fit for purpose in the age of climate change. Since anthropogenic climate change itself is an emergent property of Modernity, I have broadened the discussion to show that it has been the specific values of post-Enlightenment European societies, metastasising across the planet via science, finance and fossil fuels, that have powered the complex dynamics of global-scale climatic instability.

Queensland, as a social abstraction, is firmly situated within this matrix and proceeds from it. Changes to the planning systems operating within Queensland are circumscribed by the limits of what changes can be tolerated by the cultural framework.

Thus, to change the planning systems is to change the culture.

The cultural framework is itself a complex adaptive system with a high degree of dynamic stability. Strategies for changing the cultural framework, typically proposed through incrementalism or revolution, both meet stiff resistance as they encounter the inertia of business-as-usual.

In the context of climate change, the degree and speed of change needed – not just to the built environment, but to the governance and social arrangements that precede it – appear to be far greater than what BaU can tolerate.

This leads to what appears as a ‘choice’. Either:

- A. *Cultural coherence is enforced* (BaU persists, and thus the rate and extent of societal change is insufficient) leading to the disintegration of urban civilisation as ecosystems collapse; or
- B. *BaU is rapidly transformed* (via some as-yet-unknown mechanism) so that urban civilisation can continue, though on very different terms from its current state.

Since both paths involve profound and unavoidable change, we must come to terms with the inevitability of an end to ‘our way of life’ and the subsequent mystery of what comes next. There is no path that delivers certainty. Thus, any activity we can undertake now, from joining a volunteer group to raising provocative questions over the dinner table, is a contribution towards the social competencies we will be needing as Modernity draws to a close.

Ultimately, we may decide (or be forced to conclude) that while Modernity seems to have delivered Progress, it is increasingly apparent that Progress is alienating us from the real world that we are contiguous with. This is not a defeatist position; it is a cool assessment of reality.

The South American scholar Olivia Macahdo de Oliveria (2022) teaches the practice of “hospicing modernity”. That is, instead of rushing to kill it off or desperately trying to prolong its term, we can recognise that, like all eras, this one is simply drawing to its close; no blame – no shame.

We can choose to encounter this moment with dignity, humour and compassion. Imagine sitting bedside with an elder. Offer respect and learn lessons from what worked well. Make an unflinching assessment of what failed. Old truths are

remembered, and new ideas arise. Sing some songs and say goodbye. The great wheel turns.

Lewis Carroll (1893) relates the tale of a village that had come perilously close to collapse. One day things got so bad that everyone finally crowded together to figure out what to do. A clever woman had the idea of drawing a simple map of their valley in the sand. It immediately became clear that the villagers could improve their lot by making a few adjustments: getting water closer to the croplands; creating better transit; and, of course, making the town square more suitable for collective planning.

Their changes had an immediate and beneficial impact. Enthused, the village came together the next year and repeated the exercise, but this time with a slightly higher-resolution map. Again, the rewards were very encouraging.

The villagers quickly accelerated the process, adding more and more detail to each version of the map. For a while, the possibilities seemed unlimited. However, as a chronicler of the time noted:

After considerable effort, we had replicated everything onto the map, 1:1 scale. We had a complete model of the valley. But the map was now so large and detailed that it was too big to be deployed. It would have blocked out the sun and caused the farmers no end of complaint. So, we made a big decision: we threw away the map and decided to use the valley itself as our map. And I can assure you it works just as well.

It's not that maps are bad. It's not that models are pointless. The villagers went through a process and learned something. Perhaps it's a necessary cycle: over the past handful of generations, it has been necessary for us Moderns to move through the experience of civilisation in order to realise that it is only a map, not the territory.

Shifting towards the horticultural villages is not only sensible from a survival standpoint, but also an elegant opportunity to throw the map away and re-encounter the territory.



FIGURE 16. During the preparation of this paper, my community experienced the worst flooding in its history – December 2023 (Photo: Author; licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.).



FIGURE 17. Toondah Harbour as proposed by Walker Corporation (As interpreted by DALL-E (2025); licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

We're Not Alone

It's possible to conclude that the humans of Modernity will not choose to change. In fact, this seems likely. Projects like Toondah Harbour will go ahead. The Queensland Government will remain addicted to the drip feed of coal and gas resource royalties. And people will continue to vote for politicians who tell them the heroic story of our lucky country and the always brighter future that Progress will deliver.

And maybe things won't get too awful in SEQ for decades to come (the way some people seem to be able to smoke and drink to excess and still maintain basic motor skills years longer than others). But it does seem inevitable that the chickens will come home to roost eventually. So, what keeps us from summoning the collective willpower to change our way of life now, before things get so far out of hand?

BaU packs a staggering amount of inertia. There are plenty of options, but Modernity makes it really hard for us to hear Country, to lower our own voices, to sit in mystery, to learn a necessary discipline of the spirit. As a culture, we're still quite full of ourselves. Growth, progress, power: no limits. There's not a lot of evidence that Western society is

going to find the guts to kick these habits any time soon, at least not through its own devices.

Addiction can be a terrible revelation for the addict. I well remember the day, as a 'recreational smoker', when I realised that, in the midst of quitting, my brain was also conspiring to secure the uninterrupted flow of nicotine. While my best intentions went one way, the rest of my body made it impossible to put the smokes away. I wept in frustration as my hands ran on autopilot, delivering the next rollie and maintaining the BaU that 'I' was clearly incidental to. There's Buckley's chance that Queensland's planning systems can be rendered fit for the challenges of climate change.

A shock or an intervention can sometimes help an individual to mend their ways. A terrible accident, perhaps, will shake a person up so much that they are able to settle into a new set of habits. Maybe it will take the calamity of climate change for our extraordinary culture to finally grow up and take its place in service to the community of all human cultures and all living things.

The horticultural villages proposed here are a way to explain how Queensland's planning systems can be rendered fit for purpose in the context

of climate change. There's only one way to quit the destructive habits of Modernity. Quit. But who can do it all by themselves?

I believe an essay like this is supposed to connect with an acceptable theory of change, but perhaps we're wrong about how deep changes come about. I wonder if the deeper lesson about change is that we (humans) need help to become who we are supposed to be. We need a point of reference outside ourselves. The Aboriginal philosopher Mary Graham likes to say that *people need a preface* (2021). For Aboriginal people, Country is the preface. It is what comes before and what comes after. Country is first.

Mary is a Quandamooka woman: Toondah Harbour is part of her Country. I wonder if Lang Walker has ever listened to Mary talk about Country? I'd pay to hear that conversation! Maybe one day Lang will front up at a horticultural village, ready to start a new life. I certainly would, given the chance.

There's a lesson in finding one's own limits. It can be humbling ... and perhaps that humility actually is a survival advantage. Maybe it is essential to understand that nothing is all about us: we are always in the company of the mysterious other. It was the imminent arrival of our first child that

spurred my wife and I to finally gather the strength to leave the smokes behind, 20 years ago. We could not have done it on our own.

People are magnificent creatures, and they are of the same matter as all the other astonishing creations thrown up by the restless process of life. We are inseparable from and entirely contingent with the rest of the world. In this sense, we are not the sole authors of our own futures ... nor should we seek to be.

An evolutionary leap is only possible, I think, at the point where a person or a culture or a species finds its place in the deep communion of others. Perhaps finding our way towards a proper flourishing will only happen by the grace of the other humans and the other-than-human beings we share this planet with.

While we're trying to understand what that might mean, as individuals and as a society, we can at least make provision for others to speak, to represent their own agency, and to pursue their own interests with the same set of rights we assume for ourselves.

Leaving the curlews a bit of tasty mudflat would be a good start.



FIGURE 18. Redlands 2030 project (Photo: Chris Walker, by permission; <https://redlands2030.net>).

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And acknowledgements especially to my partner and collaborator Caroline Lieber for her incisive feedback and intellectual rigour. All errors and shortcomings in the text are likely the result of my ignoring her good advice.

ChatGPT 3.5 has been used to assist with corroboration of a handful of my sweeping claims and to simulate chronological reality. The results are probably accurate. No ChatGPT text has been used: all word salads are my own. The AI image generator DALL-E has been employed to produce completely fabricated stand-ins for certain images that appeared in the original submission of this paper:

- Walker Corp commissioned their architects to produce detailed and persuasive ‘artist’s impressions’ of Toondah Harbour which were aggressively pushed into the public view during the campaign to get the development approved. However, when I approached Walker Corp for permission to use these images, to accurately reflect what they were proposing, they declined. No reasoning was offered. Toondah Harbour was *not* given approval by the Commonwealth, so perhaps Walker

Corp’s vision of the future was no more a reflection of reality than the hallucinations of DALL-E.

- The image of protestors on the street in New York is a derivative of a photo by the very talented Spencer Platt (2022 Pulitzer Prize winner). The original is here: <https://www.gettyimages.com.au/detail/news-photo/demonstrators-take-part-in-the-global-climate-strike-in-news-photo/1342331019>. Rights to the photo are managed by Getty Images. Unfortunately, Getty has no commitment to supporting academic use or non-profit public good. They insisted on a hefty rights fee which I cannot afford. So, instead of giving Spencer’s photo a bit more circulation to a new audience, I wasted a few tonnes of datacentre methane to recreate almost the exact same image via AI ‘tools’ pushed by sociopathic tech-bros Sorry Spencer. Good ‘on ya’, Getty.

Fans of Lewis Carroll’s work may appreciate my elaboration of the almost incidental passage in *Sylvie & Bruno Concluded* (1893). The idea of a map that covers the sky also appears in Jorge Luis Borges’ pseudo history *On Exactitude in Science* (1946), makes an appearance in the dizzying exploration of abstractions in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (2003), and is interpreted as a dream of the perfect map (Vrbančić, 2012).

Ethical Feast is a loose collection of ideas I maintain for public interest. I have no conflicts to declare.

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Author Profile

John Brisbin BA (Marine Engineering & Nautical Science), MSc (Complex Systems Theory & Organisational Development) arrived in Australia in 1993 after leaving the USA over political and cultural differences. He was the founding employee of Social Change Online, one of Australia's first web-tech startups and worked with many State and Commonwealth agencies, NGOs and research groups as an information solutions architect. He has been Chair of the Northern Gulf Resource Management Group and serves as a director of various public-good organisation boards including the National Landcare Network, the Mitchell River Watershed Catchment Group, and the Australian Rangeland Society.

Currently John, Caroline and their two offspring are opening up the heavy shale-clay soils and fascinating social strata of the Mount Molloy district with an eye towards patterning a tropically adapted Ayurvedic community garden. John writes and researches on village-scale self-sufficiency and an entropy-grounded theory of ethics. He is guided by a personal mantra: "i am what i eat | i am the change i want to see."