Cars or children

I. The appearance of the car and disappearance of the child

In the 1940s Australia had seven million people. In 2026 it has thirty million. We don't use trains. We drive cars, and that started at the end of the Second World War. The result is that we live under a sea of roofs, each served by a road carrying a procession of vehicles at a snail's pace. Vehicles accrue at three or four per family. Rather than underground or in the air, this plays out at the surface, in the midst of the infrastructure. The driver must be super-alert. The pedestrian even more so. The children who played in the street before the advent of the automobile are no more. And therein lies a problem.

From above, our settlements look like a monstrous beehive. What beekeepers do is separate the hives. What humans do is add houses in a stack and side by side and around the edge, as tight as the proverbial fish's [Redacted]. And we try to own as many houses as we can because they are the best hedge against inflation. This drives up home values faster than people's incomes. The result is an underclass that can't afford a house. They must rent, and the older they get the more they suffer, because they don't own the asset that gives them the ability to rest and recuperate. And, in any case the asset, from a child's point of view, is a gaol, a penitentiary, a prison.

Intensifying development within cities, whether around transport nodes or 'filling in the missing middle' simply intensifies the problem, heightens the danger and magnifies the expense.

II. The child is the argument

A child needs other children. Not on a schedule. Not at a playdate arranged a week in advance by two exhausted parents comparing calendars. A child needs to be able to walk out the door and find other children, at the drop of a hat, on their own volition, and simply play.

That is how a child learns to listen. To comprehend. To take turns. To invent rules and then argue about them and then agree on them. To lose and not fall apart. To lead and to follow. To pay attention. This is not a sentimental claim. It's a warning based on experience and reports from former colleagues. **As a former teacher I am aware that the capacity to listen to a teacher depends on a child's ability to pay attention. This is built on experience from the earliest age during unstructured play, perhaps within a home but more likely outside it, without an adult to organize it. In fact, mostly better without the adult. The space that children once shared, informally, at the drop of a hat, where they could exercise their creative imagination, is no more.**

A park three blocks away is no substitute for a back yard with a gap in the picket fence or a car-free street where kids can play a game. An unsupervised playground a block or two distant is no substitute for a street that is safe enough for children to 'free-range',

where the task of looking after children is widely shared, that reduces the burden on the marriage and on women in particular. A phone is no substitute for a face. Your child should be walking to school.

Ask any teacher. Ask them about the stress in their classrooms. Ask them how many children cannot sit still, cannot wait their turn, cannot manage a pencil, cannot look another child in the eye. Ask them how much of their day is spent on ‘behaviour management’ rather than teaching. Ask them what has changed in thirty years. Then ask them where the children live, and what there is to do there, and who else is there is to play with them.

We have built a country where a child's world has shrunk from a street and a neighbourhood and a hundred other children to a pocket handkerchief back yard, a screen, and a trip in the car. And we have done it so gradually, so profitably, and so respectably that we don’t notice the stink attached to it.

III. How good turned into bad

The pattern of settlement that developed in the horse-and-buggy days was extensive and yet intimate, because people needed community and it was within reach. They lived where they worked. They built a hall with a kitchen attached and tennis courts and perhaps a cricket pitch, a place to meet on weekends, have tea and cakes and dance in the evening. Blocks were generous: half an acre common, ten thousand acres not unknown for a farmer. A group settler in the 1920s started with 100 to 200 acres in exchange for hard yakka, virtually no cash, right up to the 1970s.

Many settlements, no matter how small, were supported by a slow train. These were the days of steam and coal. Suburban roads were wide, with a footpath on both sides and street trees where the baker or the ice man with his horse and cart would peddle their wares. These are today's leafy suburbs. There would be a line of shops, a pub, a school, a recreation ground, and the all-important railway station. The architecture was artisanal, decorative, especially the railway station and the hotel. Between little towns there might be sheep, cows, chooks, vineyards, orchards. Closer to town, timber mills and the odd butter and cheese factory. You did the washing in an outside concrete trough, visited a loo out the back, washed in a basin on a bench. Water was scarce, so you saved it for the garden. If you needed sugar or a newspaper you walked to a general store, passing a butcher and a candlemaker, and met people along the way. Everyone knew everyone, avidly discussed their appearance, idiosyncrasies and their business, and would always greet each other cheerily.

There was no need for planning permission to do things with your land. If you wanted to subdivide you called in a surveyor. There was no permit to build a house. A two-bedroom house with a veranda cost less than three times a man's annual income, and

for a working man that was the ‘basic wage’ established by Justice Higgins in the Sunshine Harvesters judgement of 1908, upgraded for inflation on an annual basis.

In Western Australia the house was built with fresh-sawn Jarrah, nails and sheets of metal. Any handyman with a handsaw, a hammer and a chisel could build it. The basic wage was enough for a man to support a wife and children, lots of them.

I am not pretending this world was paradise. Women could not drink with the men in a public bar until 1970. Most clubs were men only. Women did not get the vote federally until 1902, and the basic wage was designed for a male breadwinner with a dependent wife, which was a cage as well as a shelter. The White Australia Policy was universally supported, and that is a stain, not a heritage. Outdoor toilets and scarce water were hardships, not charms. But the *shape* of the place — the proximity, the shared space, the free-range childhood, the walk to the shops, the hall, the train, the fact that decisions were made by people who lived among you — that shape did something for children that we have since traded away, and we did not notice the trade because the price was paid in small instalments and the benefits were paid in cash.

The car gave us the freedom to move longer distances, to set up sporting competitions, to get to a distant dance where the local band was playing. This was fun, and it was cheap. That is exactly why we did not notice what it was replacing.

Prior to the war, a general store in a rural area might sell four brands of petrol, cars, tractors, tyres, paint, crockery and fencing wire. Larger items were ordered from a catalogue, and buyers could wait for months. In towns, a general store was within walking distance. Today 90% of Australians live in urban environments that look very similar across the entire country, and they travel to shopping centres surrounded by a monstrous car park.

Chongqing is in a mountainous region of China where construction is difficult. With thirty million people it provides the same hectares per person as Perth, but much of it is too steep to live on. Beijing has extraordinarily wide streets. Singapore gets by with just over one hectare per person. In 2025, 91.2% of resident households in Singapore own the home they live in, and this is increasing. Singapore experiences a standard of living within the top ten globally. Housing is designed and built by the state. Its population is 4.2 million and another 2 million people choose to live there.

When the population was seven million, we could not imagine thirty million. We could not imagine block sizes shrinking to 100 square metres. We could not imagine that so many of us would live in urban areas and drive on congested roads with stop signs, speed cameras and punishing fines. We thought four wheels meant freedom, not a place in a funeral procession. We are now thick on the ground and cars even more so.

The average house is now 223 square metres. The quarter-acre block of old was 1,012 square metres — a tenth of a hectare, nearly three times the 350 square metres now described as "low density." We aspired to the Australian Dream of our fathers and ended up with a third of the dream, and definitely not the best third from a child's point of view. The big downside is that every adult needs a car and this is a choke point that our urban planners see as necessary and inevitable.

IV. The smell

When people stopped walking from their house to the local shops, because there weren't any, they stopped meeting their neighbours. The Jarrah picket fence was replaced with steel so they couldn't see through it or over it. The kids needed a supply of tennis balls to replace the ones that went over the Colorbond fence. You couldn't let your little kids play in the street. The back yard could no longer accommodate a tree, a workshop, a chook shed, a vegetable garden a couple of fruit trees and perhaps a swimming pool. Kids couldn't make a hundred runs before lunch because there was nobody to bowl the ball, no fielders, no space. There was no way to get a wheelbarrow from the front to the back except through the front door and across the carpet through the middle of the house. So plastic lawn and plastic flowers came into vogue. A sort of plastic life.

Face-to-face communication is less frequent, replaced by a smartphone. Strangers could be dangerous. Nobody tells jokes anymore. Lonely kids live in their bedroom playing games on their phone with a blanket over their head. They have stopped reading books. Spelling? Writing longhand? Get real. The art of writing a letter disappeared, and with it the scope for historians to reconstruct a social history. Where did all those smartphone messages finish up?

Naturally kids got fat. [Redacted]. And boys have trouble working out what it means to be a man. A lot of marriages are problematic. And when was the last time you saw your granny? Your mum and dad?

We are now living in a world where we live amongst strangers. This is affecting the art of giving and receiving. The pattern of settlement we had in the early days simply wasn't scalable. But the alternative we chose was not scalable either — not for children, not for marriages, not for the human capacity to pay attention.

And here is the part that should make you angry. We compensate for the damage to a limited extent with a band-aid program of social services: the dole, retraining, subsidised health care. This means more people working for the government and fewer in the market sector, and we pay for it via taxation, at best a band aid over a festering sore. Governments borrow to fund social services, accumulating debt, kicking the can down the road which causes inflation, requiring an income adjustment that moves the taxpayer into a higher bracket. Meanwhile the price of houses has risen again, and more

people are missing out. This is a classic doom loop, and it is paid for by the young, who cannot afford the house, cannot afford the child, and cannot afford the time to raise the child if they had one, and the presence of the child weighs upon them heavily. The result is a collapse in productivity. Who could have thunk?

The value of Australian houses is currently 11 trillion dollars, and it has doubled in the last decade. This means nothing to most people because everyone needs a house; if you sell one you have to buy another. But if you own more than one, it is a money tree. About half of what banks lend for houses goes to investors, and most of that buys existing houses. Interest rates are not fixed. They are varied in attempt to influence the economic cycle. And the awkward reality is that inevitably, householding and family building becomes a risky and onerous business, episodically, destroyed.

If our choice is between nuclear submarines and a high-speed train from Broome to Rockhampton, taking in our southern capitals but not getting too close to them, the fast train solves the productivity problem because it enables us to start a properly functional settlement and plan to get it right from the beginning.

V. What if?

What if we could turn the street into a car-free public space, in which to plant a garden, eat, drink and be merry, and where children could gather and play as the whim took them?

What if we adopted a two-storey mode of living, work below and family above, so people spend more time at or close to home and kids can walk to school and see their parents at work? No bitumen out the front. No cars, no bikes, no skateboards or electric scooters to skittle a pre-schooler.

What if we called a halt to the extent of a settlement at twenty thousand people and surrounded it with green space or an orchard? How much space would that need, four to a household, with grass and a footpath instead of bitumen and concrete kerbing, allowing half a hectare per household, 1.2 acres in the old language? The answer is a square just five kilometres wide and five deep. You could walk from the middle to the edge in half an hour. If you are happy with half an acre per household halve the area and the walk to where your car is garaged, should you still need it.

Could we have street trees like the leafy suburbs of old? Yes. Could we turn the space between houses into a botanic garden? Yes. Provide communal garages seven minutes away by foot. That is the walk that keeps your heart in good shape. No need to visit the gym. No need for a personal trainer. A friend is bound to ask: Can you spare a moment for a cuppa. What are you doing tonight? Care for a game of tennis? Put the impromptu back into your life.

What if the features we most value were built into the public space outside the houses rather than the private space within? Would the price of a house then depend on its internal character, or the character of the public space around it, that builds a society invigorated by familiarity, appreciation, cooperation and care, as in the days of old? What is it worth to you to have more friends?

Sell the cars and arrange a hiring scheme, perhaps cutting the number by two-thirds.

Standardise the exterior of a house and enable the interior to be personalised — rearrange the furniture, move the internal walls, stack the kitchen and wet areas as a module. Crane the bulk of the house into place. Orient every house to the sun, like the leaves of a plant, warm in winter and cool in summer. Would it worry us if they all looked the same from outside if we could paint them different colours? Could we find another way to conspicuously consume. Would we miss that?

Take three meals a day in a café or food hall brought down to the size of the ground floor next door. Convenient. Like having your own cook on site. Like before mum went out to work.

Tax the capital gain attached to real estate instead of wages, salaries and profit. Capital gain accrues because of an increase in the local market, the work of the community as a whole and the passage of time. It is unearned income. A windfall, like winning the lottery. What would life be like if we could reduce income tax, GST, stamp duty, municipal rates, fuel tax, payroll tax and tax on corporate profits? What if you could work without being penalised by a loss of part or the entirety of your pension?

If people worked for an employer 38 hours a week and were gainfully occupied for another 38 in a home occupation that might become an enterprise, would that increase productivity? Yes. If work is enjoyable, what is wrong with 7-7-6 — 72 hours a week of fun, like the Aussie farmer who can kick a football with his kids when he takes the time out of his dawn-to-dusk routine? Is that sort of flexibility desirable?

Would a house with a standardised exterior and a personalised interior be scalable — mass-produced in a factory under a roof, out of the weather, using robots and artificial intelligence working round the clock? Yes.

Could the infrastructure serving our homes be shrunk to fit, localised, less expensive? Less road, less copper wire, more wireless, more composting to improve the soil. More recycling of glass jars for jam, olives, gherkins, sauerkraut, chillies and jalapeños from the community garden. More recycling of stuff left at the tip. More home baking. More craft, art, music, conversation and joke-telling. More fiddling with the language for amusement and effect. More singing as we work.

Could there be a local government for this settlement? Truly local. Could the community be responsible for its own school — primary in the morning, secondary in

the afternoon, tertiary at night? Could a schoolroom be on the ground floor beneath the teacher's dwelling, to start things off, or as a make-do when extra space is required because of the boom in childbirths now that everyone can afford a house again? Could the teacher accommodate an ageing parent downstairs?

Would it not be better if decision-makers were close at hand rather than in Perth and Canberra? Would we feel more empowered? Could we recover our agency, our mojo?

VI. What it costs, and what we are choosing instead

Eight AUKUS submarines: officially A$368 billion over thirty years, **about A$46 billion for each submarine.** Keep that figure in mind. National Broadband Network: about A$60 billion in taxpayer outlay, A$36.2 billion in accumulated losses, say A$90 billion — **two submarines.** Snowy 2.0: original estimate A$2 billion; the Auditor-General says the final bill is unknowable; outside estimates run to A$40 billion — **not quite one submarine.**

High-speed rail: the World Bank reports China builds it at US$17–21 million per kilometre, on concrete piers above ground level. The road distance from Broome to Rockhampton via the southern capitals is 7,846 km; say 7,000 km on a more direct route. At US$20 million per kilometre, that is US$140 billion, or A$197 billion at US$0.71 to the dollar — **about 4.3 submarines**. A shorter 4,500 km route, Perth to Brisbane via the southern capitals, would be proportionally less.

The real payoff of high-speed rail is the societal and macroeconomic return. By connecting far-flung cities and **enabling new ones**, the state enhances mobility and connection, brings resources to market, unlocks regional labour markets, and creates economic value through connection and technology transfer. There is an immense saving of time, enabling greater productivity. The state effectively subsidises the ticket to capture a massive tax and economic harvest across the rest of society.

If the choice is between nuclear submarines and a high-speed train that enables new towns where children can play in the street, the fast train solves the housing and productivity problem. And realistically, in a nuclear age, submarines are surplus to requirements anyway. **Doubling up on congestion in existing cities makes no sense.**

We can either prepare to bash our chief trading partner at the behest of the USA or engage in nation-building with the knowledge that our chief trading partner, who adopts a far-sighted and unselfish attitude, would be delighted to help. The Chinese habitually invest in advance of need because they know the societal benefits are so great. And if we must have submarines, they are low cost shipbuilders. They build nuclear reactors to generate dirt cheap power on land. According to this: https://scottgrout.substack.com/p/what-american-nuclear-could-cost the Chinese alternative provides power at 28% of the cost of the American alternative. We are little

fish in this sea, and the biggest shark by far is our great and now not-so-powerful friend, who adopts the attitude that Might is Right.

We are stuck with our built heritage. We have sunk our capital. Unscrambling an egg is always difficult. Better to start afresh and not make the same mistakes again. Single-use urban sprawl is not living within the market, because the market is somewhere else, surrounded by a massive car park. And your work is in another place entirely.

VII. The test

Children are fascinated with how things are done. They can see a path in life that is attractive when their parents and others work close to home. They can find mentors. They are potential entrepreneurs in training. They can fund pensions and take personal care of their parents. If we truly care for our children, and ourselves, we must make sure they can get together at the drop of a hat, in a safe space, and play games wherein they invent the rules as they go along. It is their form of productivity. It is the informal, unstructured learning where they are socialised. That means they learn to pay attention and comprehend, equipping themselves to do well at school, to work with others in a group and to support common goals. They become fixers, not handicapped, drones or vandals. They can build teams where everyone pulls together.

To do this we simply need to take the cars away from in front, side and rear of the house and re-format the public space around each dwelling to become a place that loves children and old people, the ones we should be looking after, as is the practice in Asia.

We knew this once. Crown land for housing was sold by auction and we could build freely. If we knew which side our bread was buttered on, we, like any successful farmer, would not make life hard for our breeding stock. Land should be available and it should be cheap. If we don't want to be making handouts to an underclass, borrowing increasing amounts to make ends meet, a house must be ownable and not subject to hikes in interest rates. We need a government bank charged with working for the public rather than the private good. We had that once; we need it again. We sold the most successful bank in the country, set up by the government perhaps thinking that it wasn’t vital infrastructure. Wrong.

We cannot unscramble the egg. But we can ask what a child had in the past that they can’t get today. And whether we are willing to re-jig the way we live, to give it back to them.

VIII. Why you don't notice the smell

Because the change was profitable. Because it was respectable. Because every step was individually rational — a bigger house, a second car, a cul-de-sac, a school with a good reputation a short drive away. Because the losses were diffuse and slow and fell on people with no voice: children, the old, the poor, the woman at home with a toddler

and no neighbour to share the day with. Because the gains were concentrated and immediate and went to people with a voice: landowners, banks, developers, car dealers, road builders and in the end: institutionalised town planning that's backed up by a structure that shifts responsibility to a fleet of well remunerated professionals.

This happens because the people making the rules are not close to the action. They do not live in the settlement. They do not know the name of the person next door. They fly in, they consult, they legislate, they fly out. Their children go to private schools and are driven there. They have no reason to walk. They cannot smell what they have never stood in. Or they simply look into a computer screen and ask the land developers and the increasingly oligopolistic building industry that builds their bespoke castle on site, brick by brick and stick by stick, what should be done to get more houses built in the same self-seeking and wasteful fashion.

This is why the design of the public space and the design of the decision-making are the same question. A settlement of twenty thousand people, with its own school and its own local government, where the teacher lives above the classroom and the councillor lives around the corner, is a place where the consequences of a bad decision are smelled immediately by the people who made it. That is direct democracy in its most practical form. It is also, not coincidentally, the form of settlement that is best for children, because it is the form where adults are present, familiar, and accountable.

We are told there is no alternative. We are told the housing crisis is a supply problem to be solved by developers, that the car is freedom, that the suburb is the Australian Dream, that the welfare state is compassion, that the submarines are security, that the trading partner is a threat. Each of these is a story told by someone who benefits from you believing it.

The alternative is not nostalgia. The alternative is a new town, built on cheap land, with a car-free street, a shared garden, a school with a teacher who lives upstairs, a train that connects it to the ancient fading metropolis, a house you can afford on one income, and a child who can walk out the door and find a friend.

We can afford it. We are choosing nuclear powered submarines instead, including second hand discards from an owner that has lost the art of producing them efficiently.

The first step is to notice the smell. The second is to refuse to accept it as the natural order of things. The third is to demand that the people who make the rules live close enough to smell it too.

Author, Erl Happ [Redacted] with assistance from the free AI tool, DeepSeek that compressed the argument for the sake of readability.