

Imagining the Future

Notes from the frontier

Samuel Alexander, Bronwyn Adcock



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Griffith died in 1920 and is now best remembered in his namesakes: an electorate, a society, a suburb and a university. Ninety-six years after he first proposed establishing a university in Brisbane, Griffith University, the city's second, was created. His commitment to public debate and ideas, his delight in words and art, and his attachment to active citizenship are recognised by the publication that bears his name.

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A prosperous descent

Telling new stories as the old book closes

Samuel Alexander

Nothing is harder, yet nothing is more necessary, than to speak of certain things whose existence is neither demonstrable nor probable. The very fact that serious and conscientious people treat them as existing things brings them a step closer to existence and to the possibility of being born.

Herman Hesse

OVER THE LAST two centuries in the West, we have been telling ourselves that economic growth is the most direct path to prosperity, that the good life implies material affluence, and that technology and ‘free markets’ will be able to solve most of our social and environmental problems. In recent decades, we have even attempted to impose this story on the entire globe, arrogantly declaring the end of history.

As each day passes, however, this story becomes less credible, its future less plausible. With disarming clarity we see, and increasingly *feel*, that the global economy is degrading the ecological foundations of life, threatening a catastrophe that in fact is already well underway. The fact that capitalism also produces abhorrent inequalities of wealth raises the questions: for whom do we destroy the planet? And to what end? We are told to wait for justice, as if in a Kafkaesque novel, but we are not told how long we must wait.

As if this were not enough, the assault of capitalism strikes deeper still, to the core of our being. Consumer culture is spreading a spiritual malaise, an apathetic sadness of the soul, as ever-more people discover that material things cannot satisfy the universal human craving for meaning. Our abundance of stuff, as technology forecaster Paul Saffo argues, has merely produced new scarcities, creating an existential void that stuff simply cannot fill.

As our culture continues to pursue this uninspired, narrowly materialistic conception of the good life, we are guilty of celebrating a gross failure of imagination and mistaken ideas of freedom and wealth.

We know, deep down, that something is very wrong with this cultural narrative – that there must be better, freer, more humane ways to live. But we live in a world that conspires to keep knowledge of such alternatives from us. We are told that consumerism is the peak of civilisation and that there are no alternatives, and over time, as these messages are endlessly repeated and normalised, our imaginations begin to contract and we lose the ability to envision different worlds.

The future was hurtling towards us; then it arrived; now it is behind us. The new future isn't what it used to be. And yet, it seems we have not yet found a new story by which to live. We are the generation between stories, desperately clinging to yesterday's but uncertain of tomorrow's. Adrift in the cosmos, without a narrative in which to lay down new roots, humanity marches on, naively attempting to solve the crises of civilisation with the same kind of thinking that caused them.

But then again, perhaps the new words we need are already with us. Perhaps we just need to live them into existence.

BUCKMINSTER FULLER, AN American architect and systems theorist, once said: 'You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.'

This approach to social transformation essentially expresses the idea that examples are powerful, that examples can send ripples through culture further than we might think possible, creating cultural currents that can turn into subcultures, that sometimes explode into social movements and that, on very rare occasions, can spark a revolution in consciousness that changes the world. In an age when it can sometimes seem as if there is no alternative to the carbon-intensive, consumer way of life, being exposed to a real-world example of a new way of living and being has the potential to expand and radicalise the ecological imagination. At such times, when we close our eyes, new, more hopeful futures flicker in and out of existence, forcing us to vote for a future where once we had thought there was no alternative to our casual, progressive ecocide.

This experience of possibility can be both exhilarating and terrifying, for in those moments when we are able to break through the crust of conventional thinking we see that the world, as it is, is not how it has to be. Faced with living proof that life can be different – if only, at first, in a microcosm – the structures and narratives that define the contours of the human situation can suddenly seem less compelling. In this way, lived examples of alternative modes of being-on-Earth can challenge us to be examples ourselves – can challenge us to live experimentally within the cracks of capitalism in the hope of setting ourselves free. Nothing mobilises a community of people quite like the taste of freedom. Soon enough, in the flow of revolt, the new model makes the old model obsolete.

This is the disruptive potential of even small-scale explorations of new ways of living and being. When shaping post-capitalist forms of life, however, one has to start somewhere – within capitalism – with nothing but bold intentions and reckless hope. It follows that the efforts of those who seek to break new paths in the cultural landscape and signal new directions must inevitably seem insignificant at first. Pioneers are easily dismissed as utopian dreamers or escapists who lack a sense of political reality. But just as vision without politics is naive, politics without vision is dangerous. We must dream before we shape our politics, or else we will never awaken from the existing nightmare of pragmatism without principle. We are all utopians and always have been; only some of us are more ambitious.

TELLING NEW STORIES about humanity's place on Earth, and trying to live those stories into existence, has been the ongoing challenge a few of us set ourselves over the last two years on a humble but beautiful eight-hectare property in the Gunai district of Gippsland, south-east Victoria. In ways that I will try to explain, the distinction between life and literature has begun to blur, providing fertile soil for a new paradigm, a new politics of possibility, to take root. The fact that Gippsland is one of the most carbon-intensive places on Earth merely provides an ironic backdrop against which our experiments in living differently can be contrasted.

The green shoots of this project first pushed through the soil after one of the owners of the Gippsland property read my book, *Entropia*:

Life Beyond Industrial Civilisation (Simplicity Institute, 2013), which is a work of utopian fiction set after the demise of industrial civilisation on an isolated island in the South Pacific. The book envisions a radically 'simple living' culture and a post-growth economy that emerged after the 'Great Disruption', describing a way of life based on material sufficiency, frugality, renewable energy, local economy, appropriate technology and self-governance.

On the final page, I invited any interested readers to be in touch if they wanted to try to establish a real-world demonstration project that somehow embodied the ideas, vision and utopian ambitions of the book.

To my utter surprise, but much to my delight, within a few weeks of publication I received an email from an inspired fellow called Mortimer Flynn wanting to take up the challenge, noting that he was a 'steward' of some land – not an owner, he insisted, but someone who held land 'in trust' for future generations. There were also some limited funds available to get things started. He invited me out to view the property and the rest, as they say, is history. The preface of a new story had been written.

On the day I first visited, sitting on the edge of the dam in the filtered shade of softly swaying gum trees, Mortimer and I shared ideas and viewpoints on why we thought demonstrating a simpler, more localised, less consumptive way of life was a worthwhile endeavour; why we thought it was necessary to try to build the new world within the shell of the old, no matter our chances of success. To cut a long story short, our 'theory of change' was simply that examples can be powerful.

Our united motivation arose from a deep frustration and disappointment with mainstream politics, combined with a complete lack of faith that things would change from the top. We saw the world ablaze with overlapping crises – cultural, economic, environmental – and yet our politicians were bickering over this, tinkering with that, all the while the ship of civilisation propelled itself ever closer to the rocks.

It seemed to us that if a new world was to emerge, it would have to be driven into existence 'from below' – by ordinary people like us doing it ourselves. We were under no illusions about the significance of our efforts, of course, despite our lofty ambitions. Every life is but a drop in the ocean.

But that just makes it all the more important that our humble contributions are made to count.

As well as sharing a profound discontent with the many short-sighted failings of parliamentary democracy, Mortimer and I shared a mutual concern over mainstream environmentalism. Everywhere, environmentalists were calling on people to recycle, use efficient light bulbs, take shorter showers and compost – which are all good and sensible things, of course. But focusing on small-scale household action gives the impression that we can consume our way to a green economy without having to significantly change the way we live. It gives the impression that there is no need to change consumerist social values or the fundamentals of a growth-orientated market economy, for the dominant ideology suggests that technology, eco-design and free markets would save us from ourselves; apparently, more growth can solve the problems growth was causing. We didn't buy that.

As 'green consumerism' and 'green growth' were being celebrated by media, businesses and politicians, and seemingly swallowed whole by the great majority, we saw environmental science becoming ever more depressing, raining down reports and studies showing with harrowing detail and rigour how devastating our civilisation continued to be.

Decades of what I like to call 'sustainababble' had been unable to slow the onslaught of Empire. The face of Gaia was vanishing. Were efficient light bulbs ever going to be enough? Can technology really be expected to save us? What if consumer capitalism can't be fixed? What if capitalism *is* the crisis?

As we left the edge of the dam and sauntered aimlessly through the bush, we agreed that 'light green' environmentalism, despite the best of intentions, had more or less been co-opted by the market economy, entrenching business as usual at a time that was desperately in need of radical new ideas and an expanded ecological consciousness. What is needed, we said to each other, is action designed to unsettle or loosen the grip of the existing paradigm of 'sustainable development', and to show that a matrix of alternative worlds awaits those who are prepared to think otherwise and live alternatives into existence. Lived examples are the best antidote to despair, and that's an antidote always worth taking.

We concluded that experiments in sustainability shouldn't be about trying to do conventional development better; they should be about doing something other than conventional development. Similarly, the necessary revolution in the existing order of things should not be conceived of as some future event where a mobilised citizenry storms the Bastille – for Empire has no Bastille to storm anymore, its nodes of politico-financial power are so widely dispersed and decentralised that the system can evade a centralised confrontation of the old revolutionary kind.

No, the new revolution must be brought into the moment, into the present tense. We should not aim to destroy capitalism in the future but stop creating it, here and now, as best we can, knowing full well we are too often locked into reproducing it against our wishes. But we must try to break free and swim against the tide, no matter how futile it seems. Revolution should be conceived of as a way of life rather than a goal to be achieved.

For a time, Mortimer and I stood still in the midst of the bush, revelling in the unceasing eloquence of silence – a silence punctuated only with the diverse poetry of the wild. We had succeeded, if only for a few moments, in existing beyond capitalism. The thundering roar of a near-by freight train, however, soon broke our reverie, shaking the earth and reminding us how close we were to the coal-fired power stations that are the heart of industrial society. Ahh, the serenity!

FOR THESE REASONS, we decided that creating a 'simpler way' demonstration site that was based upon a deeper green shade of environmental practice and a politics of grassroots activism was the most strategic use of our energies. We realised there wasn't much use campaigning for a progressive political party until there was a culture that was aware of the extent of the overlapping crises – a culture that was also able to imagine alternatives to the consumerist pattern of life and the growth economy, and to believe in those possibilities and desire them enough to make them a reality.

If we tried to act only at the household level, we'd surely become overwhelmed at the enormity of the task; if we waited for governments to act decisively, we'd be waiting forever. It followed that it was at the community and cultural levels where practical experiments in environmental living had

most transformative potential. And if we failed to prefigure a sustainable way of life – a failure which we accepted as almost certain – then our efforts could at least be justified on the grounds of helping to increase local resilience in anticipation of forthcoming shocks and worsening crises.

But this raised the further question: was this project we were formulating just going to be another ecovillage? There would have been nothing wrong with that, of course. After all, few threads in the modern environmental movement have been more heroically active in building or trying to build new ways of living than the ecovillagers. In our discussions, however, Mortimer and I came to realise that there were two defining features of our envisioned project that would, if not distinguish it from the ecovillage movement, perhaps signal its evolution.

First of all, one of the main criticisms of ecovillages historically is that they have tended to be somewhat escapist or apolitical. We were not interested in merely creating a place where nice, disillusioned middle-class neo-hippies could come and have a lovely time growing their own organic veggies. We wanted the project to be explicitly political, engaged and inclusive, which is why we've tended to use the term 'demonstration project' rather than 'ecovillage' when describing what has emerged. Our aim was never to escape the system and live sustainably but to see if we could contribute to the positive transformation of the system. In this way, we hoped, the broader community could learn to live more sustainably and build resilience, not just a privileged few.

Secondly, we would seek to challenge the ecovillage movement in another sense too – by trying to radicalise it. One of the main concerns driving our project has been the uncomfortable realisation that even some of the world's most long-lasting and successful ecovillages have ecological footprints that are too high to be universalised. For example, in 2006 a study conducted of the Findhorn Ecovillage in Scotland, perhaps the most famous and inspiring ecovillage in the world, concluded that if everyone on the globe lived in ways similar to Findhorn, the planet would still be in ecological overshoot – we'd need one and a half planets. What this suggests is that even after many decades of the modern environmental movement, we still don't have many or any examples of what a flourishing 'one planet' existence might look like. Isn't that both interesting and disturbing?

How are we supposed to know in which direction we should be heading if we don't have a vision or example of where we'd like to end up? Before something can be brought deliberately into existence, first it must be envisioned.

This is the challenge humanity faces if we are to shape the future rather than merely be shaped by it. But once it has been envisioned, then the future must be built – even at the micro-scale, bit by bit – rather than merely dreamed of. By the time Mortimer and I returned to the edge of the dam, having circled the property, we had something of a meeting of minds about the contours of the project, even if we knew that the vision was vague and would inevitably evolve as it was put into practice. The first chapter of our new story was complete.

We had a project.

THE NEXT CHAPTER in this story was about actually getting started building this demonstration project. After our initial discussion on the edge of the dam in August 2013, and many more planning discussions with various people, our first project took place in December that year. We organised a natural building workshop, in which forty-two free-spirited people came to the property for a week to construct what is known as an 'earthship'.

The defining features of an earthship are, most famously, walls made from old car tyres that are rammed full of clay and then covered with render, and the whole structure is essentially dug into the side of a north-facing slope. Large north-facing glass doors, which we picked up from a tip shop, maximise the amount of winter sun the small earthship receives, and the thick earthen walls retain the heat in cooler temperatures. In the warmer months, the earthship stays cool from those very same thick earthen walls, assisted by a cooling pipe which runs twelve metres alongside the earthship under a couple of metres of clay. The cooling pipe works extremely well, like a non-electric air-conditioner.

By designing the building in this way, it needs neither heating in winter nor cooling in summer beyond what nature provides. As the permaculture philosophy implores, let's design our houses, our gardens, indeed, our communities, to work *with* nature, rather than *against* it. The lighting in the

earthship is charged by a small solar panel, and is otherwise unconnected to further power sources.

It helps that the earthship also looks spectacular, with coloured bottle walls along the edges of its front face, successfully demonstrating that simplicity can be beautiful, like the stars in a night sky. What perfect economy! This isn't purely an aesthetic point; it is also pedagogical: by building 'out of this world' structures, it makes it easier to think 'beyond this world'. Sitting down for the first time in the peaceful sanctuary of the earthship, looking out over the property, I got a heightened sense that other worlds were indeed possible.

In February 2014, we organised another natural building workshop, this time to build a mud hut. Twenty-five people came to the property for a week, during which time we stomped on a lot of clay, sand, straw and water to make the cob mixture, and had a deeply enriching time building a small but stunning cob cabin. Again, the thick earthen walls make the structure sufficiently cool in summer and warm in winter, without the need for external energy inputs. The windows again are orientated to the north according to passive solar design principles. All up, the build took a little over a week to finish and it cost just over \$5,000.

It struck me at the time how pleasurable it was to be involved in building a small abode like this. I hold a doctorate in law, which arguably makes me one of the least practical people on earth – far too bookish for my own good – but there I was again, with others similarly inexperienced in natural building, actually creating something real and amazing, in a community, using mainly the clay beneath our feet. There was a tangible vitality and energy to the project. I began to wonder whether the revolution might not be joyful.

Even more striking than the strange meaningfulness of the labour was how these workshops were showing themselves to be a way to escape the 'death drip' of a mortgage. If everyone in that workshop had stayed at the property for the year, we could have worked every other week and by December we could all have had such an abode. This should make us all think: if it is this easy, fulfilling and cheap to build with natural materials, why are we locked into such oppressively large mortgages? Something seems very wrong with today's social values and our property system if we are required to labour for forty years, in jobs we might not always find

fulfilling, to pay for a high-impact conventional house when there are cheap and pleasurable alternatives that we, relatively unskilled laypeople, can build ourselves under the guidance of a couple of facilitators. It also highlights the importance of land access and affordability as an essential ingredient in any emancipatory project.

Later in 2014, we ran two more building workshops. First, in September, we built another small abode, this time using the ‘earthbag’ or ‘superadobe’ technique. This involves packing a long bag with clay and tamping it down firmly as a way to build the walls. On top of the layered earthbag walls we constructed a yurt-style octagon roof with reclaimed corrugated iron and wood. We insulated the roof with light earth (straw dipped into a clay slurry) and the interior ceiling was clad with wood from an old hardwood fence. The result was something that looked similar to a hobbit house straight out of *Lord of the Rings*. In December that year, we built a ‘tiny house’ out of salvaged timber and iron, taking twelve of us just over a week and costing under \$2,500 in materials.

As well as these building projects, organic gardens on the property were expanding, a good-sized orchard was planted, water tanks and composting toilets had been installed, a yurt was erected, a large chicken and duck coop was built, a cob pizza oven was created, homemade beer was brewing, bees were buzzing, communities and networks were forming, and much, much more. Something very interesting was happening, even if we weren’t exactly clear what it was.

In time we named the property Wurruk’an. *Wurruk* is the local Indigenous term meaning both ‘Earth’ and ‘story’. *K’an* is the Mayan term for ‘seed’. We invented the term Wurruk’an to signify our attempt to seed a new Earth story.

Around this time I got an email from a documentary maker, Jordan Osmond, who had come across our project on the internet and was interested in documenting the evolution of the property. By this stage we had developed some basic infrastructure on the property, so I had the idea that perhaps this was an opportunity to take the next step and see if there were more people who might be interested in coming out to live on the property on a permanent or semi-permanent basis, to explore practices of radical simplicity. The

prospect of a documentary also meshed perfectly with our goal of reaching beyond our small node of resistance. We had created a crack in capitalism but now had to stick a crow bar into it and leverage our efforts. Here was an opportunity.

After speaking with Mortimer, who was sympathetic to the idea, I posted an invitation on a number of prominent permaculture and simple-living websites. We had decided to seek applications from people interested in forming a small community for the twelve months of 2015 in order to produce a 'simpler way' documentary that explored the living strategy of voluntary simplicity. We called it the Simpler Way Project. Our question: what might 'one planet' living look like?

Within a couple of weeks, we had received over fifty applications and began conducting interviews. The next chapter of our story was taking form. By early January 2015, there was a small community living on the property, having courageously thrown themselves into this evolving project, ready to pioneer and try to demonstrate a simpler way of life in the midst of industrial civilisation.

I WRITE THESE words in December 2015, as the year's experiment draws to an end. It's been an incredibly educational and enriching journey, but by no means easy or without trial. We've achieved a huge amount and made lifelong friends, but we've also made our fair share of mistakes. I could say it's been like one of those rollercoaster rides that leaves you both thrilled and exhausted – proud that you were brave enough to go on the journey but unsure whether you'd journey quite the same way if you were to do it again. Here are a few reflections on the way of life that evolved and some of the challenges, delights and lessons it produced.

When the community members arrived in January, they either took up residence in one of the small abodes we had built, or built their own. One moved into a caravan and others, temporarily, into tents. There was a large, tin farm shed on the property, the back third of which got converted into a living and cooking space, with the front two thirds being a work shed. As the cooler months set in the shed arrangement was reversed, with the back third becoming the work shed and the front becoming the living space. It was

insulated, beautifully clad with reclaimed wood and iron, and retrofitted with sinks and a wood burner oven and stove.

There was also a yurt that served as a secondary living space and, for time, as an extra bedroom. As I noted earlier, there were basic composting toilets set up, gardens planted up with vegetables and significant water tanks installed for drinking, cooking and cleaning purposes. The property was also connected to the grid, so extra water was available when necessary.

The large and expanding gardens provided a good source of food, but by no means allowed for complete self-sufficiency. A significant amount of time was put into sourcing organic food as locally as possible, often purchasing in bulk, including a local, in-season veggie box. Dishes and clothes were washed by hand, and the community shared one fridge. None of the abodes were connected to the grid but small solar lights were available so that people had some light in the evenings.

Much of the furniture used was built by hand from wood that was lying around the property. One couple decided to build themselves a tiny house so they could move out of their tent, and did so successfully without expert guidance, using hand tools, for a grand expense of \$420. Almost all the materials were salvaged from tip shops or skips on the side of the road, saving them from landfill. The final build for the year took place in October, when we ran a 'tiny house on wheels' workshop under the guidance of a wonderfully creative and generous carpenter. Like all the other workshops, it was a socially invigorating time during which we all developed our construction skills.

Even from this brief description, it's clear that the community was living in the tradition of the ecovillage movement, but seeking to push the boundaries of ecological practice a few steps further. Water and electricity consumption was minimal – a tiny fraction of the Australian average – due to simpler and communal ways of living. The small abodes (all around ten square metres) were built primarily with natural materials or with the waste streams of industrial society, and none had heating or cooling or even electricity beyond an off-grid solar light. Meals were cooked with local, fresh, organic food, and were almost always vegetarian. In the winter the community would often eat food that had been preserved in jars from the summer harvests. Some

residents would dumpster dive, and when the conditions were right we could cook over a parabolic solar dish. Clothes were second-hand or hand-sewn, and we drank homemade beer, cider and mead – or water captured from the sky. Books and conversation replaced television, and superfluous consumer spending was more or less negligible.

The list of such practices could go on. The community authentically embraced the challenge of living a radically low-impact, low-energy way of life, and met with some real success. I'm not sure it achieved the ambitious target of 'one planet' living – it's a difficult thing to quantify – but I would be surprised if there are many ecovillages on the planet that have a smaller ecological footprint. In the material sense, life was simple but sufficient.

Accordingly, before reviewing some of the year's challenges and complexities, it is worth highlighting the achievements. Toward the end of the year, when visitors would come to Wurruk'an, I began to notice a mysterious sparkle in people's eyes as they would walk around the property for the first time. Perhaps those living at Wurruk'an had begun to take the spectacle of their existence for granted, but when visitors came to the property fresh from the hyper-consumerist, concrete jungle of Melbourne, their astonishment at what was going on could scarcely be disguised.

It seems that people are hungry for this type of project. People want to see the new world being built, new imaginaries realised in practice. It is a source of grounded hope. While I do not want to overstate the significance of Wurruk'an – it is but a drop in the ocean, and one still taking form – it nevertheless strikes me as embodying exactly the right strategy. In discussions about the woes of the world, I often find people quickly nodding in agreement, acknowledging the dire state of things. But all too often I then get the response, 'Yeah, but what's the alternative?' The value of demonstration projects like Wurruk'an is that they can broaden the horizons of what seems possible – and that is a gift not to be undervalued. To *see* that life can be otherwise is very energising and liberating.

When people come to Wurruk'an, I encourage them to imagine a world in which these types of projects enter the mainstream and are multiplied a million times over, not only in rural or semi-rural areas, but just as importantly within urban and suburban areas. This is the revolution of

which I dream when I am awake. Wurruk'an by no means seeks to provide a blueprint that can be automatically applied independent of context. Not at all. Any such experiment with alternative ways of living can only take form in context specific ways, meaning that we must all think creatively for ourselves. As the anti-capitalist slogan goes, there may be one 'no' but there are many 'yeses'. Radical simplicity in the city, therefore, will obviously look different to radical simplicity in the country, and will depend on innumerable other things, such as financial position, family size, weather patterns and existing infrastructure. But Wurruk'an does debunk the Thatcherist dictum that 'there is no alternative'.

Most importantly, Wurruk'an provides a conception of sustainability *beyond affluence*, and that, I feel, is what the world needs more than anything else. Currently, the dominant strains in the environmental movement are aiming to universalise affluence in the hope of somehow making affluence sustainable through technological innovation and market mechanisms. But that's like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole – it can't be done. There is absolutely no way seven billion people can live in material affluence without collapsing ecosystems, to say nothing of the nine or ten billion people expected to inhabit Earth in coming decades. A 'fair share' ecological footprint is incompatible with material affluence, making affluence, I'm afraid to say, an illegitimate social goal.

This is, I acknowledge, a terribly unpopular thing to say. Nevertheless, the radical material simplicity of Wurruk'an is the currently unthinkable round peg we need in order to achieve what we all claim to want: a civilisation where the entire community of life can flourish within sustainable bounds. Wurruk'an is like a compass that can guide our efforts, a place where people can visit to reorientate themselves in a misguided world.

People will be quick, of course, to dismiss the endeavour as an escapist fantasy, just a bunch of Thoreauvian hippies who have retreated from the real world to live on the land in search of utopian isolation. It's an understandable critique, but ultimately one based on a superficial interpretation. If someone accepts that the changes necessary will never come from the 'top down', then the burden of resistance falls on individuals and communities, who must, as Gandhi implored, be the change they wish to see in the world. The fact that

such action will typically seem small and insignificant does not for a moment mean that it implies a failure of strategy. (It's quite possible the best strategy will fail to achieve sustainability).

In any case, the fact that prohibitively expensive land prices tend to push such oppositional experiments into rural areas does not mean that the spirit of opposition has no relevance to urban contexts. The message of Wurruk'an is not 'escape to the bush!' The message of Wurruk'an is far subtler: politics, as Aristotle argued, is always and necessarily founded upon a conception of the good life. Affluence is a flawed and inherently unsustainable conception; therefore, we need to found a politics upon a vision of material sufficiency for all. If people cannot see material sufficiency in action, this vision can't possibly be the foundation of a politics. Since a politics of sufficiency is necessary, Wurruk'an is justified. That, in short, is the logic of our project.

We also hope that our forthcoming documentary will be used by activists to provoke a broader cultural conversation about these ideas, for not until there is a culture of sufficiency can we hold any hope for a politics of sufficiency.

Nevertheless, people shouldn't come to Wurruk'an looking for all the answers – we might have some, but we certainly don't have them all. The real value of Wurruk'an and other such projects lie in their line of questioning: if globalising consumer affluence and maintaining limitless growth are recipes for ecological and thus humanitarian catastrophe, how can communities explore alternative, post-consumerist ways of living based on material sufficiency? How can we build highly localised, more self-sufficient economies, and thrive in doing so? Demonstration projects expand the imagination and allow these types of questions to breathe. Thus, when people come to Wurruk'an for a workshop or working bee, they inevitably develop themselves as they develop the property. Consequently, the person who comes is rarely the person who leaves. This is how cultures can change. This is how revolutions in consciousness are ignited – and how the fire spreads.

For all the many successes of the year, it would be disingenuous to deny or pass over the many challenges and compromises the community faced. Let me begin with the social dynamic. I've heard it said of ecovillages that anyone can build a mud house, grow organic food and cook in a solar oven, but that

the real challenge is the social one of living wisely in a community. After all, the history of intentional communities and ecovillages is, more or less, a history of social conflict, which has often led to breakdown and eventual dispersion. It seems our increasingly individualist culture has meant most of us have lost the skills of community living, which is hardly surprising. It is not a skill anyone is born with (despite what we might think); it is an art to be developed over a lifetime – rarely mastered, always demanding. These days, few people are trained in interpersonal skills.

This has never stopped people from trying to live well in communities. There seems to be something primordial about it, something human beings yearn for deeply, despite the challenges it inevitably brings. But it is worth acknowledging from the outset that community life is hard and participatory decision-making can be taxing, even if these things can also offer deep rewards.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the hardest part of the Simpler Way Project was the social aspect. Here was a community that formed for the purpose of the documentary, having never met each other before, linked only by the desire to explore a life of radical simplicity and to help raise awareness about the necessity of transcending consumer culture and its underlying growth fetishism. It has proven hard enough for the typical ecovillage or community to function socially, but this project had the added dimension of forming in such an unusual way, for such an unusual purpose, and for a limited timeframe. It was always going to be tough, we all knew that. And it was tough.

Nevertheless, there is a widespread sense that the social challenges have ultimately been enriching. Everyone is now a far wiser community member than when they arrived; everyone has developed as a social being. Throughout the year, the community explored the art of deep listening and learnt that that dialogue makes mutual demands on both listener and speaker. When a person expresses themselves bluntly or without due sensitivity, or feels strongly about an issue the group disagrees with, community members are being challenged to look beneath the tone of voice (perhaps the speaker is tired) and beneath the surface of the words (perhaps they're trying to say something else) to explore the potential for humane, enlightened compromise. Often, when

we listen deeply, we see that conflict is not a result of unreasonable people being combative (although sometimes it is) but instead a result of reasonable people, with different concerns and priorities, not yet understanding each other. Community living calls on us to approach conflict in that spirit, with humility and open-mindedness, in the hope of muddling our way toward a workable compromise. The aim should not be to avoid conflict – that would be impossible. The aim is to deal with conflict wisely. In this respect, the year has been a year of progress.

From an ethical or philosophical perspective, one of the most interesting aspects of the year's living experiment was how the community struggled honourably with the question of balancing principle and pragmatism. In one of the big-picture discussions held early in the year, one of the community members made the striking comment that 'if I were to live and consume strictly in accordance with my ethics of sustainability and justice, I'd die'. It's a disconcerting realisation. We live in world that so often locks us into ways of living that we know are unjust or unsustainable. One might know that driving is a leading cause of climate change, yet in the absence of good bike lanes or public transport, getting to work is more or less impossible. One might despise the unethical business strategies of the big supermarkets, yet often find their convenience just too seductive. One might be perfectly aware that billions around the world are desperately hungry, yet find oneself casually throwing out food. No doubt, everyone has their own contradictions they try to live with. I certainly have my own.

Out at Wurruk'an, these contradictions were often brought to the surface and critically analysed. One of the things that inspired me most about the community was that the conversations were always *real*. Owing to that honesty, however, the community soon discovered how muddy the waters of ethical living actually are.

This is not to say that since ethics are ambiguous, we can keep on consuming mindlessly. It is just to acknowledge that no one is innocent in a world that makes truly ethical consumption all but impossible. At every turn, our consumption practices are tainted with fossil fuels, exploitative labour and the blood of others. But we must try to escape those contaminations, and do everything we can to avoid supporting them with our actions and spending

habits. Most importantly, we need to begin building a new economy that is not grounded upon such things. But to some extent it seems we are all implicated in a globalised economy that tragically prohibits ethical living. We are all different shades of injustice, a point designed not to induce guilt but engender increased humility, care and kindness.

Put otherwise, my point is that the community at Wurruk'an has not been comprised of eco-saints but human beings. Some pushed the boundaries of ecological practice more than others – and they are to be admired for challenging us to challenge ourselves. But at various stages, for various reasons, everyone found themselves making certain ethical compromises. This is life in industrial civilisation. Exploring simplicity in an overly complex society is riddled with contradictions and challenges. So much for voluntary simplicity. Sustainable consumption rather implies involuntary complexity. This is one of the many paradoxes of the simple life.

As this chapter of the Simpler Way Project comes to close, it is clear that the book of Wurruk'an is not yet complete – perhaps, by its very nature, it can never be completed. No doubt there will be more twists in the tale as our uncertain and ever-changing future bears down upon us. For now, let me take this opportunity to thank the brave pioneers who threw themselves into this mad but noble experiment. Their integrity and authenticity have been beyond question, even if it has become increasingly clear that sustainability is a process not a destination.

As artist-activist John Jordan says: 'When we are asked how we are going to build a new world, our answer is: "We don't know, but let's build it together".' If we start in that spirit, we are off on the right foot.

The creative task of managing our civilisational descent – daunting though it is – promises to be both meaningful and fulfilling, provided we are prepared to let go of dominant conceptions of the good life and begin telling ourselves new stories of prosperity. Consumerism was an experiment that failed. It led us down a dead end. Only by letting go – or, rather, only by ripping ourselves free – can we transcend it.

Mercifully, there is a door hidden in the wall, providing us with an escape route if only we are prepared to embrace the unfashionable values of sufficiency, frugality, mindfulness, appropriate technology, self-governance

and local economy. Needless to say, personal action alone is not enough. We must also build structures that support a more localised, simpler way to live, and this can only be achieved through the collective genius and power of community action. Together we must write a new future, an undertaking that has already begun as individuals and communities begin to build the new world within the shell of the old.

We should explore alternatives not because we are ecologically compelled to live differently – although we are – but because we are human and deserve the opportunity to flourish with dignity, within sustainable bounds. This does not mean regressing to something *prior* to consumerism; rather, it means drawing on the wisdom of ages to advance *beyond* consumerism, in order to produce something better, freer, and more humane – even if it will also be more humble. This revolution, no doubt, will require all the wisdom, creativity and compassion we can muster. But impossible things have happened before. And if we fail, may we fail with dignity.

As John Holloway writes: ‘We need no promise of a happy ending to justify our rejection of a world we feel to be wrong.’

LET US DECLARE, in chorus, that providing ‘enough, for everyone, forever’ is the defining objective of a just and sustainable world, a world that we should try to build by working together in free association. And let us show that material sufficiency in a free society provides the conditions for an infinite variety of meaningful, happy and fulfilling lives. For embracing a ‘simpler’ way of life does not mean hardship or going back to the Stone Age. It means focusing on what is *sufficient* to live well, and discovering that the good life does not consist in the accumulation of ‘nice things’. Just enough is plenty.

Thus our defining challenge is to seek out and embody the ‘middle way’ between over-consumption and under-consumption, where basic material needs are sufficiently met but where attention is then redirected away from superfluous material pursuits, in search of non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning. Those sources are abundant – inexhaustible – if only we knew it. It is time to abandon affluence and turn to the realm of the spirit to satisfy our hunger for infinity.

It is painfully clear, of course, that governments around the world are not interested in moving 'beyond growth' or questioning consumer culture, and there are few signs of things changing at the top. Empire, we can be sure, will not contemplate its own self-annihilation; nor will it lie down like a lamb at the mere request of the environmental movement. Empire will struggle for existence all the way down.

It follows that the transformation that is needed must emerge 'from below', driven into existence by diverse, inspired and imaginative social movements that seek to produce a post-capitalist society. What role will you play? It is a question with no generalisable answer. However we answer it, we must endeavour to live our alternative worlds into existence, here and now, and show them to be good, while at the same time recognising that the great transition that is needed will likely come only at the end of a rough road – after or during a series of crises. Can we turn the crises of our times into opportunities for civilisational renewal? That is the question, the challenge, posed by our turbulent moment in history.

In the words of Theodore Roszak, author of *Where the Wasteland Ends* (Doubleday, 1973):

There is one way forward: the creation of flesh and blood examples of low-consumption, high quality alternatives to the mainstream pattern of life. This we can see happening already on the counter-cultural fringes. And nothing – no amount of argument or research – will take the place of such living proof. What people must see is that ecologically sane, socially responsible living is good living; that simplicity, thrift and reciprocity make for an existence that is free.

Our task, therefore, is to expose and better understand the myths that dominate our destructive and self-transforming present, and to envision what life would be like, or could be like, if we were to liberate ourselves from today's myths and step into new ones. We search for grounded hope between naive optimism and despair. Without vision and defiant positivity, we will perish.

Unfortunately, our myths today have become so entrenched that they have assumed a false necessity, which is to say, they no longer seem to be myths at all. Rather, the myths of industrial civilisation – which are the myths of limitless growth, technological redemption, and fulfilment through affluence – seem to be a reflection of some ‘grand narrative’ from which we cannot escape.

But there is a collective rumbling in the world today. Do you hear it? It is spreading in all directions, which means it is both coming your way and emanating from you. Currently dormant, our repressed hopes are all embers ready to ignite, awaiting a rush of oxygen that will flare our utopian ambitions. Breathe deeply, they say, and demand the impossible. Let us stoke the fire of ecological democracy that is burning in our eyes, not because we think we will succeed in producing a just and sustainable world, but because if we do not try, something noble in our hearts and spirits will be lost. So open your mind, gentle reader, for the future is but clay in the hands of our imaginations.

We are being called to make things new.

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Walking on sunshine

Leaping off the grid

Bronwyn Adcock

AROUND SEVEN YEARS ago I found myself in the position where, for the first time, I could consider not just owning my own home but building a new one. I had a piece of land on a mountainside on the south coast of New South Wales – a bush block my husband had bought cheap years before. I secured a line of credit with the bank, and approval from the local council to build. It was an exquisite place: sweeps of tall spotted gums rising above clusters of deep green Burrawang palms; a population of shy, darting lyrebirds and unworried swamp wallabies; a line of sight out to the Tasman Sea that would only ever skim forest canopy; all within striking distance of Sydney and Canberra.

Amidst this loveliness, however, lay a significant drawback: the nearest power lines were over one and a half kilometres away. To build a home here would mean living without a connection to the main power grid, surviving on solar energy alone.

Most Australian households receive at-your-fingertips power with ease, thanks to the vast electricity networks that track the continent. On the east coast, the National Electricity Market (NEM) is the world's largest interconnected power system: forty thousand kilometres of circuitry curls its way south from Queensland to NSW and Victoria, over to South Australia, then across the Bass Strait to Tasmania via a 290 kilometre submarine power-cable

on the ocean floor. Vast, but still no match for this wide land, and here I was, right on the fringe of the NEM.

Could I join the 2 per cent of Australians who live off the grid? I wasn't sure I was the type. Back then, off-grid living still seemed synonymous with an alternative lifestyle, a retreat from the modern world. (Almost all Google search results for 'living off the grid' mentioned the iconic hippy community of Nimbin.) I was chasing beauty and economy, but not at the expense of modernity and connection. I still had an urban heart.

I started writing this essay just as the five-year anniversary of living in the solar powered house we eventually did build passed. It seemed a good moment to reflect; five years of living on sunshine. At first I struggled to decipher what had actually changed for me since going off-grid; I was struck by an overwhelming sense of normalcy about my home. Then I realised, this was an indication of how thoroughly I have adapted.

From where I sit – here at my desk, computer on, a light burning overhead and a desk lamp beside me, the dishwasher thrumming down the hall and machine-washed clothes flapping on the line out the window – I follow the political clamour about renewable energy that takes place west over the mountains, in our nation's Parliament, with a sense of bemusement and sometimes frustration. Particularly under the government led by Tony Abbott, you could be forgiven for thinking that renewable energy was simply troublesome: pesky wind farms blighting the landscape, solar subsidies sucking up taxpayer funds. It made me want to yell over the mountain, 'Hey! This is not political, it's a practical solution! And it's easy!' (Well, perhaps not so easy for the threatened fossil fuel industry, but for me here on my hill, it's been no big deal.)

This is not to say it hasn't required significant change – it has. But as humans we are well suited to adaptation, and as I've learnt, it is a process that can bring unexpected gifts: internal shifts in knowledge and perspective.

OUR SOLAR POWER system was installed by a former electrician turned solar specialist named Warren, who said it was important we understood how it all worked. On the day he finished we stood next to our stand of gleaming new solar panels that tilted hopefully towards the sky, and watched as Warren

drew a series of diagrams with pencil and paper. Talk of volts, watts and amps tested a part of my brain that had been happily at ease since withdrawing from high school science, but I understood the very basics: the sun hits the panels, energy is stored in the batteries, and an inverter transforms that energy into power we can use. He explained this system would give us 24-hour power for things like lights, computers, TVs and refrigerators, but major appliances, like dishwashers and washing machines, should only be turned on when the sun is directly hitting the panels. Before he drove away, Warren gave us two devices to help us navigate our new sun-powered world: a gauge that shows the amount of energy stored in the batteries, and a monitor that measures how much power is being used at a given moment.

At first I was cautious, checking the battery gauge before I dared turn on so much as a light. Watching the monitor allowed me to identify individual culprits and to become wrathful: that food processor is nothing but an energy sucker!

Before long, though, I realised that the real action was outside and what I really needed to be tracking was the sun. Or more precisely, the position of the sun relative to the solar panels.

Prior to going off the grid, my relationship with the sun was a fairly superficial one: it was merely an object of beauty – an orange burst in the morning, a herald of pink sky at night – or a source of heat, to be revelled in or escaped depending on the day. Now that I was in a position of dependency, I needed to sharpen my focus. Fortunately for me, the view from my house was like an educative map: an east-facing panorama over the forest and out to the ocean horizon that displayed the sun's daily journey.

After a couple of years staring skywards, I realised that the notion of the sun rising in the east and setting in the west is a gross simplification. In the summer, it pops out of the ocean, from behind a headland to the south, and rises straight up like a slow moving rocket. But come winter solstice, it rises at least half a dozen beaches to the north, taking such a low and languid path across the sky that it seems like a balloon still anchored to the earth. Witnessing this ever-changing pilgrimage across the sky gave me more than a small sense of wonder, a return to child-like curiosity about the workings of the natural world. I'm sure I'd learnt about why the sun's path changes day

by day at some stage in my education – about how the earth’s orbit around the sun is elliptical, not circular, so that day-to-day we are never the same distance from the sun, and how the earth spins with a quirky tilt. But it was knowledge that I had discarded as I’d aged and became more concerned with functionality and less with curiosity.

The only other time in my adult life I’ve seen such interest in the precise positioning of the sun was when I was travelling in Iran during Nowruz – Iranian New Year. Nowruz is celebrated on whichever day falls on the northward equinox, when the sun crosses the celestial equator. Usually this is sometime around 21 March. However, Iranians are not content with just knowing the day; they also calculate and celebrate the *precise* moment the sun makes this crossing, be it 11.23 am or 3.44 pm. *Sal-tahvil*, as this moment is called, is a time to rejoice, to mend broken relationships and forgive. More superstitious Iranian friends warned me to be careful what I was doing at this moment of the sun’s crossing, because it could set the tone for my year ahead – best not to be caught scrubbing the toilet or arguing with a partner.

It’s likely that the importance of the sun during Nowruz can be explained by the festival’s roots in ancient traditions that venerated the sun, like Zoroastrianism, whose god, Ahura Mazda, represents both fire and sun. Ancient architects were also interested in the path of the sun: a study published in 2013 shows that the monument of Ad Deir in Petra, Jordan – built around the third century BC – was designed so that the sun’s rays would hit different parts of the façade throughout the year. Increasingly, modern-day architects and builders are applying this same kind of knowledge as they construct passive solar buildings to increase comfort and decrease energy costs.

Of course, my celestial observations were grounded in a profoundly domestic purpose: knowing that the particular rising position of the winter sun means that the first rays hit the solar panels earlier than in summer, gives me a chance to start the washing machine a whole two hours earlier.

By about the third year of living in my solar-powered house, I’d grown confident enough to discard the power monitor that Warren left, and I rarely check the battery gauge. Now, knowing what month it is and a quick glance out the window are enough for me to go forward and switch on that dishwasher – a domestic sun goddess.

IN AN ESSAY called 'Adaptation', from *Griffith Review 45: The Way We Work*, Ashley Hay pays homage to the extraordinary human capacity for adaptation, particularly when it comes to our ability to accommodate the changing workplace conditions of the past half-century. She asks if we can't also adapt in ways that would help mitigate against the oncoming catastrophe of climate change:

So can we extrapolate this capacity to adapt into other parts of our lives and remind ourselves of how good we are at doing it? What happens if we start to appreciate this skill that we all have, a skill that could surely be deployed against some of the facets of our fragile and fracturing world?

As Hay points out, the non-human biological world is adapting for climate change – there are trees in South America that are moving on average two and a half metres each year to find more favorable climes – so why can't we, as the only species with the conscious ability to understand what is happening to our world, and as the *drivers* of this change, make the required shift?

Most of the time, I feel like a poster girl for Hay's entreaty to adapt: it was such a cinch getting off fossil fuels, I say. Truly.

Of course, I've had moments of doubt. Once, a couple of years ago, we had a group of guests for dinner, most of whom were not familiar with our house. After the meal everyone helped clean up, and I walked into the kitchen just as one woman was about to turn on the dishwasher. No, I explained, we need to wait until the morning, when the sun is shining. For a fleeting second, I saw the look of abject horror that swept over her face, and the sideways glance to her husband. 'But doesn't the food stick on?' she practically gasped. Right away, I felt sure I knew what they'd be talking about in the car on the way home. That night I lay in bed, stewing on this exchange. Had I adapted too far? Become accustomed to inconvenience? The plan was never to regress into some backward kind of lifestyle.

Without doubt, I sacrifice a degree of convenience. My house doesn't function optimally over a 24-hour period: there is a day version, and a

less convenient night version. Devices that contain a heating element, like hairdryers and irons, have largely been abandoned – a clothes drier a distant memory. But my children still are able to get as much screen time as they can successfully negotiate and, crucially, I can work from home.

Somewhat paradoxically, I feel I have gained most from the things I have lost. Like how I never get a power bill now, and how if I wake up on a Saturday morning and see dark clouds I know I can't possibly do any washing so I just read the papers until noon then move onto a novel. Accumulated hours I could have spent ironing have been gifted back to me to spend playing with my children or surfing. Less has become more.

The political debate in Australia around climate change seems to be haunted by the assumption that people, on the whole, are not willing to do with less or accept change. The ultimately successful political campaign to repeal the carbon tax back in 2013, for example, was built on the premise that voters were willing to pay no price at all. Adaptation is almost a political taboo. I'm yet to hear a mainstream politician suggesting that perhaps we must forgo our love of big houses and 24-hour temperature control.

I think this assumption sells us short, and that on a gradual but significant scale we are already doing as Ashley Hay exhorts: 'rise up and do that thing we all do – adapt.' Evidence for this can be found in the changing patterns of energy consumption. Each year, for well over a century, demand for energy steadily increased in Australia. Then, in 2010, this trend suddenly reversed and consumption declined, and has continued to decline for the past five years.

WHY ARE AUSTRALIANS using less power? In research for the Australia Institute in 2013, Hugh Saddler from the Centre for Climate Economics and Policy at Australian National University found three reasons. The first was to do with a change in the economy away from energy-intensive industries, but the other two were more concerned with a change in consumer behaviour: people are choosing more energy efficient appliances and constructing more energy efficient homes (albeit at the behest of regulations) as well as taking up government programs like the 'pink batts' home insulation scheme. Also, people are just consciously cutting back – most likely in response to rising electricity prices.

This sounds like adaptation to me.

The world's largest fossil fuel companies, on the other hand, have been displaying somewhat less adaptive behaviour. In mid-2015, a non-profit science advocacy organisation in the United States called the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) published a series of dossiers: *The Climate Deception Dossiers*. They contained dozens of internal memos and documents that the USC says demonstrate how 'for nearly three decades, many of the world's largest fossil fuel companies have knowingly worked to deceive the public about the realities and risks of climate change'. Millions of dollars have been spent on tactics the USC claims aim to 'deliberately manufacture uncertainty about climate science'.

This sounds like holding on to the status quo.

Anyway, for consumers at least, it's almost certain that the rapid technological developments in solar power, particularly improved battery storage, will make the process of adaptation to a renewable energy economy easier – regardless of who stands in its way. Battery storage capacity is improving so rapidly that by the time I upgrade my batteries in five years time it's likely there'll be no excuse not to own an iron.

But in the meantime, each night I'll continue to keep a tub of water on my sink and rinse plates before they go in the dishwasher. If food gets stuck I'll blame the dishwasher or the person who stacked it. It's a small and painless adjustment.

For all my initial reticence about becoming what I perceived as an off-grid 'type' – a fringe dweller – I have come to relish this one aspect of my life where I am an outlier.

Perhaps living disconnected from one major system has made me more attuned to the presence of other systems: in this era of metadata retention, where Facebook knows if you've had a baby or want a holiday, and a simple Google search for a pair of shoes has advertisers chasing you around the web trying to sell you more, being off the grid is a small escape. There is no record of the power I consumed today and no one will try and sell me any more.

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ESSAYIST Rebecca Solnit frequently writes with an eloquent urgency about the need to tackle climate change. In

an essay published in late 2014, 'The Wheel Turns, the Boat Rocks, the Sea Rises: Change in a Time of Climate Change', she calls for a mass movement of civil society: 'To make personal changes is to do too little. Only great movements, only collective action can save us now.'

I largely agree with Solnit. While being lucky enough to live in a way that aligns with my personal ethics creates a satisfying thread that runs through my life, I have never believed that what I do up on my hill is going to help save the world. It was never my intention either; I just wanted to find a way to live in a beautiful place. As Solnit argues, greater change is required:

Yet when we argue for change, notably changing our ways in response to climate change, we're arguing against people who claim we're disrupting a stable system. They insist that we're rocking the boat unnecessarily.

I say: rock that boat. It's a lifeboat; maybe the people in it will wake up and start rowing. Those who think they're hanging onto a stable order are actually clinging to the wreckage of the old order, a ship already sinking, that we need to leave behind.

Yes, let's rock that boat. And from one who has already taken a small leap, I can tell you that solar power provides a pretty comfortable landing.

But this, I suspect, you already know. Even as I type these final paragraphs, I sense my fingertips being chased by the momentum gathering behind renewable energy technology, and the inevitability of its rise. My story is getting away from me. Soon stories similar to mine will be so common as to be unremarkable, and we will wonder what all the fuss was ever about.

While the world talks

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