

# Time for Sustainability

*originally published 27 February 2013*



When we think of ‘sustainability’ we don’t tend to think immediately of the relationship between humanity and our conception of time, yet the very idea inherent in sustainability is to ‘sustain’ – to organise how human beings live in such a way that we sustain ourselves and the planet over a long term time frame.

Sustainability debates often focus on the [physical limits to growth](#) – the non-negotiable biological limits of the closed system called planet Earth.

But there is another non-negotiable limiting factor that shapes our existence.

Time.

It is a great leveller. No matter who you are, or how much money you have, we all have the same number of hours in the day. While it is true that [how we are able to harness those hours](#) as a resource in part depends on our ability to command, or be offered, resources to meet our needs, there is still a limit – constrained by biology – to what we can all do, regardless of our skills, social capital or bank balance.

Our cultural norms influence how we use time – and in turn, how we use this limited resource influences our culture, our health and wellbeing, and our impacts on the Earth.

## **How Culture Shapes Time**

In our cult of speed, media messages and social norms influence us to equate 'fast' with 'good' and 'desirable'.

Fast is sexy. Fast is savvy. Time is money. Get up to speed. Multi-tasking is seen to be a sign of efficiency and busy-ness, a demonstration of one's importance.

In contrast, to be 'slow' carries negative connotations of being dull-witted or backward.

Yet could it be that the pace and complexity of 24-7 consumer societies is not savvy at all, and is in fact what is creating psychological and physical stress?

Could it be that it is actually the cult of speed which is dull-witted and backward, burdening our adrenal glands with a constant flow of fight-or-flight stressors and stimuli?

In his 1970 book *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler noted that:

*...the acceleration of change...shortens the duration of many situations (which) hastens their passage through the experiential channel...while we tend to focus on only one situation at a time, the increased rate at which situations flow past us vastly complicates the entire structure of life, multiplying the number of roles we must play and the number of choices we are forced to make. This, in turn, accounts for the choking sense of complexity about contemporary life.*

*Moreover, the speeded-up flow-through of situations demands much more work from the complex focusing mechanisms by which we shift our attention from one situation to another. There is more switching back and forth, less time for extended, peaceful attention to one problem or situation at a time.*

*This is what lies behind the vague feeling noted earlier that ‘Things are moving faster.’ They are. Around us. And through us.*

Since the 1970s, things have sped up in ways that were unthinkable then.

In March 2012, the [New Scientist reported](#) that a multi-billion dollar submarine fibre optic cable link extending 15,600km would be built between London and Tokyo via the Arctic Ocean (now accessible due to the convenient retreat of sea ice!). This cable would cut the ‘friction’ between the two cities from 230 milliseconds to 168 milliseconds, and the article noted that ‘reduced transmission time will be a boon for [high-frequency traders](#) who will gain crucial milliseconds on each [automated trade](#)’! No doubt this will facilitate more of the consumption that creates the greenhouse emissions that melts the sea ice.

In recent years, the Slow Movement has sought to counter the societal obsession with speed, and the association of ‘faster’ with ‘better’. The [Slow Food](#) initiative is perhaps the best known example, rejecting the production line model of mass produced, homogenised fast food in favour of local, traditional, diverse food cultures that reconnect people with their sources of food and encourage the enjoyment of food as a social experience.

One of the most compelling challenges to our short-term perception of time fuelled by a culture of fast is [The Long Now Foundation](#) in California. The Foundation, which expresses its dates in five digits (eg. 02013), seeks to stretch out [how we perceive ‘now’](#):

*Steady but gradual environmental degradation escapes our notice. The slow, inexorable pace of ecological and climatic cycles and lag times bear no relation to the hasty cycles and lag times of human attention, decision, and action. We can’t slow down all of human behavior, and shouldn’t, but we might slow down parts.*

*‘Now’ is the period in which people feel they live and act and have responsibility. For most of us, ‘now’ is about a week, sometimes a year. For some traditional tribes in the American northeast and Australia, ‘now’ is seven generations back and forward (350 years).*

*Just as the Earth photographs gave us a sense of 'the big here', we need things which give people a sense of 'the long now'...*

One of the Foundation's initiatives is [The Clock of the Long Now](#), which is being built in the USA. The clock will be designed so that the 'century hand' advances once every 100 years, and the cuckoo comes out on the millennium!

Hamstrung by a political economy that trades off the future for present gains, and where the nanosecond horizons of global finance and three-to-four year election cycles hamper any serious long-term planning, the Clock and other projects of The Long Now seek to jolt us out of our short-term complacency. They invite us to think about how we can reinvent the world so that short-termism does not undermine our ability to sustain our civilisation, and the planetary systems which support it.

### **How Stuff Steals Time**

*The more things you get, the more you want  
Just trading one for the other  
Working so hard to make it easy,  
Got to turn this thing around...*

- Right Now, Van Halen

In contemporary western society, our pace of life seems generally faster than that of any previous generation in history, even though the number of hours in the day has not changed.

Part of the reason that consumer societies seem both increasingly fast-paced and time-poor is because a political economy reliant on economic growth demands rapid and constant consumption in order to perpetuate itself.

Wuppertal Institute founder Wolfgang Sachs and German Green MP Richard Loske eloquently captured this conundrum in their paper '*Sustainable Germany*':

*Beyond a certain number, things steal time...(they) must be chosen, bought, set up, used, experienced, maintained, tidied away, dusted, repaired, stored, and disposed of. They unavoidably gnaw away at the most restricted of all resources: time. The number of possibilities has exploded in affluent societies, but the day...continues to have only 24 hours. Shortage of time is the nemesis, the revenge, of affluence.*

High levels of consumption not only require a lot of money (or debt), and nature's resources, but also a lot of time, as expressed in the phrase 'joy-to-stuff' ratio – that is, the time a person has to enjoy life versus the time a person spends accumulating and managing material goods.

Toffler predicted that the increasing explosion of choice could, past a certain point, become more of a burden than an expression of freedom:

*We are, in fact, racing toward 'overchoice'—the point at which the advantages of diversity and individualization are cancelled by the complexity of the buyer's decision-making process.*

The time-theft of stuff does not begin once we own it – it begins with the time we must exchange for our labour to earn money to buy it, or to go into debt for it.

This infographic, [How The Things You Own End Up Owning You](#), reveals the time its creator had to work to maintain ownership of his stuff by plotting his personal financial metrics on a calendar:



How many of us have 'stuff' that we never or rarely use taking up space in the spare room, garage, cluttering our living spaces – or worse, which we are paying to store elsewhere?

People are increasingly becoming aware of this and embracing a culture of 'voluntary simplicity' in order to step off of the work- spend treadmill.

The emerging collaborative consumption and sharing economy movements, which allow people to leverage value from or share their un(der) utilised assets, could help reduce the demand for resources and associated greenhouse emissions, save households money, and clear or minimise clutter in hundreds of thousands of homes.

And if you could make money hiring out your spare space or equipment, or save it by borrowing or renting stuff belonging to others at low cost, it could mean freeing up time needed for paid work.

### **How Space Shapes Time**

*City life is closing in on me  
The way things go, thirty years,  
Bus timetable'll be my elegy  
Up at seven every working day  
Pay comes in, pay goes out  
It's a week-by-week charade...*

- One Long Day, Cold Chisel

Before the Industrial era, work was much more intimately bound up with home life. Although the nature of some occupations necessitated them being sited at a distance from settlements and towns, on the whole, people lived where they worked.

With the Industrial Revolution came the rise of factories, of jobs separated from home life, of a much wider range of actual or potentially dangerous or unpleasant industries, it became necessary to invent 'zoning', physically separating 'work' from 'home' – and thus, the commute was born.

One of the main reasons for public transit was to move large numbers of (mostly) men from home to work and back. Our cities developed in patterns that enabled access to transit networks, until the car allowed urban development to scatter anywhere.

In low density, car-dependent cities – where it is often difficult and expensive to service communities with frequent, convenient public transport – citizens have become locked into high-energy and time consuming patterns of living and work. The energy requirements of car dependency and urban sprawl are well documented, and there is also the potential risk in costs to households (with the [VAMPIRE Index – Vulnerability Assessment for Mortgage, Petroleum and Inflation Risks and Expenses](#) – identifying the relative degree of socio-economic stress in suburbs in several Australian cities), and consequently more time spent earning money in order to get to work!



Even so, people will absorb the gradual increase in fuel costs, in car parking fees, or continue to do so as long as they possibly can, because they are trading them off for convenience and saving time.

Calls for more car parking and measures to relieve congestion seem to make short term sense, however they only help perpetuate the situation and create a more complex set of issues to resolve down the track, because traffic is a self-fulfilling prophecy – the more roads that are built, the more traffic fills them.

The more traffic flows freely and moves faster, the easier and more convenient it is to drive, the more people will drive, leaving transit less patronised and opening it up to justification for cutting services and funding, creating a vicious circle of making transit even less convenient and appealing.

The design of our urban space shapes, and is shaped by, the influence of technologies on time. At an average walking speed of 5-8km an hour, a pedestrian city can only be 5- 8km wide before it passes an optimal point of how far people are prepared to travel on foot and starts to become dysfunctional. Similarly, a transit based city with an average train speed of 30km/h can extend to 30km wide, and a car dependent city with an average speed of 50km can grow to 50km across before it passes its optimal point.

Italian physicist Cesare Marchetti developed an interesting measure, known as '[Marchetti's Constant](#)', which states that despite changing urban forms and methods of transport, people will adjust their lives (including the relative locations of where they work and live) so that the average travel time stays constant. When cities become more than one hour wide, when it takes more than an hour to get to work, human beings appear to hit a psychological barrier, 'Marchetti's Wall', their limit to tolerance for travel time within a city.

In his book *Reclaiming our Cities & Towns*, placemaker and designer [David Engwicht](#) challenged the transport engineering approach to planning and city design by asking himself 'for what purpose do human beings build and maintain cities?'

*Cities are an invention to maximise exchange (goods, culture, friendship, knowledge) and to minimise travel. The role of transport is to maximise exchange.*

This is a critical distinction Engwicht makes, which flies in the face of engineering-based approaches to planning and urban design that have held sway for decades – **the role of transport is not to maximise mobility, it is to maximise access to exchange.**

Roads, carparks and other requirements of cars lock up large amounts of land that would otherwise be used for the purposes for which cities are made. If we prioritise 'movement' space over 'exchange' space, we are undermining the very reason for cities' existence.

One of the key ideas of the ecological city movement is '[access by proximity](#)' – succinctly expressed by [Ecocity Builders](#) founder Richard Register who notes that 'the fastest way to get from A to B is to build B next to A'.

If we are to address a myriad of challenges from household and business fuel costs in a post-peak oil era, to the dispersion of places people need and want to access and the theft of time by commutes, we will need to move from a mindset of urban sprawl to one of [urban shrink](#).

Designing cities for people, not cars, along with relocalisation efforts and flexible, innovative work practices in an era of digital connectivity – from co-working to location-independent modes of organisation – could help us reclaim time (and energy and money) wasted in commuting.

### **How Haste Makes Waste**

Our sense of what is 'normal' and our spatial arrangements in cities – such as length of commute, separation of work from home – in large part determines how we experience time, which in turn influences our daily choices.

In her book [Time Bomb](#), Barbara Pocock, Director of the Centre for Work + Life at the University of South Australia, notes that:

*Time is a resource that makes change possible and without it, new ways of living are crowded out – decisions to reassess behaviour and do things differently require an investment of time and thought.*

Asking people to 'live sustainably' requires them to make a conscious effort to do something different within existing system conditions.

And where habit takes precedence over considered approach, sustaining a constant, conscious effort is difficult for people who are often expending most of their decision making capacity just trying to make it through the daily routine of work, school, commutes and getting the evening meal together.

Time pressures are therefore more likely to result in the use of energy intensive appliances like clothes dryers instead of line drying; of driving rather than cycling or using transit. Pocock notes:

*Convenient, time saving energy consumption is common, even if it contradicts pro- environmental attitudes or incurs financial costs.*

Changing behaviour takes time – energy and water use are shaped by home, work, community circumstances and demands these create on time, and convenience and comfort are also influences on behaviour.

When it comes to not wasting energy, water or materials, Pocock says, ‘time is at the heart of our adaptive capacity’.

At the macro level, technological developments have allowed us to access resources at faster rates – and technologies are not only chainsaws and drills, but also phenomena like instantaneous communication and ease of currency conversion (and submarine fibre optic cables), which lessens ‘friction’ in the system and facilitates faster access to resources, fuelling hyperconsumption.

## **How Hurry Hurts Our Health**

*Life in the fast lane*

*Surely make you lose your mind*

*Life in the fast lane, everything all the time...*

- The Eagles

Living fast can affect our personal well-being – the pace of life not only saps us of time and energy to sustain ourselves and our relationships with others, but it can have serious physical and mental consequences.

There is a direct correlation between the volume and type of food we consume, long hours of sedentary work and lifestyles which impacts on available time to exercise (which has now become a separate activity we have to schedule time for), and concerns with levels of obesity in our society.

Along with becoming 'hooked on speed', we've created a world of industrial time which, while necessary for so many aspects of modern life, often clashes with the natural time and rhythms of nature and our bodies. Most of us have to artificially manage when and how we get up – meet '[Clocky](#)', a wheel-mounted alarm clock that leaps off your bedside table if you hit the 'snooze' button, and scurries off to different parts of the room until you get up to silence it:

Ironically, it is an almost-ten second film, [Late For Work](#), which best expresses the toxic mix of industrial time + speed.

From fast food to overwork and overscheduled lives, 'hurry sickness' contributes to a range of stress-related illnesses, from adrenal exhaustion and lowered immunity; from increased obesity to heart disease; from impatience with loved ones and strangers alike to debilitating mental health problems.

The Western Australian government's Office of Road Safety grasped this connection when they initiated 'Enjoy the Ride', an innovative campaign that diverges from preaching the 'shalt nots' of speeding, and instead links the issue to the wider cultural context, and how speed affects different areas of our lives.

In his book *Growth Fetish*, Clive Hamilton noted that research into the incidence of modern day psychological and mental health problems such as anxiety, stress and depression has unearthed a range of predisposing factors. These include being unemployed, impoverished or living in a dysfunctional family, along with broader social changes such as geographic mobility, urbanisation, changes in family structure.

But the foremost factor and common denominator is social isolation.

Consumption promotes the definition of individual identity and focuses our attention on what we are doing to maximise our consumption and generating the income to sustain it.

While people are busy concentrating on the pursuit of individual lifestyles, there is a corresponding retreat from involvement in civic and community life, and a weakening of the social cohesion that has been part of life for centuries.

Although we are more materially well off than at any previous time in history, we are, on the whole, less satisfied and experiencing higher levels of anxiety and other impacts on our wellbeing.

And our fa(u)stian relationship with time is threatening the ability of our bodies, minds and spirits to keep doing what we need and love to do.

### **How Time Poverty Erodes Families and Communities**

*I've long since retired, my son's moved away...  
I called him up just the other day  
I said, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind"  
He said, "I'd love to, Dad, if I can find the time..."*

- Cat's In The Cradle, Harry Chapin

The more time we are at work, or getting to and from work, the less time there is available to be split between a variety of possible needs and desires, from caring responsibilities (be it for children, elders or animals); the self-care that ensures our wellbeing by allowing time for exercise and for organising, preparing and eating food that nourishes us; leisure, hobbies and enjoyment, or simply rest.

Research by [The Australia Institute](#) in 2009 found that each year Australians work more than two billion hours of unpaid overtime, worth the equivalent of \$72 billion or six per cent of GDP.

Australia has morphed from being the 'Land of the Long Weekend' to a society where we have created a [reality TV show](#) that encourages people to take their annual leave.

*There's very clear evidence we're working longer hours and we're spending more time travelling to and from work, which means less time for leisure activities, friends and family.*

- Dawn O'Neil, CEO of Lifeline Australia

This 'speed trap' persists, even though as Slow writer, speaker and activist [Carl Honoré](#) expresses it, people are yearning to 'reconnect with their inner tortoise'.

Honoré, author of *In Praise of Slow* and *The Slow Fix*, describes us as being 'marinated in the culture of speed' – he traces his own epiphany to when he caught himself speed-reading bedtime stories to his son, skipping pages, and reading portions of paragraphs:

*My life had become an endless race against the clock. I was always in a hurry, scrambling to save a minute here, a few seconds there. My wake-up call came when I found myself toying with the idea of buying a collection of *One-Minute Bedtime Stories: Snow White in 60 seconds*. Suddenly it hit me: my rushaholism has got so out of hand that I'm even willing to speed up those precious moments with my children at the end of the day. There has to be a better way, I thought, because living in fast forward is not really living at all. That's why I began investigating the possibility of slowing down.*

One of his funniest and most bizarre examples of what he calls 'road runner culture' was when he stumbled across 'speed yoga'!

But time poverty not only threatens our health and that of our connections with people we care about, it undermines the wider community fabric.

Robert Putnam, prominent US social researcher and author of [Bowling Alone](#), has identified three features of American society (many of which translate to other countries) that have significantly contributed to a decline in both formal membership and levels of participation in organisations, and informal social interaction, especially with neighbours:

- time pressures, which are partly or largely associated with working longer hours and longer commutes
- urban sprawl, which is a product of car dependence (also related to time pressures of commuting; an hour commute each way is two hours' less time for other activities each day)
- extensive television viewing, which keeps people indoors, siphons time away from other activities and promotes consumption through exposure to advertising

If, as the prominent urbanist Jane Jacobs noted, 'sidewalk contacts are the small change from which a city's wealth of public life may grow', and all the things we are doing are conspiring against this spontaneous exchange, then it is less surprising that people feel less of a sense of community than they once did.

*In our urgent rush to get "there," we are going everywhere but being nowhere.*

- Kevin Cashman, author of *The Pause Principle*

Compare this with the ['Civetta' \(Little Owl\) contrada](#) I visited in the car-free town centre of Siena, Italy, where the residents eat shared meals in the street in the summer. It's part of the culture, but the design and shaping of space absolutely influences what choices people can make and how they interact. It is interesting to note how many people love to visit small European towns which grew up without the influence of the car to immerse themselves in human-scale urban landscapes.

Compounding the atomisation of consumer societies is the commodification of a range of goods and services – we now have to pay for things that used to occur as a transaction of trust and friendship, from how we entertain ourselves to how we care for children. Often these commodities – such as child care and fast food – are bought because people are time-pressed from working longer hours and have longer commutes to and from work.

In a profound departure from the integrated community life, spontaneous social contact and support of extended family, friends and neighbours that has characterised human lifestyles through the generations, more affluent societies have begun leading lives that are increasingly privatised, segregated, time impoverished and disconnected.

Creating a healthy, resilient community means having time and energy to be a citizen, not just a consumer.

Along with Honoré, there are many other thinkers, academics, researchers and activists challenging the relationship of time to the pace of life, working hours, and work life balance, including John de Graaf, who founded the Take Back Your Time initiative in the US and Juliet Schor, Professor of Sociology at Boston College and author of *Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth*.

In a comical irony, one can only wish the Slow Movement would hurry up!

### **Time As a Pain Point**

*It's just another Manic Monday Wish it was Sunday  
'Cause that's my fun day  
My I-don't-have-to-run day...*

- The Bangles

Time and time pressures – work-life balance and fractured connections with family and friends – is a key ‘pain point’ of life today for many people.

You can Google a plethora of results on this, or you can simply ask the next five people you see if they feel they have enough time in the day, if they ever feel time-pressured, and note what the response is.

If we are going to make sustainability more immediately relevant in people's lives, we need to consider using frames that sit at the nexus of what they are craving, and where it connects to sustainability.

If environment/sustainability framing isn't working as well, or not working for many people, would a better approach be to show how it relates to the pain point of time?

Here is [one of my favourite stories](#) to illustrate this approach.

With time being a key factor in everything from waste and energy use, to working long hours to pay for consumption, to physical and mental lifestyle diseases, maybe it is time to ask:

What if we framed 'sustainability' as a way to free up people's time, reduce stress, and improve their work-life balance?