

Characteristics of Thriving and the importance of Neighbourhoods.

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Introduction - protecting the essence of Thriving for challenging times ahead.

Thriving! Such an evocative and important concept! I congratulate the organisers for choosing *this* word to describe the ideal state of communities. A *thriving* community will be a community of *well-being* and later in this event there will be a number of opportunities to be reminded of the conditions of life that provide for *well being* and to get a sense of how communities are tracking. But to me *thriving* is something more; It deserves careful consideration and articulation; *it* is definitely a concept that must not to be relinquished to the death zone of political speak.

I have had cause to think a lot about *thriving communities* in our work over the last few years in VEIL and about what that will mean in the face of the huge challenges facing us over the next 25-30 years. Whatever might be the characteristics of thriving today, we are entering a period where all that will be put to under enormous pressure. It is essential that we think, now, about the changes and challenges to come, to develop, in our communities, conditions that will protect well-being and provide the creative energy for sustainable prosperity in a period of transformation. To *thrive* in the future implies that we have been able to make, from the looming challenges, new conditions of *convivial life* able to subvert the obstacles we face.

So can we define the 'essence of thriving' in a way that transcends conditions, context and time? To me, a *thriving* community is a place that you recognise from its energetic engagement with the essential human project of re-inventing and re-constructing the possibilities for social existence. You would know a community that is *thriving* if you visited it, for it would leave you *refreshed, invigorated and empowered*. Those terms, by the way, come from the *mission* for the proposed research and training centre for Gross National Happiness in Bhutan. They express a feeling I have about the nature of what it is to *thrive*, not just because of the association with 'gross happiness', but also because of a sense that *thriving* may never be adequately judged by sets of indices of well being, but by the way it is *experienced* from within, and from without - as an inspiration to people and other communities for the way they live.

Thriving will mean different things in different contexts and times, but will always be about the *ability to renew*.

Thriving and surviving.

Refreshed, invigorated and empowered. In the last week or so those terms have plagued my subconscious, colouring the experience of my everyday world. Walking the dog; selecting fruit and vegetables at the local greengrocer; drinking with friends; purchasing the Age from the newsagent; running back to the mini-market because I had forgotten to buy toilet paper; skyping with my son in Beijing; mulching my garden; putting out the recycling bin; accepting surplus home-grown lemons from the Italian nonna around the corner; washing clothes; arguing with a federal politician at a party; reading climate spectator; the important and the mundane events of my days, became situations in which the idea of *thriving* was subconsciously put to the test by judging what was refreshing, invigorating and empowering. The unexpected result of all that reflection and rumination in my subconscious 'life-as-laboratory', was an aphorism that stuck in my head like a jingle. Like a jingle it just states the obvious - in this case defining thriving by what it isn't:

Thriving is much more than surviving.

(Being an academic, and to make it sound more profound, I have given it a proper attribution: *Chris Ryan, Carlton North. 20 Oct 2011. 6.55am. Morning Shower.* We all know that as we've come to treat water as a precious resource we've realised that the biggest challenge to a short shower is that hot water running over your head is absolutely **the** best place for creative thinking. You might think *this* aphorism isn't particularly creative - but, in defence of the shower, it didn't actually arrive until after my four minutes were up, and I'd turned it off.)

So why did my subconscious conclude that there is a need to consider thriving *in contrast to the state of survival*? Because, in the next 25 years the challenges we will face might make mere survival seem acceptable, or all that is achievable.

The generations present in this audience are those that will witness *the end of the carbonaceous period* of human development: the end of 150- 200 years of economic growth and the development of science and technology to overcome the limits and vicissitudes of nature, derived from a process of digging far back into earth's history. All the extraordinary discoveries and innovations and the wonders of the industrial age that have shaped our current existence, have depended more or less directly on our exploitation of a vast, cheap, technologically accessible store of millions of years of deposits of long-

dead animals and plants - the fossils we turned into fuels. Opening that grave gave us the energy to build our vast 'machine for living' - with provision of energy, water, food and shelter; infrastructures for handling waste, producing artificial light, improving health, facilitating the movement of goods and people and ideas and information. The high energy return for low energy input from a fossil life-support system allowed humanity to break from the limits of a social metabolism based mostly on the energy we could extract from sun and land through agriculture. It also produced a world constructed from oil (and coal and gas).

We live now in a carbonaceous world where the vast stores of energy we have released are embedded in the fabric of our life - in its static physical 'stuff' and in the dynamic life systems on which we depend. The human story of how we have become 'masters and possessors of nature' through technology (to use Descartes' description of the goal of science) is also fundamentally embedded in our culture. George Bush is reputed to have remarked, in the context of discussions about the Kyoto agreement, that US citizens have a God-given right to burn as much oil as they want; for US citizens (and other nations influenced by US attitudes) the profligate consumption of fossil fuels is a quasi-religious act. In the rest of the secular developed world the mining and burning of coal and oil underpins our perception of what it is to be human and sets us apart from – and above - other species.

That 150 year old 'way of shaping the world' is coming to an end in a disturbing blind race between two interconnected limits of nature that we cannot overcome by technology alone. The first the race is happening in the 80% of the neglected population of the world who received little of the benefits of growth and now, rightfully, want their share of the bounties we gained from burning the past. Those countries' rapid growth and the finite supply of [oil](#) means that oil supplies are about to 'peak' - demand will soon (or has already) outstrip supply. If we ever return to some stable form of global financial recovery, the cost of oil will soon fluctuate around \$200 a barrel and higher (instead of around \$80 as it is today). We found in VEIL community engagement that people quickly appreciate the difference between thriving and surviving when they try to balance their household budget for a week on an estimated petrol price of \$4 a litre (which it could easily reach if the oil price rises rapidly). They quickly appreciate that how all that embedded fossil fuel has shaped their urban living conditions and that a rapid rise in oil price can quickly turn those conditions into a straightjacket.

The second part of the race is of course [climate change](#). The natural carbon cycle moves a relatively stable amount of the element carbon between living things on land and in the oceans, and the atmosphere (the cycle of photosynthesis and respiration). Or it used to. This cycle has been disrupted by our release into nature of a vast amount of previously locked-up carbon through burning fossil fuels. Relatively small amounts of oxidised carbon (CO₂)

in the atmosphere (from plants) keep just the right amount of heat from the sun in the biosphere to support life. That the biosphere is heating on the basis of the constantly rising CO₂ in the atmosphere since the beginning of the industrial revolution is beyond doubt, it is just basic physics. What happens as a result of that pollution and all the extra heat circulating in the bio-system is very difficult to predict with precision and certainty. We have well over fifty years of scientific investigation of the greenhouse effect culminating, over the last few decades, in perhaps the biggest collaborative multidisciplinary scientific enterprise in human history. That massive scientific effort still only gives us probabilities of change with higher levels of uncertainties than we would wish. Yet the overall picture of the impacts of global heating is so disturbing that the necessity to act is beyond precautionary; we understand that in something like a quarter of the time that it took us to burn all that fossil fuel, we have to change to a carbon free energy system, *and* adopt processes that will take carbon back out of the atmosphere and lock it up.

That shift away from a carbon/oil/fossil fuel past will be truly transformative, affecting technologies for producing and using energy, patterns of living, goods and services, and the established infrastructure of the provision of food and water and transport and buildings. Overall it will require a dramatic and sustained reduction in what is known as the energy intensity of our economy - the amount of energy used to produce and distribute the goods and services we need - because there is no realistic pathway to avoiding dangerous temperature rise that doesn't involve huge reductions in the amount of energy required per person (in developed economies).

Thus, we know that the future will involve: [embracing non-carbon \(renewable\) energy](#) and finding ways of [living better whilst consuming less](#). And that means substantial [changes to our current urban form](#) that we will hear more about in this event (density, proximity of services, urban food and energy production, a shift away from car based mobility to public transport, walking and cycling, and so on).

The shape of *thriving* communities will be different for other climate related reasons as well. One other thing we know about climate change with a high level of certainty is that the world will not just heat progressively - there are processes (tipping points) in which heating suddenly changes conditions such that even faster heating will take place (often called runaway warming). Even without such step-changes in conditions, the variation in the weather around the warming mean is likely to increase; thus we have, in the CSIRO projections for future weather, data about the expected *decrease* in rainfall over, say the next two decades, at the same time as estimates of the expected *increase* in extremely high rainfall days. Droughts, floods, extreme heat, fires, extreme cold, cyclones; we can expect these events to increase in intensity and, most probably, frequency.

Australia has had a good taste of extreme weather variability in the last decade. We have seen clearly how our constructed infrastructure of urban life, designed around past patterns of climate variability with the expectation that those patterns will hold into the future, can break down leaving lives broken and exposed. When past variability is exceeded, critical aspects of life - housing, water, food, transport, health - can suddenly prove to be brittle and at risk

So, clearly and importantly, thriving in the future will be dependent on [the building of resilience](#) - physical and social - to enable communities to bounce back from unexpected shocks.

In our work at VEIL over the last five years - with communities and households; with designers and researchers on visions of future sustainable societies; with new entrepreneurs; in mapping emerging local innovations across Melbourne and other cities around the world; in research and modelling of scenarios for the future of food production and healthy eating, and so on, we have formed some general ideas about the characteristics of resilient, zero-carbon futures that would allow communities to *thrive* and maintain that essential and critical characteristic of *the ability to renew*. In brief they are:

- [citizens producing, not just passively consuming](#): In the critical areas of life - in the provision of food, water, energy, mobility, shelter, information as well as in the power to shape development - *thriving* will see a shift of citizens to active roles in *production* and *governance* (a reversal of current trends that define the role of citizens as 'passive consumers');
- [diversity in approaches to living systems and resource use](#): Diversity is a critical characteristics of resilience. *Thriving* will require an increase in diversity of the sources of energy and water, in forms of transport, in patterns of living, in 'household' type and so on;
- [high value placed on services \(compared to 'goods'\)](#): Services, when properly designed, can deliver 'needs' with less resource use than many products targeted at fulfilling the same need; services can also provide for strong social capital and improve community connectedness, so essential to resilience
- [strong networks of exchange, support and sharing](#): Across and between thriving communities, intrinsic deficiencies and surpluses require strong networks of 'load sharing', to ensure that diversity can be increased without building undesirable inequalities. These networks will be both physical/social as well as virtual (internet connected systems).
- [passion for creative experimentation and innovation](#): We really do not know clearly what will work in this transformation, in the complex interplay of life-styles, systems of provision and technology. *Thriving* will be associated with a strong spirit of experimentation and social and technical innovation - real life

laboratories constantly trying new ways to do old things and new ways to do new things, within a local context

This is not fashionable time in Australia for speculating about the likely impacts of climate change (or peak oil) on future patterns of living. With the exception of some of the more paranoid and culturally regressive states in the US there is possibly no other developed economy in the world that has been brought to the level of hysterical polarisation about the reality of CC and/or the need to take action as it is now in Australia. It is most certainly a tragedy for future generations that there is so much effort, in politics and our monopoly media, focused on creating fear about the future if we leave our place amongst the highest per capita energy users and greenhouse gas producers in the world. The advancing climate science and data, that now shows the world tracking far in advance of the conservative predictions of the IPCC, has little impact in a nation being taught to distrust and fear any scientific data that questions the direction of progress.

In a spate of recent studies of why 'we' resist the truth about climate change, numerous authors think that we are abysmally ignorant of the history of the earth, the formation of life and the workings of natural systems that support the biosphere. So another attribute of a thriving community will surely be:

- [the valuing of 'natural capital', biodiversity and knowledge of nature](#): In the thriving urban communities of the next decades a respect for, knowledge of, and engagement with, natural systems, cycles and rhythms will be high. This would bring the pursuit of 'bio-mimicry' beyond the idea of goods and technologies that are inspired by 'nature's ways', to social organisation and patterns of living inspired by understandings of complex adaptive ecosystems - [structural bio-mimicry](#).

So to finish, why are neighbourhoods and precincts important in attaining this future state of *thrivation*? Clearly if you look at all the above attributes they point to the importance of 'the local' - to local diversity, local economies, to what we at VEIL call 'distributed systems' of production and consumption. But it is more than that. We know that innovation, really significant innovation that brings about disruptive change, most often starts from small niche activity that according to studies are often carried and developed by small networks of dedicated actors, often outsiders or on the fringe; and those niches may be entrepreneurial corporations, small businesses or cooperatives or grassroots activist communities, cultural groups, towns and neighbourhoods.

The slowness of political, global and national, action in response to CC is often contrasted with the real threat of tipping points and runaway climate shifts that create the palpable sense of urgency and pessimism that permeates so much of the writings of those who watch the climate data unfold. In his pessimistic

and depressing book *Requiem for a Species*, (typical of many written over the last year or so) Clive Hamilton can see no hope for the future because of the likelihood will reach one of those climate tipping points before any real program of deliberative action is in place. Yet Hamilton and others fail to understand that social change - in attitudes, behaviour, organisation, movements - follows a similar pattern of tipping points, because social change is non-linear, with action that often begins incrementally and slowly and then, unexpectedly, reaches a threshold where it is a dominant process. These optimistic features of our ability, as a social species, to innovate and change substantially and quickly, point to the important role of neighbourhoods that provide for high levels of social contact and interaction, in meeting the challenges to come.

Neighbourhoods also encompass all of the systems - social, physical and technical - that will be transformed. Whilst the idea of changing the future 'one building at a time' is attractive in its simplicity it leaves out too much of the fabric of life to be effective. We need to talk at the very least (as David Sloan Wilson does in his wonderful book, *The Neighbourhood project*) of changing things 'one block at a time'. However my sense is that the neighbourhood or precinct will be the unit of human existence that will determine whether we can continue to *thrive* through the transformation to come.