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OPINION

Build slower cities or keep careering towards disaster



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So here's the paradox of speed. Slow cities give you more time. How that works goes to how we conceive and colonise planet Earth.

Two new works bookend this question in a way that seems tailored to this particular historical instant. One is David Attenborough's extraordinary new film, *A Life on Our Planet*, which recounts humanity's "greatest mistake" – and how we can fix it. The other is a book – *Slow Cities* by Paul Tranter and Rodney Tolley – examining the same issue from the other end of the telescope.



Inner-city lanes can be treasures in the making of a slower city made for walking. DEAN SEWELL

Both stitch the small personal narrative to the great political tapestry. The 20th century was focused largely on burning the past to expand the present. The idea, behind all that puffing of steam and belching of carbon, was to magnify ourselves into gods.

Now we see that, far from gods, we've become fat little murderous bipeds behaving like a species maddened by pain. We see what we were really burning was the future. Pretty soon, if we don't wise up, we'll watch it dive, still wearing its wax-and-feather wings, into the sea.

Attenborough is 93. His life has paralleled the American century, arcing from new hope through limitless optimism to diminution. "The way we humans live on Earth is sending it into a decline ... our planet is headed for disaster." You never wanted to see Attenborough weep, just like you never wanted to see America descend into theocracy. Now you've seen both.

Documenting the halving of wilderness area over his lifetime (from two-thirds to one-third of the planet), Attenborough's film has been called a "[one-man Extinction Rebellion](#)". And yes, biodiversity is his core concern. Yet he makes it clear that nature will recover. The real mass extinction is our own.

Yet the film ends on an uptick. It's still not too late. If we pull our horns in dramatically – burn no carbon, eat less meat, magnify forests and rebuild oceans – we can still revive wilderness, our greatest defence against fire, disease and death. Our big brains got us into this mess. They can get us out.

And this is where slow cities comes in. I know. Congestion is bad, efficiency is good. Life is short, time is money. But does anyone really believe this, anymore? Or does that old, commuting, ladder-climbing lifestyle seem simply old-fashioned now, the dusty habit of a bygone era? Are we ready to admit we have not a career but a life?

For a century, speed and efficiency have been our gods. But they're dangerous and duplicitous deities, making us destroy our cities and our planet and still not delivering the promised time savings. Because high-speed travel actually increases distance, pushing buildings apart, the time savings are illusory.

But the losses are real – physical, social and psychological. Apart from the obvious destruction of trees and neighbourhoods, high-speed roads shove fine urban texture and fertile farmland, both, under the great bulldozer of hurry. And at a personal level, say Tranter and Tolley, driving more than 16 kilometres to work links to increased cholesterol and blood sugar, heart issues, posture problems and bad sleep.

Social effects include increased loneliness. Living so far apart forces us to drive to work and school and shop in massive malls that make bumping into friends or chats with your fruiterer improbable.

And then there's the way driving makes us worse human beings. It's not just road rage. Watch how people behave on motorways – the bullying and tailgating, the overtaking and slowing right down, the relentless competition and aggression. Driving is no path to our better selves.

But let's look at the upsides of places designed for slow modes such as walking and cycling. There's the personal health stuff. Walking, say Tranter and Tolley, halves Alzheimers, halves colds, limits colon cancer, improves balance, reduces osteoporosis, burns fat (more than jogging), improves blood pressure, strengthens

muscles, reduces glaucoma risk, improves heart health, boosts endorphins, reduces anxiety and improves memory.

And if it's pandemic you're worried about, walking and cycling are open-air activities that also build your immune system.

Then there are the enviro-benefits. Living close enough to walk to school, shops or movies doesn't demand towers. Even three-storey villages allow us to shrink our physical footprint, rebuilding wilderness as Attenborough prescribes. They mean we share more – pools and libraries, bars and gardens – which is fun and connective. And in all these things, they limit climate change, restoring the jungles, icecaps and oceans on which our lives depend.

But there are also immediate benefits. A good walking city doesn't just allow walking but incentivises it with charm and pokability. A certain picturesqueness is implied; nooks and crannies, surprise and delight, nature tangled with culture. Inner Sydney, with its alleys and undulations, is a perfect fit.

Old cities did this without effort, which is why almost all cities have a charming ancient core and soulless outer rings. It's also why I've always lived in as close as I can to the middle.

Our speed addiction is every bit as destructive as dependence on speed of the other sort. As with most destructive behaviours, the excuse is economic, but Tranter and Tolley point out that this too is illusory. Slow cities foster cafe economies: resilient, small-scale, healthy, with far lower health, land, infrastructure and transport costs. Plus there's the economic benefit of actually surviving.

Planners, listen up. There's not much point in building our way out of pandemic if it drives us over the cliff of climate change. The future, if we're to have one, will be slower, closer and inestimably more interesting.

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Elizabeth Farrelly is a Sydney-based columnist and author who holds a PhD in architecture and several international writing awards. She is a former editor and Sydney City Councilor. Her books include 'Glenn Murcutt: Three Houses', 'Blubberland; the dangers of happiness' and 'Caro Was Here', crime fiction for children (2014).