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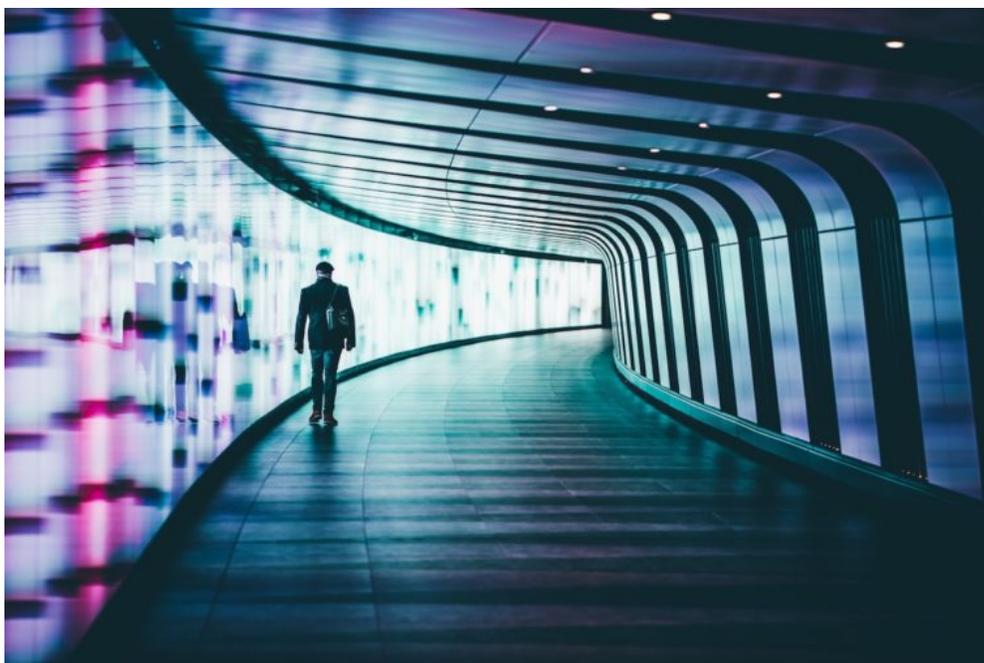
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## Tim Williams: Why we need to plan our cities for the jobs of the future

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**Tim Williams, Arup | 18 March 2019**

**OPINION:** The Greater Sydney Commission’s new policy has little discernible economic research behind it or any discussion about where jobs are going in the modern city or what jobs and services will be around in the fast arriving digital era. But it wants to abolish planning flexibility for “employment land” and will prevent the emergence of the mixed uses places to which, on evidence, modern jobs want to go.

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I’m exploring where jobs are going at the moment, and what jobs there might be as we move towards

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So I am looking at what kind of places and environments internationally are attracting investment and talent at the moment. But I'm also considering the transition to more knowledge-intensive jobs and what AI, AVs and other disruptive tech-enabled acronyms beginning with the letter "A" will do to the jobs done by mere humans. It doesn't look pretty.

I'm turning into a luddite pessimist on what the digital universe will do to employment. Technology can of course both kill and make jobs, but even in that benign assumption we need to be clear that those who die in the process may not be the ones reborn. The first industrial revolution broke a few eggs on the way to making an omelette and some workers whose trades were abolished by technology were impoverished and never recovered.

The macro economic consequences were transformative but the micro ones were often catastrophic for individuals and families. I sense that dislocation is going to happen again but on a bigger scale. I am also less sure that new well-paid jobs will replace the old ones.

I note also that automation and AI have begun to destroy not only working class jobs but also middle class, managerial and indeed knowledge-rich jobs. We are beginning to see machine-generated legal opinions with a better evidential basis and reasoning than some lawyers can produce.

As a lapsed barrister myself, I want to joke at lawyers' expense and say "no surprises there". But the implications are chilling.

## **Professionals and leafy suburbs could also be eroded as AI moves into our lives**

And not just for individuals but the professional services economy and the city districts that rely on them. It's no longer just rustbelt areas at risk. Some currently leafy suburbs of Sydney could be under a medium to long term threat from what **Joseph Schumpeter** called the creative destruction of capitalism in its new "digital disruption" form.

## **Towns and cities with high densities of graduates are winning the battle for talent and investment over non-graduate places**

As to where jobs are going now, it's clear that certain cities and places are favoured by global talent and investment. **Enrico Moretti** has written about the [New Geography of Jobs](#) which shows that towns and cities with high densities of graduates are winning the battle for talent and investment over non-graduate places.

both residentially and commercially, towards what he calls “walkable urban” districts compared with “drivable suburban”.

We have seen such a shift in Sydney. Mixed use, walkable, high amenity, high public transport-accessible locations, preferably close to universities, attract top dollar and agglomerations of talent. These places – not out of town, single use, business parks – are where the top knowledge jobs are going.

This has a number of policy implications. One is that the best mode to service this knowledge economy is rail or other mass transit modes that enable a large number of workers to agglomerate in a concentrated space with as little congestion on the roads as possible. Motorway projects and such agglomeration are not natural bedfellows.

The second implication is spatial in that this agglomeration trend is leading to certain parts of towns over-heating in terms of rents and house prices. What do we do about that and the areas left behind?

The third implication is about the whole concept of “employment” or “industrial” land.

Globally and in Australia, jobs are going to mixed use “innovation districts” and other places which mix jobs, homes, retail, education, cafes and leisure activities – and employee preferences are clearly towards this model rather than single use, drivable, business parks in the middle of nowhere.

## Like it or not most jobs are in the CBD

Like it or not, 50 per cent of all jobs in Australia in the last five years have been created within a few kilometres of the CBD in Sydney and Melbourne because of this fact, according to [The Grattan Institute](#).

So why are we seeking in planning terms to draw a red line around “employment areas” just because industries have “traditionally” clustered there, when these industries may be dying and these places no longer attract talent and investment?

Or rather, why would we try and stop single use, under utilised land with jobs in disappearing sectors from moving in a more sustainable direction?

This is, of course, not an academic question in Sydney. The GSC’s “thought leadership” piece on such matters, [A Metropolis That Works](#), was recently issued.

**Some planning authorities, believing the commission’s work to be ex cathedra, are rushing to turn thought**

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I put “thought leadership” in inverted commas because despite its modest pretensions – and equally modest evidential basis – I find that some planning authorities, believing the commission’s work to be *ex cathedra* [straight from the pope], are rushing to turn thought bubbles into inflexible reality.

In my view, this is happening without deep enough consultation between the GSC and the property sector about what a radical shift in planning policy entails.

## **In depth research needed on how to do mixed use in previously single use job-rich precincts, like in London**

Nor as far as I can see is there anything like the depth of research behind the policy we find in the documentation on “strategic employment land” of the Greater London Authority, which has also, creatively, provided design guidance on how to do mixed use in previously single use job-rich precincts.

The GSC’s new policy, which as far as I can see has no economic research behind it or any discussion about where jobs are going in the modern city or what jobs and services will be around in the fast arriving digital era, wants to abolish planning flexibility for “employment land” and will prevent the emergence of the mixed uses places to which, on evidence, modern jobs want to go.

## **If implemented, everything outside an employment land will be flexible and amenable to changing outcomes but not land within them.**

The GSC is basically saying that areas ripe for reinvention as mixed use areas, which may attract more jobs in reality than the declining single use areas, should remain sacredly inviolable.

They want to freeze such areas in what in many cases is a fallen state because they once provided lots of jobs and “urban services” for local communities.

I have been working on one such area in the so-called “Eastern City”.

It was a major local employment area now drastically reduced in job density and scale, with its once significant role in car assembly now only evident in a handful of panel beaters providing urban services when it’s not clear anyone will be owning cars after the arrival of shared cars, AVs and mobility as a service.

And the majority of the people who work there are certainly not from the local community but indeed drive in from south western Sydney (well outside the notion of a 30 minute city).

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This is the final irony of the policy: treating these locations with this backward approach will push residential development – not jobs – westwards when precisely the opposite balance is the core strategic aim of the GSC.

I add: there are also concerns in Western Sydney that the policy will trap certain locations there in a time-warp – places no longer successful at attracting jobs but not allowed to progress to a mixed use condition which would work better.

I hope they look at this over-simplified policy shift. I really believe more jobs and urban services can go into such places by accepting the market wants mixed use, connected and walkable locations and enabling more of them to happen. But hey, I still have a Betamax video so what do I know about technology and the future of work?

**Tim Williams is a regular contributor to *The Fifth Estate*. He is head of cities and urban renewal at Arup and adjunct professor at Western Sydney University.**

**UPDATED: 25 March 2019.** This article has been updated to reference the Grattan Institute for the figure quoted for employment growth in Melbourne and Sydney.

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Tags: [AI](#), [automation](#), [AVs](#), [cities](#), [jobs](#), [planning](#)

## Comments

**8 Responses to "Tim Williams: Why we need to plan our cities for the jobs of the future"**

**Michael Harrison** says:  
5 April 2019 at 10:40 am

“ As a consultant urban designer and strategic urban planner in Sydney for over 30 years I have a lot of sympathy for both the GSC position and Tim Williams position. In regard to rezoning industrial land to mixed use we must hasten slowly. Tim is right – the best cities have the best mixes of uses and people live pretty close to jobs. While there probably should be a

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sites for rezoning and the paucity of evidence supporting strategic planning policy at the local level is very underwhelming. Two sites come to mind. A client has 5ha of land by Clyde station just used by warehouses employing very few people. Why should this use continue adjacent a rail station and the new light rail. Especially as the site fronts Ducks Creek and could contribute a park along side the creek as part of the Governments Green Grid. Another area is Macquarie Park – Australia's most successful employment area outside a CBD. Some people say we should tamper with this success by introducing higher density mixed use (with higher densities of employment). With three rail stations, a uni, a regional shopping centre and a hospital – the only long term future is mixed use as a fully operating urban centre – it is just a matter of time. The average lot size is 2 ha – half of Macquarie Park along Waterloo Rd could be zoned mixed use requiring at least doubling of employment on each development – and these lots have plenty of room to design office buildings fronting Waterloo Rd with high density residential behind on the same lot but accessed by new local east west streets. All parts of Macquarie Park are within walking and cycling distance of the new rail stations. Rezoning can be staged so that half the industrial zoned land remains for 20 years before reconsideration. Some people don't like the look and scale of current high density residential at the east and west precincts of Macquarie Park but this is an urban design issue that can be controlled – slim tall buildings among low rise buildings with open space is the proven way to go – there are good examples at Green Square – but we can still do better in terms of design quality and slimmer towers. The District Planning Panels who decide rezonings do need to be given more flexibility when evidence is provided rather than having a general stop to all rezoning of industrial land in metro Sydney. My consultancy gets half our work from government and half from developers so

**Tina Perinotto** says:

25 March 2019 at 6:14 pm

“ Here is the source for Tim Williams’ statistic that 50 per cent of jobs are created within the inner city, It’s from the Grattan Institute. <https://grattan.edu.au/news/productivity-and-geography/>

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**Julian Ardas** says:

24 March 2019 at 11:56 am

“ Great thought provocation Tim, as usual. As we live in increasingly dense urban environments land as a resource becomes more scarce and more valuable. I believe planners need to seriously start implementing land use zonings and controls in three dimensions and not from a traditional two dimensional plan view. We need to think about development sites and precincts as self contained communities where work, rest and play occurs at all times of the 24 hour day and each day of the week. We should think of development sites and precincts in cross-section as a variety of human activity. We need to start stratifying such controls on the vertical scale. Basement areas could be allowed for more noisy activities, street level areas to connect with the public domain and different activities at higher levels etc.

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**John Brockhoff** says:

20 March 2019 at 6:05 pm

“ Tim,  
Your article makes out that it is an either / or proposition – of having job rich liveable centres or ‘redundant’ industrial land. This is not the case, and ensuring there is stock of land for urban serves, logistics, other industry is vital for the success of any city.

The GSC paper did involve considerable research into Sydney’s needs and is an important contribution. In any case, the points

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Regards John Brockhoff

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**julia** says:

23 March 2019 at 10:00 am

👍 Reply from Tim Williams to comments by John Brockhoff

☐ Thanks John a commendable and not unexpected attempt by you to play the ball not the man. I still don't buy it. The economic studies you point to merely support the notion there is demand for spaces for jobs and enterprise in such locations.

☐ Also that we need land from which so called urban services can be provided. So far so banal.

☐ My point was the lack of any discussion or research in A Metropolis that Works or supporting papers about the future of jobs and services in a digital and knowledge job era and how areas currently deemed "employment" or "industrial " lands might need to adapt to actually attract such jobs or services.

☐ Specifically, there was no consideration of the international trend towards worker and business preferences for mixed use environments not single use business parks or compounds.

☐ Such places are losing employment density everywhere and if businesses do go to them they are likely to be in the form of jobless logistics sheds served by AV trucks. Not panel beaters let alone the creative industries.

☐ I suggest a thought leadership piece on work place might have been underpinned by research into such scenarios. It also should have presented case studies and ideas about imaginative developments where jobs and homes have been combined and how this was accomplished.

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residential.

□I am strongly against promiscuous spot rezoning and indeed against the private sector supplanting the public sector role in plan making.

□But to have a GSC paper not embrace mixed use when we all want to work and live in such environments is puzzling and indeed worrying. It suggests closed minds. Let's open them and mix it up to get a real world solution to Sydney's needs.

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***máire sheehan*** says:

20 March 2019 at 5:50 pm

“ I agree in principle with the trend and the need for more flexibility for 'mixed uses'. However I think the assertion that existing employment lands are not needed for future employment is a bit 'one size fits all' In inner Sydney most employment land has been rezoned to residential (Best ROI) with minimum employment activities.

The employment zones that are left are being used for culture/arts and linked support services. They provide essential support services and equipment to theatre, film, events etc. Such services should be kept within the 30 minute radius of where the services are needed. Two examples in Inner West Council area – Canal Road and Carrington road are fighting to stop residential development that will push out existing tenants that are part of a diverse and thriving economy  
Yes, there are different experiences and transitions in other parts of Sydney which is why a one size fits all will not work.

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***Christopher B Leinberger*** says:

20 March 2019 at 5:13 am

“ Tim, How the heck are you...this article just popped up. I have a delegation of Victoria planners and developers coming to metro DC as well as San Francisco and NYC for a tour. I am

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**janet sealy** says:

19 March 2019 at 9:53 pm

“ Hi Tim thanks for alerting to planning for jobs for the future, I would like to add we need some form of job-making in the world of animals and plants. We seem to have forgotten we are entirely dependent on the Natural World.

We are entirely hell bent on removing the last of our unique fauna and flora inherited from the original inhabitants just 230 years ago – This link shows the bushland before it was cleared:

<http://thegreenmanly.blogspot.com.au/2014/01/if-this-hospitals-builtthe-animals-die.html> Wild About...: Endangered vegetation now a hospital case. thegreenmanly.blogspot.com.au

Ironic that the Nature we need for our health was removed to build a hospital – just the kind of un-thinking decision destroying our prospects for survival and just one of hundreds of decisions that have been made in the last few years. No wonder the wildlife of the planet has halved since the 70s and plummeting insects will remove the food source of other species in a chain of events. But this is just the first course in a meal humans have made of the Natural World – that is their own Life-Support.

Forest is a survival mechanism, especially in cities, yet it seems there is no ethical consideration or EIA to consider that all species in future will need forest remnants to enable physical and mental health ... Our conversation is entirely anthropocentric and short -term and our behaviours in planning and construction follow suit.

Have said to the GSC it needs to consider a biodiversity strategy in its Green Grid. Why ? Unless that happens the recreational economy will simply eat up the future Natural

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for native vegetation and fauna to simply have some habitat, is not planned to happen.

This is a deep mistake in the face of over-whelming anthropocentricity in planning discussion and broad media conversation. It seems science has bowed to economic thinking but we have forgotten that there can be no Economy or Society without the Environment – the triple bottom line is not “equal” at all we will soon discover.

At all government levels there seems to be an inability to comprehend that humans are just animals in need of the same critical biological infrastructure that all living creatures need – yet this infrastructure does not feature in our land-use planning or legislation. Urban Forest is not even mentioned, soils and seedbank are not considered and the cumulative effect of all human impact from agriculture, construction, logging, mining, tourism and transport etc. is not in anyone’s vision.

It all will come down to hard limits – hard ecological limits – and the rights of nature will simply be asserted in the end – by Nature. Pity generations to come that will pay the price that we have not understood or acted according to these limits.

On a more hopeful note Western Sydney Uni is one of the few looking at how we humans have placed ourselves in this situation and research into the re-wilding of cities and the restoration of native vegetation is urgent for in situ biodiversity corridors.

Thanks to Fifth Estate for reporting that the RBA has recognized the Environment is in crisis. “Both the physical impact of climate change and the transition are likely to have first-order economic effects.”

<https://www.rba.gov.au/speeches/2019/sp-dg-2019-03-12.html>

picking up on the policy think tank

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