A Re-Balancing of The Home in the City
Dean Drayton, January 2021

In the last century two major developments changed the nature of the home. First the railways provided star like ribbon development out from the centre of cities, and then second in the fifties the motor car gave a new freedom for family travel and at the same time enabled the spaces in between the railway lines to be filled with the modern-day suburb. Both fuelled the rapid growth of cities in the last half of the twentieth century. The Central Business District became the working centre of the city, surrounded by dormitory suburbs for those working there. The skyline of a modern city shows the skyscrapers in the centre, surrounded by sub-centres with some higher buildings in the surrounding suburban sea of houses.

For example, the effect on the churches was most marked. The church went from being one of the dominant buildings in the central city, to being towered over by skyscrapers. The churches found a new role in the suburbs. By the sixties, the church had become the local centre emphasising the role of faith in dealing with the personal, and the subjective issues of life.

A profound separation occurred with the core issues of society being worked out in the business and social centres in the city, while "The local congregation was left focussed on the family and the essential 'private' areas of life. It shows there was little way of relating to the workplace which had become the 'public' domain in a secular world."(AGN .p. 47). The matters of faith and meaning were being marginalised from the central issues of economy and national production. The tendency was further and further centralising in the major centres, with less and less focus on the decentralised centres and suburbs, except in so far as they provided the infrastructure for the centred city.

At the beginning of the 21st century the emergence of the internet, introduced a digital form of relationship which was not defined by spatial location but by digital location. This gave a new degree of freedom for individuals to relate to their community, nation and the world. Changes like this in technology begin slowly but reach a critical mass or are seen to be another way forward at a time of crisis. The internet was to have a key role in the 2020 Pandemic that shut down international and national travel and led to lockdowns of life in all communities to prevent further spread of the disease. As it turned out the internet provided the freedom for people

to work at home that was a necessary way of lessening the effect of the virus. This became a tipping point for re-assessing the role of the home.

The Re-Balancing of the Role of the Home
By necessity, the home had to become a family support centre, a working centre, a leisure and recreation centre, an entertainment, social and cultural centre. And it was the internet that provided the overall possibility that then had lots of other implications for the structure of the city. After the initial lockdowns were eased it was apparent that most workers, while willing to go back to the old patterns for some of the week, did not want to give up on the freedom for family and individual life that the reality of working from home made possible. And it was also apparent that the level of efficiency of the work did not decrease.

The internet had provided another way of organising commerce digitally that does not depend on the spatial, physical shape of the city organised around the central business district. The presenting problem of lessening the risk of infection through city centres gave a glimpse of the way that the internet was opening a new role for the home in the future.
In particular, many had seen the possibility of a different sort of work/family/leisure balance in the family if a significant component of a five-day working work in the city or other centres could be restricted to two or three days since the internet provided a wide networking vehicle for work to continue from different locations than before.

The viral city has opened a pandora's box of questions and alternate possibilities for the accepted view that developed in the last century that the need for high rise city centres was the essential requisite of a modern city. The digital world is different to the spatial world.

The lock down patterns have opened up the possibility that there is less of a need for office space, less need to travel to the centre, with flow on effects for business concentration and the opportunities for retail that were a part of this structure. In a deeper and less obvious way the greater use of the digital world changes the nature of national borders. Closures of borders to protect the nation, only point up the importance of the international inter-relationship. The response to Covid-19 provides a for a social rebalancing of the accepted relationship between home, suburb, city centre, state, nation and world that is happening. While at first these matters were raised as tentative suggestions, as time goes on it is apparent that challenges are emerging to the previously accepted order.

Re-evaluating the home setting
When work is reintroduced to the home setting, the previous ordering of responsibilities is called in question. The dominant pattern of there being one bread winner, who has to leave the home and travel to work, while the one who stays

home looks after home and children changes.

The requirement to travel, the physical separation of partners, has been modified and in doing so many new requirements emerge. In a democracy the political power of the homeowner is a considerable factor in the election of government. How will these changes impact the body politic?

Here we will look at this from the perspective of families, though many singles and older couples will echo what is happening in the primary care group in society.

The Spatial Implications
The home becomes the centre of life for the family requiring not only the normal bedrooms, bathrooms, and kitchen, but especially more family spaces, workspaces and recreational spaces. Most of the family needs require spaces and a place to be fulfilled. The digital world brings a greater need for an immediate spatial world at hand. Already there are signs that the McMansions of the past that completely covered the block are falling out of favour, as people are willing to live further from the city centre where the home can be bigger and the block larger. The motor car provides the means for more extensive spreading cities or facilitates the move to regional and country centres for the needs of the family.

Already the planning minister in NSW is calling for less high-rise apartment blocks which in the very large cities of the world Moltmann called 'pigeon cages' and a move to lower rise blocks with more recreational and leisure possibilities.

Of course, there are huge implications for the use of freeways and central city office use as this trend continues.

And as the city decentralises further, the local shopping mall becomes more important as a vital centre. Just as the future of malls was threatened by online shopping, this move to the local gives a new role to these centres and calls in question the effectiveness of CBD shopping. It may not be business as usual, but there will still be the need for the local outlet.

The Health Implications
Within weeks the limits on travel, and the danger of seeing health professionals brought rapid changes to the delivery of services. Phone consultations were accepted, home based services were offered by MediBank, the process of obtaining prescriptions streamlined, and deliveries were increased of medical needs.

The greater intensification of relationships in the socially confined space of the home resulted in a greater need for mental health resources available through the internet, the phone, access to psychological services were made available. There is a

continuing decentralising of services happening that will only increase under the stresses and mental pressures that continue in this setting.

The Cultural Implications
The digital world opens a home to enormous resources that are immediately available. What is becoming vital is for parents and children to become more than observers, and not lose the importance of being participators in cultural activities. There is need for access to art, music and drama locally given that this is where people are spending most of their time. The rapid rise in awareness of the need for recreational areas, groups, and activities has huge implications for town planners, as these fall more into the orbit of the home and the local area. It is more likely that regional councils will need to have a larger say in the development of such policies.

The future church setting
In a way the pandemic has brought the world back into the life of the church. For a long time, the local decentralised church has majored mostly on the private and subjective. As the major issues of life are more and more decentralised then the issues of society and the issues of the suburbs will now become part of the agenda of people's home lives, with less of a schizophrenia between home and work. This will have far reaching political implications given the potential for more home based and local involvement in these matters. And in all this intensification of the individual and the family where is the space for solitude. And how does one create a family and social community. These just do not happen; they have to be formed in the local networks. There is a great opportunity for the church to find the way the resources of faith point to the creation of a greater sense of communal life.

It is worth remembering the dramatic development that occurred in South America in the Roman Catholic Church when some sought a renewal of the structures of the church and society after the second Vatican Council. They developed what came to be called 'base ecclesial communities' that gathered round the scriptures with new questions that faced the abuse of power in the politics of church and the community. There a new movement began. When now the church is facing a new digital future that is changing how we live and work, their approach suggests we need to gather more closely to the scriptures with new questions that emerge from our time. Questions like, how do we pray both globally as well as locally, how do we use the resources of a digital era to grow new networks within our country and beyond our country, networks that can foster new relationships and new ways of speaking together rather than pushing people to the extremes and fostering hate speech. And a whole host of matters like global warming, the isolation in our communities, relating to congregations in cross-cultural initiatives, being aware of ministry in the outback and in the Pacific so that we can pray within this wider network.

Future Digital Changes

Much is being made of experiments now underway for a new way of providing transport in the suburbs, that of T(ransport) a(s) a(way) S(upply)(TaaS). The greater safety of driverless computer-controlled vehicles, and the possibility of providing a rental rapid car transport service for homes is promising a further intensification of the home as the centre. This would change the way cars are owned and used. If this is a service, a garage is not necessary, there is less outlay on travel, less accidents, less need for insurances and maintenance.

As well there is a continuing trend in the developing role of computers in becoming service agents and avatars for the individual, making the individual the centre of their world of information, entertainment, and knowledge. The digital world has changed the role of libraries from being depositories of information and intellectual knowledge, to places where people can be helped to find the resources that are already available to them through their computer.

The rate of change in this technology has been phenomenal, with new technologies becoming available and older technologies reworked. What is clear is that the digital age is just beginning. What is not clear is the shape of the society that will unfold.

The Atomising of Society

The more the home becomes important in terms of the economy, politics, recreation and entertainment, the greater the degree of atomising occurs in society. It is the logical consequence of the Enlightenment world view where all is related to the reality of the individual. The greater the role of digital freedom, the greater the uncertainty in the way that political structures will evolve. The illustration of the power of tweeting by the US President Trump provides a warning to those who presume that this rebalancing of the modes of society will necessarily be creative and life sustaining. There is a need for a great deal of rethinking about the way that the individual and society are related. There is the promise of greater integration between the home and the rest of society. But there is also the threat of those who use the freedom for their own benefit, or the benefit of their particular world view. The old political truths will have to be rethought in this digital environment. The church too will have to face the matters of public theology, finding new resources within the divine witness that we have been given. It is amazing what happened when a group in SA started to find (as they searched for an environmental word) that the Biblical witness is not just about people, but about the trees and the rocks and the rivers all giving their praise to God.

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