

David Nicholson-Lord is an environmental writer. He is chair of the Urban Wildlife Network, deputy chair of NEF (New Economics Foundation) and research associate for the Optimum Population Trust. His books include *The Greening of the Cities* and *Green Cities – And Why We Need Them*.



THE GREAT URBAN INDOORS

Not drowning – not even swimming – but waving goodbye to nature.

WHAT I'M ABOUT to write is a kind of parable. As befits a piece which is partly retrospective, it's about the contrasts between past and future. In particular, it's about a small part of the unfolding future which I've glimpsed recently.

Not far from where I live, in south London, is a park with, backing onto it, some large and expensive houses. Since the houses are priced towards £2 million, they're occupied by the new feudal plutocracy of City and plc, and at the bottom of their gardens, where the hoi polloi can rubberneck through the high wire fencing, a strange little rash of new buildings has sprouted. There are at least three of them now, as neighbour has copied neighbour; they look a little like posh garden sheds and they cost upwards of £10,000.

Each shed contains, not the old-fashioned implements of toil, but a small and perfectly formed swimming pool where, in peace and total privacy, the new plutocrats can pit their wills and their stamina against an electrically generated current precisely calibrated to their selected swimming speed. The pools are not much bigger than a bath so you can't swim anywhere even if you wanted to. You swim, and swim, but you stay in the same place. The technical term for this exercise is 'resistance swimming'. One of the models is known as an 'endless pool'.

IF YOU DATE the beginning of the environmental movement from 1962, the year Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published, then *Resurgence*, born in 1966, was one of its very first progeny. I was at school then so am a bit older than the magazine, but when I compare the magazine's infancy, and my own youth, with our shared middle-age forty years on, there are some striking contrasts.

My youth, or at least that part of it spent at home before university, was relatively impecunious, pretty much alcohol-free, fairly 'primitive' – open fires, no central heating – and almost totally carless: I walked, cycled, caught trains and buses. And although it wasn't rural – I was brought up on the outskirts of Manchester – there was a lot of nature about. We had an overgrown garden where I spent long periods up trees, a couple of nearby ponds, a wood and a semi-functioning farm within a few hundred metres and, beyond them, a peri-urban river valley with marshy bits and bulrushes. As for garden sheds, we had an outbuilding we called a toolshed. It contained, as its name implies, tools.

Absolute wealth in those days was much less and inequalities less pronounced: ostentatious affluence seemed rare. No-one worried too much about crime, no doubt in part because there was less to pinch, and children routinely undertook long

solo journeys on public transport without the protection of mobile phones. Children also contributed to household tasks – one of my jobs was to clean the grates and make the fires – and were regularly subject to tellings-off by 'strangers' in public when they misbehaved.

I imagine these sorts of recollection will be shared by most people of a certain age. Those who feel excluded from them – usually because they are too young to have any comparable memories of their own – often resort to satire. Yet one of the inevitable consequences of ageing – any ageing, even from one's twenties onwards – is that we acquire perspectives that are simply unavailable earlier. We neglect these perspectives, I think, at our peril.

I have no idea whether 'life' was 'better' or 'worse' in the 1960s: the question, as soon as you pose it, slithers out of control. What evidence we have suggests we're nearly three times richer, in money terms, but somewhat less contented. But when one looks at how attitudes to the environment have developed, it's difficult not to reach bleaker conclusions.

The orthodoxy is that environment has been mainstreamed, embodied in institutions, policies and attitudes, and that green civil society has never had it so good. It's a superficially attractive argument but it ignores some powerful countervailing forces. Among these



I would list the rise of competitive individualism as the dominant planetary ideology; the primacy of 'feel-good' commercial values; the decay of belief in collective action, coupled with a growing fear of the public realm; and the spread of material wealth. In particular, that threefold increase in income has enabled people to gratify their appetites in ways undreamt of in the 1960s, turning wants into needs, moderation to excess, abundance to satiety. Alcohol and cars, both absent in my childhood, have become toxic. Children, taught to regard designer labels as a birthright, are insulted if you ask them to wash up. Possessions, now ubiquitous, are the feedstock of crime.

Our new wealth, far from strengthening planetary awareness, seems to

have dissolved or at least diluted it. I'm not sure which is the more depressing – the relative absence of environmental concern among teenagers and twenty-somethings, the relapse of our attitudes towards other species, or the repeatedly demonstrated tendency of behaviour to change only when crisis is imminent. Thus, while the 1960s gave us environmentalism (and *Resurgence* magazine), the 21st century, so far, has given us denial. In some all-encompassing way, human society has turned in upon itself and, partly as a corollary, our psychological freedoms – our sense of what it is to be a free individual – are trammelled and diminished. This, for me, is the most worrying change of all and I think it can be partly traced to the physical and demographic contexts of our lives.

OVER THE LAST forty years, the UK, and the world in general, has become more populous, more urban, more managed, trodden, dwelt on. In the UK there are some seven million more people – a city the size of London – than when *Resurgence* was founded, so that we live increasingly hugger-mugger with each other, our appetites and impacts much greater, our lives and living spaces, of necessity, more tightly controlled. For me, the ramshackle woods and ponds of the urban fringe have been replaced by the managed green spaces of suburbia. It's hard for kids now to find trees to climb in even if they were allowed to, gardens are getting smaller, tools are for the vanishing manual classes, and most professional lives are spent staring at a computer. As a species, we have moved into the Great Urban Indoors, with its manifold diversions and distractions, and we are simply losing sight of nature, except as an occasional occurrence at weekend or on holiday, and then usually in surrogate or replica form. Is it, therefore, any wonder that what we don't see, we don't think about much, or don't care for? Or that we withdraw into ourselves, our homes, our families, fetishising what they contain – décor, careers, possessions, progeny?

In that sense, the endless pool is a version of the future – a vision of where wealth, overpopulation, individualism and commercialism are taking us. It's about denial, certainly, but denial given a perverse twist by indulgence and extravagance – in this case, the pumping out of CO₂ emissions for an activity, like patio heating or power showering – that is essentially marginal. It's about how pathogenic our urban habitat has become – sedentary, claustrophobic, self-reflective – and thus about the contemporary ego, its obsession with body image, its deepening narcissism. It's also about our relationship with the world beyond home, office and city, or such of it as remains. When I saw the first endless pool being erected, it struck me as another of the over-ripe fruits of privilege, another sign of how the superfluously rich are shutting themselves away from the rest of us, but I now think that's only half the story. In reality it's a journey into onanism, solipsism and decadence – a solitary traveller in an ersatz environment, moving constantly, seeing nothing, going nowhere. ●