

# Perspective

Read the world differently

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A vibrant, futuristic city street scene. The buildings are covered in lush green vegetation, creating a vertical garden effect. A yellow tram is moving along the street, and two cyclists are riding in the distance. The lighting is bright and warm, suggesting a sunny day.

## Wild cities

*Ben Wilson*

### Surveillance state

*Susie Alegre*

### Climate inequality

*Wade Graham*

### Naked protest

*Victoria Bateman*

### Andy Burnham and Andy Street

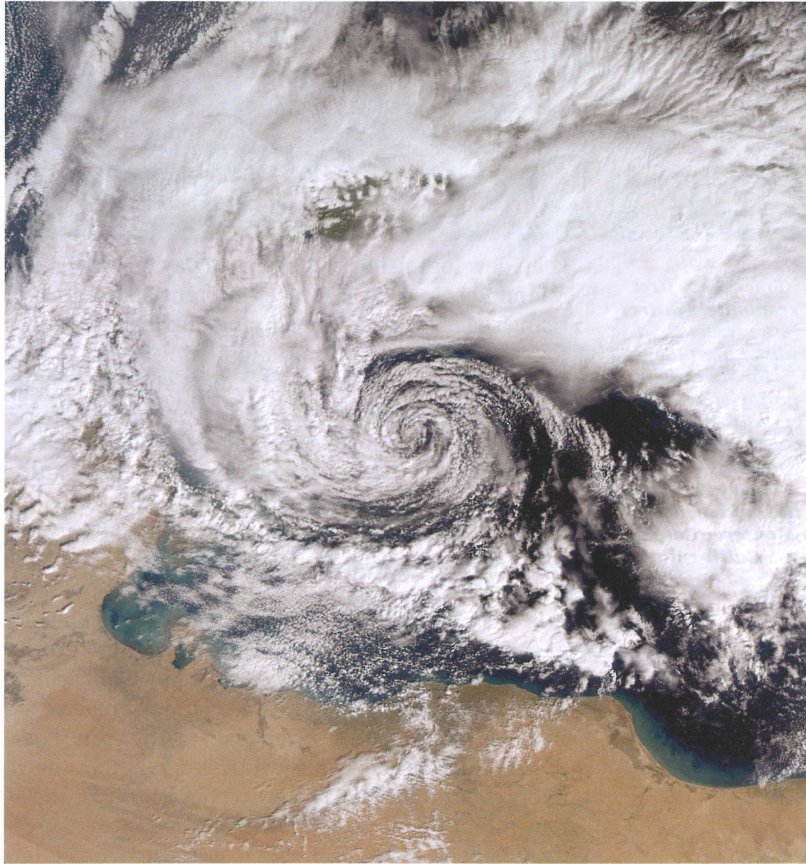
*talk to Gavin Esler*

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## Walden

# Survival of the richest

By Wade Graham



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The US Census Bureau recently estimated that 3.3 million American adults are displaced from their homes every year due to fires, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, and other “natural disasters”. Most are evacuated from the path of danger and return within a week, but 500,000 never go home. Half a million people equals a good-sized city – roughly the population of Liverpool, Edinburgh, Atlanta or Kansas City, displaced every year. But we’re not missing any major cities. Instead, what is happening is the emptying out, and in some cases, abandonment, of hundreds of scattered, smaller places.

Thinking of entire towns disappearing reminds me of the book series *Mortal Engines* by Phillip Reeve, a YA tale about a future, war-shattered Earth riven by erupting volcanoes and earthquakes, where cities mount themselves on giant tracks and become predatory, chasing down smaller,

slower rivals and consuming them, absorbing their resources and enslaving their inhabitants. Only the biggest, fastest, and most pitiless survive, and they justify their violence with the doctrine of Municipal Darwinism – the survival of the fittest.

Is real life on Earth coming to resemble *Mortal Engines*? In a sense, yes. Our landscapes are increasingly buffeted by ever-stronger natural forces, intensified by global warming, destabilising even the ground beneath our feet. Sure, cities haven’t become physically mobile, as in the book, but their inhabitants and their capital have; a zero-sum competition is increasingly the norm between larger and smaller urban areas, for resources to deal with climate chaos.

This worrying trend is happening everywhere and is sadly likely to be in everyone’s future. But for many it is already here: most visibly in places exposed to frequent extreme weather events. In the US they include Florida, Louisiana, Texas and of course California, where I live. Ever the trendsetter, California is a climate early-warning system, thanks to its statistic-topping variability of wet/dry and hot/cold, where “normal” weather has always been marked by extremes, making the new extremes even more ferocious.

In the last five years, firestorms of unprecedented intensity have obliterated whole towns, including Greenfield, Concow and Paradise, where 85 people perished in flames. This year, a nonstop parade of powerful atmospheric river storms training in from the Pacific Ocean have overtopped levees and inundated scores of towns: Pajaro, Kernville, Woodlake, Felton, Porterville – the list grows with each week’s new storm – with at least 22 dead. Along the coastline, wind and waves have smashed piers, devoured roads, and collapsed cliffs from under apartment buildings. Even snow, not generally associated with Southern California, has proved fatal, with thirteen people found dead in San Bernardino County after heavy snows buried towns for more than a week, exposing the shocking failure of local authorities to prepare for predictable events.

For some, recovery is relatively quick. Money flows from insurance for those fortunate enough to afford it, and from the federal government, which unhesitatingly funds generous relief outlays – so long as communities have the political clout to demand it. The wealthier a place is to begin with, the more relief money it will garner. With few strings attached to aid and subsidies, many rebuild bigger on the same spot, putting more value in harm’s way, and in the process becoming richer, at least on paper. Repetitive losses are the rule not the exception: on hurricane-prone coasts, homes having been rebuilt four times with taxpayer funds are not uncommon.

But for others, recovery comes haltingly or not at all. Lower-income communities and those with a high percentage of immigrants, people of colour and, especially, undocumented residents, fare the worst. Most lack insurance, the personal capital to tide them over, much less to rebuild, and the political clout needed to compel politicians to help. ▶

▲  
Satellite photo of  
hurricane Helios



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## Walden

The results are shrinking, weakening towns and settlements, sometimes abandoned altogether.

In the recent March storms, the town of Pajaro, home to around 3,000 mostly Spanish-speaking workers, was flooded when the Pajaro River, which separates it from the more prosperous city of Watsonville, broke through a levee. Authorities had known for decades that the levee on the Pajaro side could fail but had rejected an improvement project on cost grounds. “It’s a low-income area. It’s largely farmworkers that live there,” were the words of one official. For a century and a half, low-lying Pajaro was where immigrant, non-white agricultural workers were relegated: first Chinese, then Japanese, Filipino, and now Mexican. Though the residents pay taxes, they get few services in return – County authorities historically have been slow to pave streets, or to provide water, sewerage and other infrastructure.

The residents of Pajaro may never be able to return to their homes. Watsonville, with a better-maintained levee, remained dry.

What happened there is happening all over the state and the country. It not only reflects the durable inequalities at the base of how we finance, build and maintain cities, but worsens our intractable housing problems at the moment we can least afford it. The lowest-cost housing is on urban peripheries or in rural areas – those most likely to suffer climate-related damage and least able to recover without outside help. In response to growing losses, insurance costs are rapidly going up, mortgages are harder to get, and, as building codes become more stringent, so do rebuilding costs. These rises hit the lowest incomes hardest.

The fate of many marginal places like Pajaro is to wither or even disappear. For others, like Paradise, attractively nestled in the pines of the Sierra Nevada mountains, it is increasingly “climate gentrification” as people from wealthier big cities – including investors drawn by low, post-disaster prices – turn once-working-class towns into second-home enclaves.

More people than ever are moving to the zones of highest climate risk: the coasts, the mountains, and the desert Southwest. In California, eleven million people and counting live in the urban-wildland interface where wildfires reign unchecked. Before it was levelled by Hurricane Michael last fall, Fort Myers, Florida was one of the test-growing places in America. Phoenix, Arizona, saw a nearly 70% rise in home prices from 2019-22 – never mind that the desert city already sees 22 days of 43 °C a year, and by 2030 is projected to have 133 days of heat above 40 °C. The financial system makes these trends hard to reverse and more deadly outcomes unavoidable. First, the webs of subsidies and incentives – disaster relief being only the most obvious – are politically impervious to reform. Most local governments fund themselves in large part through property taxes, meaning they must



▲  
**Emergency first responders patrol the streets in a rubber boat looking for stranded motorists as parts of California suffer severe flooding following a winter of heavy rain near the Pajaro River in Monterey County, California**

keep developing in risky places to pay for services. Miami Beach, even as it faces existential threats of rising sea levels and intensifying hurricanes, pays for expensive flood pumps and raising streets by permitting more luxury skyscrapers atop the sand. Second, little correlation exists between climate risk and housing costs. Until recently insurance didn’t price-in local risks. Flood and fire maps are out of date or non-existent. One third of states don’t require sellers to disclose prior flood damage to buyers. Lacking information, markets fail to price not only present risks, but future ones.

Is the US housing market a climate-change house of cards? By many measures, yes. Houses in known flood zones are currently overvalued by \$500 billion, by one estimate. Stung by catastrophic damages, insurers have begun to price realistically or pull out of risky markets such as Florida altogether. In the likely event of more devastating hurricanes or the more-than-likely event of more of the same steady drumbeat of destruction and loss, mortgage defaults in the hundreds of thousands may stress the system beyond what caused the subprime crisis of 2008.

We are already seeing the beginning of a rearranging of the map, with the usual economic winners and losers – the working class and pensioners in their mobile homes losing and the better-off, better-insured owners of those Miami Beach high-rise condos winning – at least in the near term. In the UK, the situation is different in local detail only. Anyone who has been to the lovely, quickly-eroding sand beaches of Norfolk can attest to the speed of change. Near Great Yarmouth, one beachfront town facing the sea’s rapid advance is called California – named after sixteenth-century gold coins were discovered there in 1848, the year the California Gold Rush began. I say: Enjoy it while it lasts, and before the predators roll in.

*Wade Graham is an author, environmentalist and academic. He lives in LA.*



**More people than ever are moving to the zones of highest climate risk**