Next Era Living

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Introduction

I started in kitchens and went on to run VIP catering at the London Olympics and open a large operation halfway up The Shard. Upstairs is a splendid place to eat. It's a slightly less obvious place for a delivery to turn up. A hot dinner depends, among other things, on where the architect has put the kitchen in relation to the loading bay.

The part of hospitality I find most interesting happens before anyone sits down. The cook due in at six needs the right food, in the right quantity, in a place they can find it. A floor plan can give you a good idea of how long a delivery ought to take. The person who wheels the trolley through the building can tell you which door they have to stop and open. One stiff door can add a job to every delivery without ever appearing on a rota.

I've spent much of my writing life looking backwards to see how we ended up doing things this way. This time I'd like to know what we could do next. A routine can carry an old piece of wisdom or the consequences of a decision nobody remembers making.

Here's what I mean by *Next Era Living*. We can arrange homes, work and streets so that everyday things take less out of us and less out of the places we live. I judge an improvement by what it gives people time or room to do, and by where the work and the cost go. Who carries it, who pays for it, and who keeps it going once it's open? Ask who's absent when those decisions are made. The person who spends every Friday washing up often has a more useful answer than the person who chose the chairs.

In *The Art of Ritual* I was interested in why a certain walk, a meal or the first few notes of a song can come to mean so much. Here I want to follow what makes those occasions possible. A child who takes a turn serving lunch finds out how thirty people get fed. For that to happen every week, a school needs a kitchen and a timetable that gives an adult time to show the children what to do.

I've imagined a street with flats above the shops, houses farther along and a library with a back room. I call one of the neighbours Mrs X. She works shifts and we'll see the street through some of the hours she has to herself. At six on a Thursday the chairs have to go out, including the one that wobbles. The corridor light takes a while to come on. You can hear the lids coming off the pans before you can see who brought the food. A man straight from work sits down in his coat. The place at the end is left clear so that a wheelchair can fit under the table.

If the meal happens once a month, people start to remember who takes tea and what to put by for the man who gets off the bus late. Even a person who comes alone knows where to sit. Then the caretaker's evening hours come up for review. The next supper depends on who has the key and whether the library can afford to pay them to lock up.

Buy food little and often, runs one piece of advice. Try that when the only shop you can afford is on the other side of town. Leaving time for each other is easier if you know what time you're getting off work. I'd like to make both pieces of advice easier to follow.

In Japan an exercise broadcast can get people moving together in their own living rooms. Paris has opened schoolyards to neighbours so a family can go somewhere nearby on a Saturday. I've also followed a different sort of

question up to the roof. The physics of a solar panel explains how light becomes electricity. To find out whose bill comes down, you'll have to see what the people who own the roof have agreed with the people who live under it.

Pictures of the future tend to feature a great deal of glass. The people in them usually seem to own the house. I've given quite a bit of thought to the tenant who lives behind some of that glass and would like enough afternoon shade to sit by the window. They may have had years to work out what the building needs and very little say in what gets done.

We'll come back to the street in 2040. By then, in my version, fewer errands need a bus and there's a piano you can play badly, in peace, before deciding what to have for tea. The chairs still need putting out.

I'd happily keep the sort of supper that takes most of the evening. I'd spend less of the afternoon getting the things we need for it. To see how much say people already have over their time, we can start just before the first bus comes down the street.

1. The Shape of a Day

The first bus comes down the street while one kitchen light is already on. At the sink, a parent is trying to get to the bottom of a mug of tea before waking the children. Two doors down, Mrs X has just got off the bus after a night shift. She puts her keys in a dish, takes off her work shoes and looks to see what the rest of the household has left to eat. One person is putting off the moment the day begins. The other is looking for somewhere to put the end of it.

I always want to know which of those people a book is addressing when it describes the ideal morning. The hour it sets aside for you may already belong to the children. You might have six minutes before they get up, and those six minutes might be lovely. If your hands are stiff, you might feel the day has begun properly when you can get a finger through the handle of a cup. The child who hears the kettle lid knows there's a grown-up in the kitchen.

You can learn quite a bit about a household from the whereabouts of its keys. A habit gets them into the dish with very little thought. A routine gets the kettle on, the shoes off and the kitchen ready for whoever is up next. The tea becomes a ritual when it's the cup you drink together before going your separate ways, or the one you drink from a mug that belonged to a friend who died. From the doorway, it still looks like a cup of tea.

I'm glad about the things we can do half asleep. If I had to find fresh significance in where I'd put my keys every morning, I'd miss the bus. The useful rituals tend to fall at the edges of things, where one activity gives way to another.

There's a moment on a swimming block when you have done all the training you're going to do. Rolling your shoulders and setting your feet can be a familiar way to cross it. Something equally ordinary can tell Mrs X that she has finished work. The shoes finally come off. She has reached the part of the day that belongs to her.

How much of it belongs to her depends on who makes the rota. If she has to keep checking for a message that might move tomorrow's shift, part of her working day is still in the kitchen with her. With a proper handover, the next shift knows what it's taking on and the outgoing staff know what they can leave behind. We spend a lot of time discussing how to get better at unwinding. I'd give some of the credit to a manager who lets you go when they said they would.

A way in and a way out

A pile of unopened post becomes remarkably interesting when there's a difficult paragraph to write. One of those envelopes could contain something I ought to deal with. The chances rise sharply in the last forty minutes before I have to give up the table. I'd read yesterday's last few lines aloud to get back to the question I was trying to answer.

Before putting a page away, it helps to leave a sentence about what comes next. 'Work on section' scarcely qualifies. You know where you were going when you type it. Tomorrow morning you may be glad of a clue. Playing a passage you know has much the same effect. You can hear what your hands are doing before you get to the bit you've been avoiding. It takes a committed musician to begin a ten-minute practice by moving a vacuum cleaner and two coats.

In a kitchen I learnt to look for the station likely to get into trouble once the orders came in. A small difficulty in one

part of the room becomes a difficulty for the whole kitchen quite quickly. A useful word before service can be as simple as letting the cook know who'll be free to help.

A late message from the boss may have been sent at the hour that suited them best. If you're new to the team and have never been told what to do with it, you may spend some of your evening deciding whether to answer. When everyone knows which calls are urgent and who's on duty, the rest of the team can get on with their dinner. They can still keep the phone to hand if they're waiting for news from home.

There are beginnings no one would have chosen. An alarm that used to get the household out to work and school can go off the first Monday after a redundancy. A cup carried outside may be enough to put a start somewhere in the unfamiliar day. When a person dies, a morning practice can be a comfort for a time and then become impossible. A favourite bowl can go back in the cupboard until the sight of it is welcome again. I'm wary of attaching a score to a sequence of days in which someone has done the same thing. The business of getting on with life is full of perfectly respectable reasons to break the run.

If your knee objects after years of walking the same route with a friend, it's worth thinking about what you'd miss. You might be able to catch up at a gentler pace or take the bus to the place where the houses give way to trees. A bench may do more for an evening walk than a pair of expensive shoes. The timing of a light or the position of a dropped kerb can make rather more difference to a crossing than you'd think until you have to get across with the shopping.

On our imagined street, people still tell you to get off the bus outside the pub. You look out of the window and see no pub whatsoever. There's a building with a different tenant and a