



AI: The Death or Life of Great Cities?

White Paper

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This document was written by a human. AI was used to find some references and quotes.



Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

- I was invited to present a keynote address on the impact of AI on cities and planning at the 61st ISOCARP World Congress in Riyadh in December 2025.
- This white paper is an adaptation of the speaking notes for the talk.

AI AND JOBS

- AI is likely to affect the number of jobs available to older workers, particularly as its growing strength is in replicating crystallised intelligence.
- Already, AI is certainly affecting the availability of jobs for younger workers. It does this by taking on the more rote and mundane work, much as technology did in agriculture and manufacturing.
- The adoption of AI is rapid and ubiquitous. Given the pace of take-up and the wide range of tasks it can complete, it is hard to imagine new job creation will keep pace.
- Yet if the enormous volume of AI investment has created a bubble and if the bubble pops, then AI will have definitely (and negatively) impacted job numbers for everyone. So, whether it succeeds (replacing the need for labour) or fails (as the investment bubble pops), AI will affect the world of work.

AI AND PLANNERS

- Planners can (and already are) use AI to speed up rote work, leaving more time for complex, creative work. Or so the theory goes. In theory, AI can improve the quality of work through more sophisticated, comprehensive analysis.
- Both of these claims can be challenged. There is the risk of not learning and developing crystallised knowledge or intuition if you let AI take on a growing share of your work: the work you rely on to develop and hone your skills. And there is the risk that, in letting your skills atrophy (or, if you are young, never having developed them), you have no way of validating the AI's output, so we don't know whether AI's creations are good.
- The solution, if there is one, is to be cautious and establish guardrails for when to use (or not use) AI.

AI AND CITIES

- AI is accelerating change in cities, altering how decisions are made and raising questions about whether the faster, more opaque analysis it produces will, or can, result in a better quality of life.
- AI (along with earlier technologies) has meant that a growing share of daily routines and economic interactions (once concentrated in city centres) can occur at home (or, for younger people, maybe not at all).
- All of this may mean cities (at least central cities) are no longer the centres of activity or innovation, particularly cities that depend on the knowledge economy.

PLANNERS SHOULD PLAN FOR HOW TO MANAGE AI

- At the risk of my poor prediction living on the Internet forever, to me, the evidence is starting to mount that AI will have a net negative effect on the number of jobs available, especially in the knowledge economy, including jobs for planners.
- This impact is accelerating because of incentives for developers and users, and there is no guarantee that its use will result in better cities.
- What is certain, though, is that the benefits will not accrue equally to cities or to people.

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1.0 Introduction

This paper is based on a keynote speech given by Geografia Managing Director, Dr Kevin Johnson, to the 61st World Congress of Isocarp on 3 December 2025.

1.1 BACKGROUND

This paper is a written version of a keynote speech I gave to the 61st World Congress of ISOCARP in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on 3 December 2025. I was invited to speak, sharing the perspective of a practitioner on how AI is changing how cities are planned and built. The speech's text has been modified to suit the platform.

1.2 THE SEED OF THE IDEA

In January 2023, UN-Habitat and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Quality of Life Programme Center commissioned Geografia Managing Director Kevin Johnson to lead a technical team to design, pilot, and help launch an index to measure quality of life in cities. The team drew on insights from hundreds of planners, economists, public health experts, policy makers and data scientists from around the world, including city governments. The research revealed that many cities face similar challenges in creating liveable places, and that what was needed were proven ideas for designing, financing, and building successful interventions.

Back in Australia in 2014, Geografia designed and built an online tool that matched successful (proven) solutions to specific economic development and population growth problems in Australian towns and cities with similar problems in comparable towns. The tool (called the Population Attraction and Retention Toolkit) steps the user through a process:

1. Identify what the key development problems were (benchmarking against comparison locations).
2. Rank the problems in order of priority.
3. Match the problems to solutions implemented in towns of a similar size, form and character.

The solutions in the database were compiled from a review of 100 reports documenting successful outcomes.

Given how similar the causal factors of quality-of-life challenges were across cities worldwide, the Geografia team investigated whether the original idea of the Population Attraction and Retention toolkit could be scaled up with new metrics and processes and be useful to any city worldwide. In the more than 10 years since it was built, it was assumed that new technology could create something more extensive and easier to maintain.

The original tool took about six months and four people to create. It needed constant updating and was effective for about 70 towns and cities in one country (Australia).

That was in 2014; in 2023, a prototype of a new global variation on this model was built in about a week using AI. It took one person and, with the right data, could be used in almost any city, anywhere. Updating was also much easier.

This is when it became clear that, like it or not, AI was here, and it was going to transform cities, city planning, economic and urban development. And along the way, it was going to put a lot of people out of work.

Unless we pay attention to how we use it.

1.3 THE IDEA

It seems obvious that AI is transformational. We ask a lot of cities: commerce, government, recreation, service access, and, right from the beginning, religion has always been there.

New technology can affect all of that. So, AI must be impacting cities. And that means it's impacting the job of planners and the work of planning. And that impact is unlikely to be good for every city or for everyone. This paper explains the rationale for that.

The Caveat

Before starting, there is a caveat to declare.

In his book *Expert Political Judgement*, Philip Tetlock used the philosopher Isaiah Berlin's fox-and-hedgehog metaphor: foxes are adaptable and draw on multiple perspectives to reach cautious conclusions about where things are heading. Hedgehogs, by contrast, focus on single-view perspectives and a single grand narrative.

Foxes are almost always better at predicting future trends, and we should value them a little more than the bold and seductive certainty of hedgehogs.

It's hard to reliably predict major events or the direction of change in a complex world. But that doesn't stop some of us from channelling our inner hedgehog and making predictions. It is, after all, an attractive (not to say lucrative) character trait, particularly for a public speaker.

"By 2005, it will become clear that the Internet's impact on the economy has been no greater than the fax machine's."

"...based on the midterm turnout, Biden has all the numbers stacking up in his favour... and he's going to win the office for another four years."

Peter Zeihan, 2023

If we want to make a meaningful contribution to the world, we should be a little less confident about what we claim to know.

The Internet does not forget.

Most of what is described in this paper is more speculation than prediction. However, it is not unfounded speculation.

I have run an urban data analytics company – Geografia – for almost 20 years, and I have AI experts on staff. The team all use AI and other technologies in all of their work, including work with planners. And this is framed by a clear set of guidelines for doing it well.

I have seen how AI is changing **what** we do, what we **can** do, and **how** we do it. The speculation, therefore, is based on real-world observations and work practices.



2.0 AI and Jobs

AI is likely to affect the number of jobs available to older workers, and it is already certainly affecting the availability of jobs for younger workers. Its adoption is rapid and ubiquitous. Moreover, if the enormous volume of AI investment has created a bubble and the bubble pops, then AI will have definitely (and negatively) impacted job numbers for everyone.

2.1 BACKGROUND

We should start with what AI might do to jobs, because jobs are what bring most people into cities. Right now, we can say four things about AI and jobs.

1. AI is probably going to impact jobs for older workers, if it hasn't already
2. AI is almost certainly already impacting jobs for younger workers
3. Its adoption is fast and widespread.
4. If this is just a massive investment bubble, then it is very likely to impact everybody's jobs.

We are probably all somewhere on a continuum of views about whether AI will be good or bad for jobs. At one end, the optimists and at the other, the Luddites.

As we all know, the optimists look to history and claim that new technology creates more jobs than it destroys. AI is another productivity tool and is changing the labour market, but not closing it. AI does the tedious work, which frees up our time so we can be more creative and solve more interesting problems. And the real gains are that we become more effective at our jobs, and our jobs become more satisfying for us.

For the Luddites, AI is maybe the most significant technology in the modern era for reducing the need for human labour across the entire economy. If it keeps going the way it is, a high percentage of all jobs will disappear, with nowhere near enough new ones to replace them. The optimists call this the Luddite fallacy.

However, past performance is no guarantee of future returns. AI is a fundamentally different technological innovation: in form, scale and possibly speed of rollout. There are four dimensions to the impact that make the Luddites' the more sensible view:

1. What it does to opportunities for experienced workers.
2. What it does to opportunities for early career workers.
3. The scale and extent of its impact.
4. Whether we are just in an AI bubble (hype and investment).

2.2 AI MAY ALREADY BE ABLE TO REPLICATE THE SKILLS OF OLDER WORKERS

A 50-year-old car assembly line worker who was permanently automated out of the labour market some time in the last few decades (depending on which country) will tell you technology negatively impacts on jobs. And the roboticised automation that took their job is still doing it, especially in agriculture and manufacturing.

AI is in another league entirely. This is because, right now, AI is better at replicating crystallised intelligence than it is at demonstrating fluid intelligence.

FLUID VERSUS CRYSTALLISED INTELLIGENCE

Crystallised intelligence is what older workers have. In simple terms, it is the capacity to see and make connections between existing ideas. Fluid intelligence is about *inventing* new ideas. Crystallised intelligence is useful in the workplace, which makes older workers useful.

However, older workers are also a lot slower and more expensive than AI. And they cause frictions such as HR issues (although those issues are increasingly managed through AI).

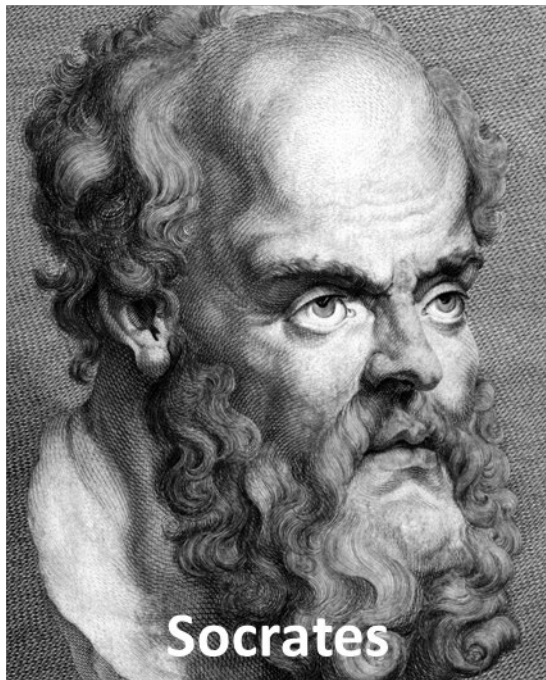


Figure 1: Young Geniuses, Older Sages

Suppose AI can replace all the expense, inefficiency, and trouble caused by older workers. In that case, it seems obvious that entirely new sectors and generations of workers over 50 will lose their jobs.

2.3 AI IS REPLACING YOUNGER, EARLY CAREER WORKERS

For at least the last two decades, youth unemployment has been much higher than the overall rate. In OECD countries, it has been persistently twice the rate (typically 10% compared to around 5%).

"...since the widespread adoption of generative AI, early-career workers (ages 22–25) in the most AI-exposed occupations have experienced a 13% relative decline in employment."

Brynjolfsson et al, 2025¹

At the same time, AI is being used for a growing share of mundane and basic work: the type that defines early-career responsibilities, the responsibilities younger workers have.

2.4 AI TAKE-UP IS RAPID AND WIDESPREAD

The Internet became widely available (at least in OECD countries) in the early nineties. Although take-up was relatively rapid, it required infrastructure and several bandwidth upgrades to become globally effective. It took around 10–15 years before businesses began to take advantage of it and commence large-scale offshoring or outsourcing.

With AI, the timeline from the release of, say, ChatGPT and obvious examples of it speeding up our work and slowing down our hiring has been more like two years. That pace of change makes it almost impossible for new job creation to keep up.

And it's not just fast, it's widespread. AI is impacting almost all industries. A glance at any article discussing the impact of AI on work will show it replacing:

- Legal services and accountants
- Town planners and building designers

¹ Brynjolfsson, E., Chandar, B., Chen, R., Canaries in the Coal Mine? Six Facts about the Recent Employment Effects of Artificial Intelligence, August 2025

- Musicians, songwriters, scriptwriters, even film actors
- Software engineers and data scientists
- Logistics and call centre workers
- Telehealth services
- Stockbrokers and management consultants.

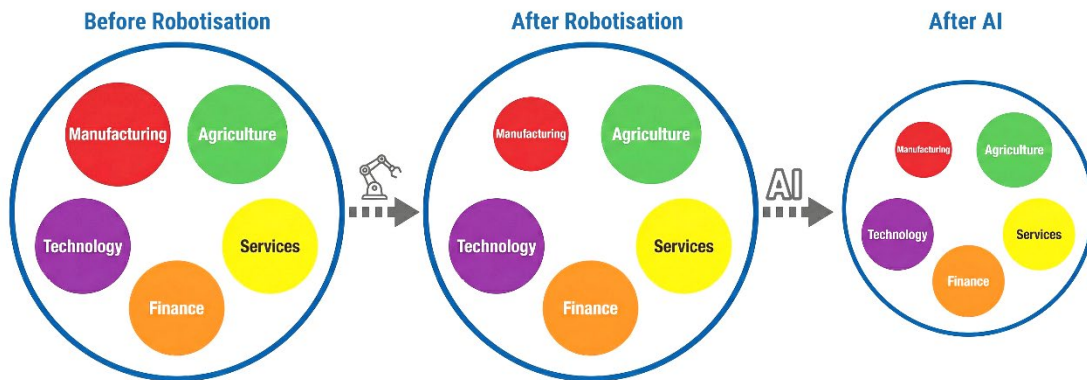


Figure 2: Economy-wide Impacts

Of course, AI is replacing low-productivity, low-value work and jobs, so in some respects, there is merit in the shift from human labour to AI: just not for the people in those roles.

This scale, speed and range of job replacement is probably why Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, is an advocate for a universal basic income:

"...as technology continues to eliminate traditional jobs and massive new wealth gets created, we're going to see some version of this [universal basic income] at a national scale."

Sam Altman, 2016

2.5 A BURSTING AI INVESTMENT BUBBLE WILL DESTROY EVEN MORE JOBS

If the AI investment boom is a bubble and it pops, it will significantly hurt the global economy, leading to a very high rate of job losses.

It appears that, on the one hand, if the current AI development succeeds, it will probably destroy more jobs than it creates. And if it fails, and the bubble pops, it will almost certainly destroy more jobs than it creates.

But we should remember the lessons of those before us who have made bold claims about the future and be cautious about our predictions. While we are undoubtedly seeing job losses (or at least a slowdown in hiring), much of this could be a winding down of the post-pandemic hiring boom.

3.0 AI and Planners

Planners already are using AI to speed up rote work, leaving more time for complex, creative work. Or so the theory goes. Also in theory, AI can improve the quality of work through more sophisticated and comprehensive analysis. Both of these claims can be challenged. There is the risk of not learning and developing crystallised knowledge or intuition if you let AI take on a growing share of your work: the work you rely on to develop and hone your skills. And there is the risk that, in letting your skills atrophy (or, if you are young, never having developed them), you have no way of validating the AI's output, so we don't know whether AI's creations are good. The solution, if there is one, is to be cautious and establish guardrails for when to use (or not use) AI.

3.1 BACKGROUND

Then there is the work of planners. There are two questions to consider here:

1. What happens if AI takes on the less creative work of planners, such as writing templated reports, processing building applications or reviewing literature?
2. What happens to the quality of our work if we rely on AI?

3.2 AI TAKING ON PLANNERS' MUNDANE WORK

There are innumerable comments and articles online that take the optimist's view of AI and planning. For the most part, they take the same line: AI is definitely freeing up time to get back to what we used to do, which was to creatively solve urban and regional planning issues. It basically means less mundane paperwork and more creative problem-solving and, as a result, better cities.

And anecdotally at least, a planning job today includes a lot more mundane work than in the past. However, all that extra work (mundane or not) resulted in more hiring over the last 20 years or so (Figure 3).



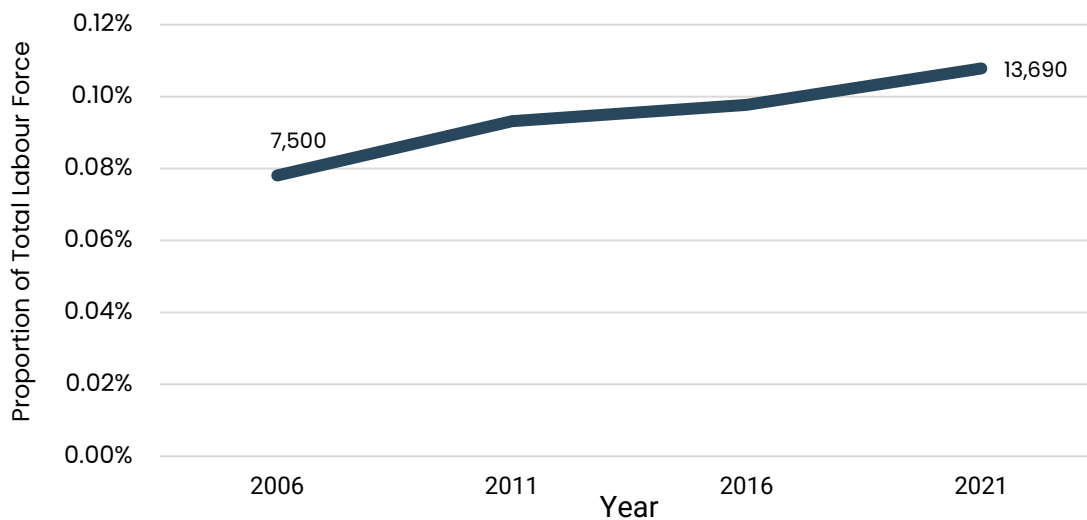


Figure 3: Count of Urban and Regional Planners, Australia
Source: ABS, 2025

As Figure 3 shows, over the last 15 years, the number of planners in Australia has almost doubled. Over the same period, the population went up by 25%. Obviously, not all of those new planners were doing creative and innovative work.

If AI frees up some of the day for some of us to go back to more creative planning work, then it likely means it has freed up all day, every day, for a lot more planners to go back to looking for a new job.

3.3 THE QUALITY OF WORK PRODUCED BY AI

As for the quality of the work, in planning, quality is defined by whether the output improves how cities contribute to our quality of life. And this question relates to how our current AIs work.

These AIs are built on machine learning, primarily deep learning. Deep learning is like statistics on steroids.

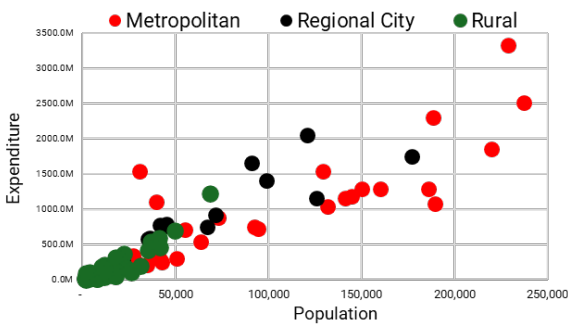
We have been using statistics in and around planning for decades. We build predictive models to estimate the probability that someone shops in one part of the city rather than another, the modal choice during the commute to work, or even the probability of having children. We then use these outputs to plan for our cities.

Our models are often simple, but they're effective. Typically, there are just a few predictors and a single outcome variable. The process involves compiling data on the predictors (e.g., population by age), observing the output variables of interest (e.g., transport modal choice), and then deriving a few equations with simple coefficients that statistically describe the relationship between the predictor and the predicted

variable. The concept is relatively easy to understand, even if you are not familiar with statistics.

Deep learning ramps this up with billions of parameters, weights, and biases, and applies them to much larger datasets. There is very little external control over the composition of the equations or relationships. The AI chooses all the starting points for the analysis and produces an output based on statistical decisions that you have no real way of understanding.

A human grade statistical model



An AI-grade statistical model

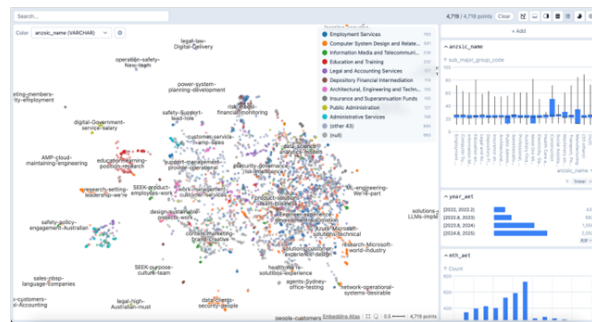


Figure 4: 'Analogue' and AI Model Outputs

The chart on the left shows the relationship between adult population size and total annual local expenditure by town type (rural, regional, or metropolitan). It is based on bank transaction data. On the right is a representation of a model built on an AI analysis of job advertisement text. Source: Geografia, 2025

Figure 4 compares an older style 'analogue' model output with an AI-generated model output². The left chart is easy to follow. You can predict expenditure in a town by working out what type of town it is (from a choice of three types) and how many adults live there. It's very reliable and uses about 500 data points and three dimensions (population, expenditure and town typology).

On the right is an AI-generated model. It is a numerical representation of millions of lines of text from job ads. This model predicts job growth by industry and location at a very granular level of industry type and geography. The real data this representation draws from exists in 4,000+ dimensions. This obviously cannot be visualised. It has been compressed into two dimensions so that we can try to interpret it.

If you have spent years crystallising your knowledge, then you can probably make a sound judgment on whether the outputs from this model are good. And you probably have that capacity because you have created a human-scale version of this model

² Both of these examples are taken from real data and real models produced by Geografia.

in the past. But if you're an early-career planner or analyst who has gone straight to using an LLM for your work, your knowledge has had no time to crystallise.

Relying on AI from the start is a risk.

Even if you have lots of analytical experience, if you rely more heavily on AI over time, your skills and intuition will atrophy.

Relying on AI without continuously testing and using your skills is also a risk.

In fact, academics recently published a meta-study of the research on the impact of AI on cognitive abilities, and it appears to be negative:

"Higher confidence in GenAI's ability to perform a task is related to less critical thinking effort."

Lee et al, 2025³

The obvious conclusion is that we should be cautious and at least set up some guardrails and processes.

In 2023, Geografia's Chief Data Scientist, Dean Magee, and I published a paper in the Planning Institute of Australia's journal on the good and bad of using AI in planning (specifically ChatGPT and Retrieval-Augmented Generation).⁴ It highlighted the benefits, but also the risks. Running an SME in a highly competitive landscape with the risk of commercial and reputational damage at stake, we have had to put up safeguards and establish processes for using AI so that we benefit from its productivity enhancement but avoid the pitfalls of AI. An internal policy was developed with guardrails around the use of AI in our work. This emphasises:

- Protecting the quality of output. We all know examples of how AI has been used to produce slop⁵. As an SME with fewer high-level connections with public and private client bases, Geografia is far less likely to recover from the reputational damage caused by AI missteps.
- Ensuring value for money for clients. As AI increases productivity and reduces the time required for everything from simple computations to report production, client money is (and always should be) either returned or

³ Lee, H.P., Sarkar, A., Tankelevitch, L., Drosos, I., Rintel, S., Banks, R., and Wilson, N., *The Impact of Generative AI on Critical Thinking: Self-Reported Reductions in Cognitive Effort and Confidence Effects from a Survey of Knowledge Workers*, in "Proceedings of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems", Article No 1121, pp1-22

⁴ Magee, D., and Johnson, K., 2023, Streamlining Urban Planning with AI Tools, in Planning News, 1 June

⁵ Recently, in Australia, a major consulting firm was exposed for allowing junior staff to use AI to produce a paid report drawing on fake research. The firm was compelled to repay some of the AUD400,000+ fee.

redirected to value-adding tasks for each project. In Geografia's case, fast-tracking the production of databases, economic models, and summary documents has created opportunities for deeper analysis, more on-site visits and more extensive engagement with clients and other stakeholders. This is done transparently so the client and contractor can agree on the revised resource allocation.

- Making sure the opportunities for *all* staff to learn are still part of the process and, more importantly, are integral to the workflow. Geografia's Chief Data Scientist leads this effort, establishing and enforcing rules for the use of AI as part of a broader, ongoing learning process.
- AI is not becoming a pathway to staff redundancy, but to staff productivity enhancement. For a small business, this means leveraging AI to expand the scale and scope of work a small team can deliver without compromising quality. Our team are educated, clever, and widely read people, and are fully aware of the employment risks posed by AI. Leaving these concerns unspoken undermines the trust and collegiality that have taken years and significant effort to build.

While these are the objectives (and guardrails) established by Geografia for its own use, they could equally apply to the public sector or other agencies. And the first step in developing them is to adopt a cautious approach. The global community jumped headfirst into the take-up of social media, and that rush has created innumerable problems of misinformation, FOMO, isolation, and damage to mental and physical health. AI is likely to have a significantly bigger impact on all aspects of life, so caution is warranted.

For Geografia, this has meant, for example:

- The Chief Data Scientist is setting up rules and built-in restrictions to stop our client data from being uploaded to open platforms.
- Written guidelines on which engines can be used, for what purpose, and in what circumstances.
- Regular Internal sessions to coach the team on new ways we can work with AI. This is part of ongoing internal workshops on methods, project debriefs, seminars and conferences we attend. Combined, this activity ensures the team don't just lean on AI and lose the habit of continuous learning.
- Because the field is evolving so quickly, the Chief Data Scientist maintains a structured "watch list" of new models, tools and regulations, and regularly updates our internal guidance so Geografia keeps pace with the latest improvements and technologies.
- We trial new AI tools and approaches in small, time-limited pilots before wider adoption, so that we can test their value, robustness and risks in a controlled way. Models are integrated into our client-facing products via tightly controlled betas with clear guidelines and warnings.

- We document where and how AI is used in projects, including its limitations, so that future teams and clients can understand, review, and, if necessary, audit the decisions that were supported by these tools.

3.4 WHEN DO WE NEED AI FOR OUR WORK?

There is an argument that we often do not need complex data analytics to do good planning. After all, what makes a good park is mostly obvious. A pedestrian-friendly street is clearly a pedestrian-friendly street. And we already know most of what makes a liveable city. Case study-based research is still valuable if it reveals successful pathways to these good outcomes. However, complex quantitative analysis or conceptual qualitative research (consider the speed with which LLMs can produce long reports) on the 'direction of the pathway' can be redundant if we have already travelled this path many times.

However, it is quick and easy to use AIs to inform commercial, financial and planning decisions. And that means a new generation of planners risks not accumulating the knowledge that takes years to develop, or even rejecting the validity of pre-existing knowledge altogether.

The question, then, is whether we are giving up this tacit knowledge in exchange for better planning outcomes. The answer will only be fully evident when we are living in a more fully AI-designed city. Although there are already clues (see later).

One possibly positive side effect of rejecting our analogue knowledge is that using AI and other advanced analytical technology may improve the credibility of our work. Everyone has an anecdote about decision-makers being more satisfied with your work if you say it was done using machine learning or some similar technology. That is even the case if you are doing something already well established through 'analogue' research. By way of an example, most of us have known for years that street design is a better way to slow traffic than posted speed limits. We know because analogue studies have proven it repeatedly; we know because you can see it on your streets; and we know because if you spare a few moments to think about human behaviour, it makes intuitive sense.

Carlo Ratti at Senseable City Labs recently completed a study using AI to trawl through massive datasets of telemetry data.⁶ The key finding was:

"Street design was a better way to slow traffic than posted speed limits."

We did not need an AI model to prove this. AI has not answered a question we had not already answered. But what it might have done is convince decision-makers it was a problem and that we've finally solved it. In this respect, then, AI has some value.

⁶ See *Slowing Down by Design*, <https://senseable.mit.edu/slowng-design/>

4.0 AI and Cities

AI is accelerating change in cities, altering how decisions are made and raising questions about whether the faster, more opaque analysis undertaken by AI will, or can, result in a better quality of life. AI (along with earlier technologies) has meant that a growing share of daily routines and economic interactions (once concentrated in city centres) can occur at home (or, for younger people, maybe not at all). All of this may mean cities (at least central cities) end up no longer being the centres of activity or innovation, particularly cities that depend on the knowledge economy.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

What does the impact of AI on jobs, planners and planning mean for cities? There are four things we can consider:

1. The way AI may accelerate change in cities.
2. The way it may change how we design cities.
3. How it may affect the reason we live and work in cities.
4. How this impact might differ between cities.

4.2 AI AND CHANGE IN CITIES

Cities change all the time. Good or bad, AI seems to be accelerating this and changing the direction. If we are making decisions faster and more opaque, how do we know we will improve the quality of life?

Speed and opacity in decision-making create a risky bet, as it is hard to predict the outcome.

4.3 DESIGNING CITIES WITH AI

Then there is city design.

Most of us like to be creative and spontaneous from time to time. We need cities that allow us to do this and experience quality of life in the way we define it for ourselves. Hyper-rational decision-making that produces an AI-designed smart city does not necessarily allow us that.

The image on the left of Figure 5 is a conceptual smart city streetscape for Melbourne, Australia. The image on the right is a laneway developed through the accretion of human activity over decades. As a measure of what appeals to people, there are far more wedding photos taken in the street on the right than the one on the left.



Figure 5: Highly Rational and Slightly Rational Planning
 These images compare an AI-designed Smart City Streetscape (for Melbourne, Australia) and an actual human-designed streetscape in the same city. Source: Geografia, 2025

4.4 THE PURPOSE OF CITIES IN A WORLD WITH AI

As for the purpose of cities, if you write any report for UN-Habitat, the phrase below must be included. On the surface, it seems uncontroversial. Especially if you take the broad definition of what a city is.

"By 2050, two-thirds of humanity will be living in cities."

UN-Habitat

But how confident can we be about this trajectory? Think about the last time you went into your city centre:

- Maybe you started early at the gym near your office.
- Then went in to work, and on to some meetings in another block.
- Then you had lunch, and while out, you did a bit of shopping or picked up your dry cleaning.
- On the way back to the office, you decided to pay your parking fine in person.
- After work, you met some friends and had dinner with them... or you saw a movie.

Cities are for commerce, the business of government, access to services, social or cultural experiences and for spiritual purposes.

Now imagine instead:

- You work out in your garden with a fitness app.
- You went back inside, got changed, then logged on to your laptop and started working from home.
- That evening, you ordered dinner from Uber Eats.
- And finally, you streamed a film on Netflix and then went to bed.

Or imagine you are young, and an AI has replaced your internship. That means you have no office to go to and a lot less discretionary income to spend. This last point matters because young people account for most nighttime spending, and the nighttime economy is important to most cities.

Figure 6 shows the share of annual after-hours spending for Australian capital cities (blue) and all cities (orange) by age. Even though older people have far more money in Australia (and in most countries), in cities, younger people do more of the nighttime spending. No jobs for them means a far more moribund nighttime economy.



Figure 6: Spending at Night by Age, Capital Cities and Other Cities, Australia, 2024-2025
Source: Spendmapp by Geografia, 2025

On top of the impact on cities' core functions, most of the larger, growing cities already lack infrastructure. They probably have expensive, overcrowded housing; some struggle with high crime; and most have much higher levels of pollution. Given all of this, one has to ask: what will be attracting all those people into cities by 2050? It is at least worth considering that the flow might slow down, change shape, or even stop, especially for cities that rely on the knowledge economy.

And that leads me to the last of the four ideas.

4.5 THE UNEVEN RESPONSE OF CITIES TO AI

The impact of AI on cities will not be uniform. In developed cities, AI may widen the gulf between rich and poor, as AI owners vacuum up the activity of smaller businesses while still reducing their own workforces. In developing cities, all the work once outsourced to them will disappear (for example, call centres and bookkeeping).

So, New York, London, Zurich, Shanghai, and Tokyo reshore all the work, but with little need to hire. Dakar, Manila, Bangalore, Guadalajara and Hanoi lose the jobs and investment. It's not obvious that by 2050, two-thirds of the world will want or need to live in cities.

5.0 Planners Should Plan on How to Manage AI

At the risk of a poor prediction of mine living on the Internet forever, to me, the evidence is starting to mount that AI will have a net negative effect on the number of jobs available, especially in the knowledge economy, and that includes jobs for planners. This impact is accelerating due to incentives for developers and users, and there is no guarantee that its use will result in better cities. What is certain, though, is that the benefits will not accrue equally, for cities or for people.

5.1 GETTING OFF THE FENCE: MY OPINION ON THE IMPACT OF AI

Whatever happens, I suspect we are not that far off from knowing what AI will do to planning and cities. That is, whether today's AI bubble will pop, taking down a big chunk of the global economy. Or whether AIs will transform the economy. And, if so, how?

It is tempting to sit on the fence about this. And you would not be alone. Even the AI experts can't agree. Consider the two quotes below.

"If any company or group, anywhere on the planet, builds an artificial intelligence ...everyone, everywhere on Earth, will die."

Yudkowsky and Soares, 2025⁷

"LLMs are great, they're useful ... They are not a path to human-level intelligence. They're just not."

Yann LeCun, 2025⁸

It seems AI could end up being a useful, but not transformational, software leap. Or it could kill us all. But of course, we should remember to be wary of people making bold predictions.

⁷ Yudkowsky, E., & Soares, 2025, N., *If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies*, Bodley Head

⁸ Quoted in *Forbes Magazine*, May 2024

Nonetheless. Here's mine. Right now, AIs are enabling more output with less labour input, particularly for knowledge workers, including planners. As a result, we seem to be seeing job losses, especially for younger workers.

And maybe older workers will be at risk soon as well. Because, as any business owner will tell you, cutting costs is important, and the most effective way to do that is by cutting staff, especially expensive senior staff. I can't imagine a profitability-focused business or budget-conscious government slowing down.

Moreover, because LLMs are built on the Internet's knowledge base, which is full of junk, I think using AI will result in cognitive decline for AIs (if it hasn't already) and for humans, including planners.

None of this is better for us or cities.

5.2 WHERE TO FROM HERE?

AI is already changing our cities - as an economic tool, and as a designer, operator and manager of cities. The scale of change is hard to predict. Maybe as much as the car. Maybe as little as the fax machine.

However, as AI is a general technology, more like the steam engine than a fax machine, I think its impact will be transformational as much or more than the car. You can already name almost any job and most social, recreational, cultural, or commercial activities happening in cities, and AI has a role to play in them.

And so, for me, it's obvious. If the AI bubble doesn't pop, then cities and planning will change dramatically. If it does, then we're in an economic downturn: an arguably more familiar landscape.

The Case for AI-Derived Super-Abundance

Something not yet mentioned is that all this new efficiency will create more abundance. That is, we can work with AI to design beautiful cities for all of us that are safer, more inclusive, more sustainable, and more resilient. I have a problem with some of the logic behind this argument.

Firstly, we're exceeding so many planetary environmental boundaries that you have to ask where this abundance will come from.

And pre-empting an obvious answer, if AIs solve the problem of abundance, we then have to rely on the owners of the AIs not only agreeing to but being the ones to roll out the biggest redistribution of wealth in world history.

That's not a bet I would take.

"So, is AI the Death or Life of Great Cities? Yes.

Kevin Johnson, 2025

If AI replaces more jobs, increases the concentration of global wealth in fewer cities, and accelerates cognitive decline, then, on balance, it will negatively impact the core functions of many cities and towns.

Just maybe not all.

This new technology can and will probably improve the quality of life in our cities.

For some of us, but not all of us.

But when has that ever been otherwise?



Figure 7: Is Your City AI-ready? Take the Test

