

Get over yourselves, boomers! The '60s weren't that flash

WAS 1969 really so interesting? Certainly, a lot happened that year, as evidenced by the regular 40th anniversary pieces that have run in the media in recent weeks. There was the first moon landing, the great event of exploration. There was Woodstock, supposedly a great expression of a mass social movement merged with the dominant youth culture.

The Beatles made one last monumental album, *Abbey Road*, an event celebrated recently by the pathetic middle-aged fans who last week gathered at the site where the cover picture was taken 40 years ago. Outrage became a constant. It was the year that Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and the stage show *Oh, Calcutta!* first appeared.



SHAUN CARNEY

Forget 1969. We have it so much better right here, right now.

There was a bit going on, and from time to time it was pretty exciting. Levels of conformity and modes of expression were changing. But it shouldn't be oversold. Often I feel bad for today's young people when they are served up excessive and regular

rhapsodies about the 1960s, with their implicit messages that the modern era doesn't quite measure up.

So let's get it out in the open: 2009 is better! The 1960s weren't that great! Yes, the music was amazing, and the exponential manner in which fashions and art and the vernacular language developed during that decade was unique to that time.

But there was another side to it, which is explored in the American TV series *Mad Men*, the third season of which premiered in the US at the weekend. Superficially, *Mad Men* is an utter delight. It's the most meticulously art directed show ever, surely. Set in the pre-youthquake early 1960s, it re-creates the sharp visual lines of the clothes and furniture of the time, as well as the clearly

defined reporting lines of industrial societies in that era — in the workplace and the home.

And yet, despite all those imposed certainties, everybody in the show is unhappy and frightened. They're scared of a nuclear cataclysm. The men are worried about the women, who want more. The women are worried about the men, who want to stand in their way.

The social and cultural revolutions that led to Woodstock were supposed to obviate those tensions and fears, raising consciousness about peace, love and understanding. For some, they did. It seems ridiculous to dismiss Woodstock altogether, as some have during the 40th anniversary week, as little more than a poorly serviced festival of sloppy music, but it's also

dishonest not to acknowledge the limits of its effects. Four months later, the Rolling Stones organised a festival at Altamont, in California — a sort of West Coast Woodstock — which resulted in a stabbing homicide, a drowning and two deaths from a hit-and-run, with the Hells Angels providing security. That was how the decade of peace and love saw itself out.

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Similarly, when considering the success of the Apollo moon program, it was not all about discovery. Its genesis lay as much in America's desire to win a propaganda war with its nuclear rival, the Soviet Union,

as in the pure desire to push out past the existing scientific boundaries.

And it has to be noted that all of these events took place a long way from Australia. In 1969, far from sending someone to the moon, you could not even take an international flight from Melbourne. First, you had to take a TAA or Ansett plane to Sydney.

In Australia 40 years ago, debates about censorship were never far away from the front pages. We were still three years away from enshrining the concept of equal pay for women in our award system.

And change came slowly. When I first started working at *The Herald*, which in 1978 sold more than 400,000 copies a day in Victoria, the stylebook forbade the use of the "Ms" honorific in the paper. It was

several years before female journalists were allowed by the paper's executives — all of them men — to wear trousers to work.

Of course, the freedoms and the entertainments and gadgets we enjoy today are the sum total of all that's gone before, and some of those are down to what happened in the 1960s.

But nostalgia for those times ignores the downsides. Perhaps it's hard-wired in most of us to tell ourselves that simpler times were better times, but I'll take today's safer cars, cancer cure rates, public transport, workplace safety laws, instantaneous communications, cheaper consumer durables, ease of global travel, and access to news and entertainment from around the world, to the way we did things in 1969 any day, thanks.

And is it just possible —

despite the recklessness that's led to successive economic bubbles, leading to a financial crisis in most of the industrialised world — that we've accrued sufficient knowledge and a sense of our interconnectedness to avoid a complete economic crash?

There are some signs that co-ordinated action through the G20 might just have averted a near-bottomless financial plunge. That sort of thing would have been unachievable in 1969 and even as recently as the early 1990s, when national economies operated autonomously and global economic forces were often viewed as immutable. Surely the joining of hands didn't all begin in an alfalfa field in upstate New York 40 years ago.

Shaun Carney is associate editor.

Everyone must do their bit

Implementing the bushfire commission's recommendations poses problems for an already overloaded volunteer brigade.

IN THE opening paragraphs of its interim report, the Bushfires Royal Commission refers to the CFA as "justifiably a proud organisation". It goes on to praise "the sacrifice and dedication of the thousands of volunteers [as] a striking example of the community taking responsibility for itself".

There will doubtless be many interesting and robust discussions at CFA brigade sheds across Victoria this week as the initial findings of the royal commission are digested and disseminated. But most CFA volunteers will not have the luxury of detailed reflections on the findings — or in some instances lack of findings — in the 360-page report. There are a couple of much more pressing tasks at hand.

The first is preparing and planning for what is predicted to be another potentially long and difficult summer. There are just 69 days left before the official start of the fire season. Bear in mind, of course, that fires don't always respect such bureaucratic niceties as an "official" fire season any more than lines drawn on maps between public and private land.

The second task will be trying to make some sense of and put in place at the local level those recommendations from the report that Government will give effect to in coming weeks.

That will mean working closely with individuals and communities still stunned by the impact of the February 7 bushfires and those other fires last summer that claimed a dreadful toll in human lives and property loss.

Not surprisingly, there is a fair bit of fear across the Victorian community about what might happen this summer. Tackling this will ultimately fall not to politicians, bureaucrats or fire agency officials, but to local fire brigade personnel who live in the communities they serve. All risk is local and the answers to it are found at a local level.

For its part, the community needs to accept that it too will have to bear much more of the burden for its own safety in the face of bushfires. That means becoming fully



JOHN SCHAUBLE

involved and engaged in the sorts of preparedness programs that only some community members in fire-prone areas have bothered about in the past.

Inevitably, the recommendations pose almost as many questions as they answer. Some of the recommendations in the interim report to which the Government is already committed will be problematic on the ground. The retention of the so-called "stay or go" policy will no doubt anger some people. In the end, perhaps, it is not the policy and practice of "stay or go" that is at fault as the failure of large parts of the community living in bushfire areas to engage with the risk of fire in the landscape and what they need to do to remain safe from it. A major shift in the application of the "stay or go" approach will be an emphasis on leaving early. It is one thing to tell people to leave, but it raises the question: where will they go? An unknown remains how many times people will respond to the need to leave before they tire of evacuating when nothing actually happens.

The push for community fire refuges is another issue likely to be locally contentious. The commission is suggesting the designation of community refuges and has backed the state's plan for the identification of "safer neighbourhood places". These might include areas such as ovals, racetracks and car parks. Given that a major killer in a bushfire is exposure to radiant heat when out in the open, a range of questions immediately arise. In the end it will be up to local brigades to assist in the nomination of such places. That will place yet another onus on volunteers, who will grapple with the suggestion that a lesser standard of refuge might be acceptable.



The unpalatable truth for some communities is that there may be no places safer than private houses (which themselves may offer minimal protection) and the only absolutely safe option on days of extreme fire danger will be for people to leave. End of story.

The suggestion that volunteers will have a role in the individual assessment of properties opens another Pandora's box. Put simply, not everyone in a pair of yellow overalls is up to this task. Telling someone that their home is indefensible in a bushfire is a role that requires training, skill and tact. It also opens up issues of liability for the advice given. Assessing tens of thousands of homes in the most at-risk areas alone is a task that conservatively would take many months.

Finally, there is the issue of sirens. The reality is that in those communities where CFA stations still have sirens, they already act as a de facto warning that "something" is happening. But there are inherent problems. Existing sirens rely on power supplies that may be cut during bushfires. Strong winds such as those experienced during bushfires affect their audible range. Sirens give a non-specific message. Negotiating with communities about using them as an effective warning will need to take such

factors into account, along with the question of who will have the role of issuing warnings at this local level.

The CFA's 59,000 volunteers can be justifiably proud of their role in protecting Victoria from fire and other emergencies. The levels of training and practice expected of the state's volunteer firefighters meet world's best practice. They might not be paid, but they provide a professional service well suited to the environments in which they operate.

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With their role comes responsibility and accountability, from which the CFA's volunteers have never resiled. But loading them up with a range of new and onerous tasks will need the full support of both government and the broader community.

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Life's daily grind, but not as we know it

WAKING up to cable news in a foreign hotel room is always a disorienting experience. Not quite conscious, adrift between realities. Outside are unfamiliar tongues and traditions, conditions that might surprise and shock, delight and disturb. But for the moment, you are safely wrapped in the bland comfort of the ubiquitous hotel room.

In Port Moresby, in the aftermath of last week's plane crash, there was the Channel 9 breakfast team being beamed in from Brisbane, just three hours' flight and a world away. They momentarily turned down the volume on their shiny, happy morning routine to go live to the sombre scene outside the airport just up the road from my room.

A file image of the rough-and-ready Kokoda landing strip, which the doomed flight had failed to reach, flashed on the screen. The accompanying commentary questioned the safety of the remote airfield. The Brisbane anchor plainly felt the facility left something to be desired — and certainly it appeared she had a point. But then she proceeded, tones loaded with judgment, with questions along the line that surely, given such conditions, Australian tourists and trekkers were risking their lives flying into Kokoda.

I winced, gripped by an overwhelming pang of cultural cringe. Local pilots rank the Kokoda strip as nowhere near the worst that they must negotiate as they travel around the country, but cope they must — frequently it is the only point of access to communities. Across Papua New Guinea, a road is a blessing. A smooth, intact, functional one a miracle. Power supply is patchy and erratic.

The infrastructure taken for granted in Australia simply does not exist across much of the country. Where it does, it is fragile or failed unless proximity to some kind of big-money resources venture has brought the mixed blessing of such basics, improving the services and logistics of daily life, but along the way shattering small societies with population movements and disease and the tensions of new money.

The offence of the broadcast from Brisbane was not its focus on the concerns of Australians — that's legitimate. The problem was the blinkers, the failure to even attempt to see those concerns within the context of the broader reality.

I couldn't help but contrast the jarring insensitivity of the questions from Brisbane with the heartfelt sympathy of the Papua New Guineans keeping vigil around the airport, some of whom had lost kin of their own, but who would reach out to every passing Australian (including bemused members of the media pack) to hold hands and commiserate the loss of their compatriots.

A couple of days earlier I had visited the Nazarene Hospital at Kudjip in the Western Highlands province, right in the middle of the country. One of the nation's few major roads passes through here, a rough ribbon crossing from Lae on the east coast to the Southern Highlands province in the west.

On a bed in one of the overcrowded wards I met a woman, the mother of a young family, lying motionless on her back on a tired vinyl mattress, with a brace bolted into her skull and fastened to the rusted bedhead. Dr Bill



JO CHANDLER

The Kokoda plane tragedy highlights Papua New Guinea's deprivation.

McCoy, a missionary who runs the hospital, explained that a while back the road out the front of the hospital collapsed. He begged local authorities to fix it before someone was killed. Six weeks ago, his patient was one of several passengers in a vehicle that fell into the hole and she broke her neck.

She has at least another 10 weeks lying here, crocheting billlums (traditional bags) to keep herself occupied, enduring the pain and humiliations of managing her care in an open ward with only the most basic of facilities, grateful that she was close to medical help when the accident happened or she may be paralysed or dead. Just another of the daily casualties of collapsed infrastructure.

There are countless others. Children who miss out on education or opportunities. Families who miss out on income because they can't transport goods or services around, tying them to continued subsistence lifestyles. Children who die from preventable diseases because they can't get to care.

4 A smooth, intact, functional road is a miracle. Power supply is patchy and erratic. 7

Rural women will tell you stories of their sisters and neighbours who bleed to death at road sides trying to get to hospital when their labour runs into trouble, or who deliver at home on their own by lamplight. Their accounts are given credence by recently published national data showing the maternal death rate in PNG has doubled in the past 10 years — to 733 in every 100,000 births. The equivalent figure in Australia is about eight deaths.

Watching cable TV last night, by now in a guesthouse in the wild west town of Tari, I am sharing the couch with Edward, my elderly host, who is looking bemused by *The Farmer Wants A Wife*. I'm doing my best to broaden realities, provide some cultural context, but not too successfully. Given the amount of polygamy still practised in these parts, maybe it is the premise that the farmer must choose just one wife that is the problem.

He gives up and opts for the universal language of sport, watching rugby league until the generator fails and there's no choice but to go to bed, listening to the generator next door that keeps the hospital operating most of 24 hours a day. The sick and wounded come in all night from distant places looking for help from the Medecins Sans Frontieres team that arrived last year. Australian trekkers may well feel confronted, even offended by the conditions they find in PNG. Imagine living in it.

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Technology is no substitute for the messiness of humanity

THE world is flat, US journalist Thomas Friedman told us in his 2005 book of the same name. Globalisation and technology meant work could now occur any time, anywhere, if you had the right software.

The implication was that geography was dead. We could begin the process of seriously experimenting with new ways of living. Trends emerged such as telecommuting — where you would work from home, communicating via the internet with your colleagues wherever they were, and the sea change and the tree change trends. More recently the *San Francisco Chronicle* coined a new term for the tech-enabled mobile worker. "New nomads" were being seen around the coffee houses of the city, moving around according to the strength of Wi-Fi signals, "paying their rent in lattes". The implication for cities had



BRIGID DELANEY

Despite our ability to live remotely, we still crave the buzz of cities.

the potential to be profound. In the flat Earth world, where you lived didn't matter. It's weird then that towards the end of this turbulent decade of technology, where we were promised freedom from place, that we are still living in cities. In fact our cities are in ruder health than ever. As the population heads towards 4 million, Melbourne's biggest issue is

growth. So many people want to live here, that we have to think creatively about where to put everyone.

After spending more than a decade away from my home town, what has amazed me on return is the buzz in the city.

When I last lived here in the '90s, bars started to appear in the laneways at the top of the city, and a few brave souls were moving into new CBD apartments, or else Melrose Place-style compounds on the city fringe in Southbank, East Melbourne and North Melbourne.

Docklands didn't exist, Federation Square was a wasteland, and edginess was a defining characteristic of the inner city. The heroin problem created a continual thrum of tension.

Now the city has other problems, including a rise in drunken violence, but there is a different sort of energy from the '90s — the energy of a place that is

being boisterously, enthusiastically, lovingly inhabited. Some nights, pushing against the tide of people moving up Little Bourke Street, the energy of Melbourne at night exceeds that of serious nightlife capitals such as Barcelona or London.

4 The implication for cities had the potential to be profound. 7

Academic Richard Florida tackles the enduring appeal of the city in his book *Who's Your City*. He writes: "Globalisation is not flattening the world; on the contrary, the world is spiky. Place is becoming more relevant to the global economy and our individual lives. The choice of where to live, therefore, is not an arbitrary one. It is arguably the most important decision we make, as important as choosing a spouse

or a career. In fact, place exerts powerful influence over the jobs and careers we have access to, the people we meet and our 'mating markets' and our ability to lead happy and fulfilled lives." Florida's point is: where you live matters.

Cities are still the best place for serendipity — accidental meetings, the spontaneous catch-up for drinks, chance meetings with people who inspire, help, or challenge you. There is none of this real-life messiness — or magic — for those living "remotely".

Writes Florida: "When large numbers of entrepreneurs, financiers, engineers, designers, and other smart creative people are constantly bumping into one another inside and outside work, business ideas are formed, sharpened, executed and, if successful, expanded. As the number of smart people increase and the connections among them grow more dense, the faster it all goes. It's the multiplying effect of the

clustering force at work." The more Melbourne grows and attracts a creative class, the more of that type of class it will attract. This poses a challenge for governments and planners. How to harness the energy and the social and creative capital of the bright young things that flock here? Yet how to stop the city becoming what Florida calls topsy-turvy — that is a city where the "winner takes all".

The tipping point for these cities is when other residents (those with less dynamic jobs and less dynamic salaries) get pushed out to the fringes. House prices rise, and essential service workers cannot afford the live near their workplaces.

The city becomes too hip for its own good and loses the beckoning spark that made it so attractive in the first place.

Brigid Delaney is the author of *This Restless Life*, available now.