

Degrowth

Keynote speech transcript from

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When I first got the request to speak I was surprised. What can I, as an economist concerned with strategies for social ecological transformation, offer to a conference on landscape architecture?

This puzzled for me some time, until I spoke with one of the conference organizers and they mentioned that at the moment most (landscape) architects are paid by the square meter of soil sealing!

Also last month, in a Le Monde Diplomatique article I read, it said that to build the modern highway system in France it required: 5 tons of sand & gravel per linear meter of highway built and that infrastructure projects account for the largest flow of resources (more so than any other socio-economic activity in France). In these moments it became clear to me why someone from the degrowth research community fits to a conference on landscape architecture.

I perceive we are facing the same problem, the absurdity of a system that has reached its limits yet continues to require ongoing expansion and growth despite everyone knowing it's not possible to continue in this way.

The buildings, spaces and environments you want to build and design (or advocate for) can not be created en masse and at scale in the current economic system, despite everyone knowing that the logic of more new buildings and more concrete must change to renovation, and new materials. And if you try to work within the logic of the current market economy, these alternative projects are destined to be marginal because they simply don't fit to the current economy, they are too expensive and not what the client wants.

This is why I am working in the field of degrowth, to challenge an absurd economic system that requires infinite growth on a finite planet, which I believe closely touches your field of landscape architecture and its concerns of:

- Preventing soil sealing
- Expanding green spaces
- Focus on re-localizing
- Shifting from closed and private spaces to public and shared spaces
- Retrofitting and re-designing rather than re-building
- Innovative re-using of materials, and
- Creating spaces that foster connection rather than isolation; and much more !

I hope my presentation will do two things:

- Explain what degrowth is, and is doing, to show that it is relevant for both of our fields (economics and landscape architecture), along the way highlighting that the current social-ecological crises are at the core of how our societies are organized, based on a capitalist mode of production, consumption and exploitation
- and then, I will argue that due to the scope of changed required to achieve a social ecological transformation, effective strategies and coordinated political action is necessary – not another 'best practice', another model project, or even more good ideas, but instead changing the rules of the game!

What is degrowth?

So, explaining degrowth can be challenging because it has multiple facets: it is first and foremost a critique, second it is a vision of an alternative way to organize the economy/society, and lastly it is a loose movement of activist-academics who are trying to realize this change.

It has existed since 2008 as a research field, with its first academic conference taking place that year, which as most of us know, wasn't a great year for the economy. Since then degrowth has had 17 conferences, most of which took place in Europe but also elsewhere like in Mexico City and Montreal. Degrowth draws heavily on the fields of ecological economics, feminist economics, political ecology, social ecology, Marxist economics, development studies and critical theory more broadly, with many intellectuals and academics that we are building upon and bringing together.

Why is degrowth relevant?

One of the most exciting things about degrowth, in my opinion, is that it is increasingly being engaged with by researchers, politicians, young people, and many different walks of life – and that means it is relevant and not just a marginal critique.

The IPCC's sixth Assessment report released in 2023 named degrowth as one of the two key green economy approaches (alongside green growth).

Degrowth scholar Jason Hickel spoke to the Dutch parliament on the merits of degrowth. Dozens of local groups working on degrowth as a 'political' project exist across Europe and increasingly elsewhere as well. Last year the Beyond Growth Conference took place in Brussels at the European Parliament, with MPs in attendance and supporting the event. The EU last year awarded its largest grant, an ERC grant of 10 million euro, to a degrowth research project based in Barcelona for seven years; and lastly, Kohei Saito published a book on Degrowth Communism in Japan and it became a best-selling book there!

So now on to degrowth's critique

Degrowth is a critique of our current economic system that is focused on infinite growth at the expense of society and the environment, which has produced an economy that fetishizes growth at all costs (both human and environmental). Further, economic growth often just profits the richest of society while showing no improvements to the majority. Instead, the growth economy swallows up more and more resources, pillages more eco-systems, obliterates biodiversity and communities along the way, in the search for new cheap materials and more things to commodify. The only thing that matters is that GDP increases even if that is due to economic activity like military expenditure, surveillance equipment, more advertising in our already visually polluted environments, or other "uneconomic" growth that hardly improves our quality of life.

There is a misconception that economic growth is key to societal well-being and this simply is not true, instead in many instances economic growth undermines our societal goals of ecological sustainability and social well-being.

A quick example to show the contrast:

- An ambulance going to help someone in a car accident increases GDP; whereas
- A person who goes for a walk every morning has no increase on GDP

Based on the logic of mainstream economics, the former is better for the economy (and thus society); whereas the latter brings no benefit to the economy (and thus to society). I think I don't need to spell out the absurdity of this.

Degrowth is also critical of the emerging 'green economy' paradigms that promise more consumption, more production, and no meaningful changes to our way of life, just a switch from fossil fuels to "renewable" energy sources, which is the mantra of green growth enthusiasts but also visible in less critical applications of sustainable development and circular economy.

These narratives are enticing, but they are inadequate in a few ways. First: These discourses often assume it is possible to de-link economic growth from its material, energetic and biophysical basis but research shows this isn't possible. All economic growth is

inherently material and energetically intensive. Second: these approaches often reduce our collective societal crises just to carbon. But the crises run far deeper: inequality, alienation, biodiversity loss, and many others that cannot be de-carbonized away, instead deep structural and political-economic change is needed, which these approaches often do not advocate for. Third: green economy approaches do not challenge how we use energy, but simply advocate a switch of sources to "renewable energy". But if you have ever seen the production and transport process required for a wind turbine or a solar panel you will know anything but renewable. These things do not grow on trees.

This is not to say degrowth thinks we should go back to the stone ages and is anti-renewable energy, it instead emphasizes that these technologies are crucial but if they are used to maintain our current mode of living, then they are totally inadequate – a change of our way of living must accompany these technologies else this added energy will be used just to expand more production and consumption (as is currently the case).

So, to put it in a nutshell, all economic growth is materially and energetically intensive (especially when we zoom out to the global level), and given the timeframe for rapid decarbonization we have no time to explore and place hope in miracle technologies but must instead degrow our economic activity. Obviously not degrowing endlessly, but until a balanced point is

reached, in other words, a kind of steady state economy. So degrowth can be understood as a transition from our current massive over-production and hyper-consumption economy to a more balanced one without the simplistic and false promise of “nothing needs to change, just the energy source”.

And one big disclaimer: It must be made clear that degrowth is a vision for transformation in rich countries of the global north, which aims to create ecological space for the Global South to find its own paths forward (devoid of neo-colonial relations) and acknowledging the North’s disproportionate responsibility in terms of CO₂ emissions, biodiversity destruction, material usage, and eco-system degradation.

So, what could that look like? I will next sketch the degrowth vision:

Vision: degrowth envisions a post-capitalist future where the economy is in service of social and ecological needs, aiming for human flourishing within biophysical limits based on principles of equity, care, reciprocity, as well as global solidarity. This implies new laws, built infrastructures, adapting and re-inventing existing institutions and a significant cultural change away from consumption towards conviviality with issues of equity and justice at the center. This can be achieved in a number of ways and crucially across multiple domains or spheres of life, I will give some examples to try and show the

interrelation of politics, economics, markets, ownership structures, cultural change, and consumption habits. I will explore a few via examples of what degrowth could look like in the future by describing some examples in more detail (i) Red Vienna, (ii) Mobility; and (iii) Improving well-being.

Red Vienna

Removing basic needs like healthcare, education, mobility, and housing from the whims of the market is a key pillar of a degrowth future – in other words: de-commodification. De-commodification is one key pillar in a degrowth future because it ensures people’s basic needs are met regardless of income. This also increases the possibility of planning production rather than having market demand shape production, so not building more of the luxury apartments that we see dominating the skylines of most cities as empty investment prosperities. Red Vienna was a period in the early 20th century when a massive amount of municipal housing was built in Vienna by the socialist (red) government and has since been sustained and expanded. It is an excellent example of de-commodifying housing and fits well to the degrowth vision because it is characterized by affordability, quality (there is a design competition for new buildings), social integration (multiple classes alongside each other to avoid ghettos), links to public transport and newly built buildings require bike storage. An impressive figure: 2/3 of the Vienna housing stock is owned or managed by the city. Prices aren’t determined by

profit-seeking real estate investment companies but rather municipal entities or limited-profit firms that have clear rules on the building quality and the degree to which the prices are subject to market-mechanisms, and this has a downward affect on the other apartments in Vienna. I pay less than 400 EUR for a room in a shared apartment and we have two balconies in a newly renovated municipal building, which is impressive for a European capital city! They could be improved further by increasing the number of shared facilities, for example shared clothes washing facilities, which in the early 1900s the Karl Marx Hof had. The legacy of Red Vienna is very impressive and shows that a degrowth future is not utopian but requires often re-assembling what we already know.

However, such changes in ownership structures are limited today by the EU's common market and its laws on competition, which bans municipal ownership at this scale. These laws on competition show the close link between economics (or economic ideology) and the barriers to meaningful structural change in many sectors. So a degrowth housing policy must not only aim to expand public housing and de-commodify housing, but simultaneously challenge the pro-market logic of the EU.

Changing mobility under degrowth

Degrowth is not just about encouraging the consumer to make better, more eco-friendly, and

socially conscious buying habits (which will play some part), but it's also about limiting consumption and production through new rules/norms, and also building infrastructures and adopting policies to enable these lower energy modes of living.

For example, encouraging people to bike to work is not enough, we need the public infrastructure built for it, we need to educate people who did not grow up with bikes how to ride, we need to subsidize good bikes for all, we need to build bike parking and retrofit trains to transport bikes. But we also need to challenge the dominant and destructive modes of transport through laws and rules, and not leave this to the market to fix. This could include banning advertisements for cars or at least severely limiting it, since today many motivations for having a car are tied to image, power, toxic masculinity, and other behaviors that a degrowth future needs to challenge and move beyond. Also putting clear limits on high-carbon activities, like private vehicles, long-distance flights, and limiting luxury consumption in general, since these activities account for a large percentage of emissions yet are done by few, often the rich.

I saw an excellent image recently showcasing the space on a road required to transport 50 people in different forms of transport – foot, bike, bus (each taking a marginally larger amount of space) and then the massive increase in the amount of space once each was in a combustion engine car (an image many of us are familiar with) and then it showed how the

space changed for electric cars, hydrogen cars and biofuel cars and it was exactly the same as the normal car of course. So changing mobility under a degrowth paradigm requires expanding access and ease of us of low-carbon forms of transport, through investment and innovation, but also limiting the most excessive forms of high-carbon mobility. Simply because we can build a Hummer SUV does not mean we should, simply because we can go to the Canary Islands for the weekend on a private jet doesn't mean we should. And this isn't about then moralizing individuals and making better green consumption habits but instead collectively deciding on societal limits and then helping our society to best stay within those limits while still leading a good life for all .

Improving well-being and why degrowth isn't austerity

One of the mistaken understandings of degrowth, which assumes a degrowth paradigm implies everything must shrink, but obviously some things must grow and flourish (like renewable energy production, but also community centers, bike infrastructure, etc). Degrowth aims to increase well-being through fewer resource and material usage, this can be seen in policies that focus on reducing things like work-time reduction, less stress, less traffic, less pollution, less advertising (visual pollution), less pressure to perform. And also increasing the things that bring us happiness and increase well-being but have a small ecological and social footprint,

like increasing time with friends, increasing the amount of cooking we do at home, increasing caring time with loved ones, increasing time for fixing things and repairing things, having time for buying used things. These changes can be understood as a shift from consumption to conviviality (in other words: gaining human satisfaction and well-being through interactions and inter-relations not through more objects). Such a cultural change also entails re-normalizing the idea of "enough" (sufficiency), which historically there were such limits on what we could and couldn't do, limits we have abandoned with the philosophy of "if we can do it, we should do it" ... but should we really do anything just because we can?

Thus a degrowth society and economy would shrink those things that are harming humans and the environment, but aim to expand those things that enrich and nourish communities and eco-systems. This won't be easy, and will require re-learning and forgetting things, crucially needing not just economists but importantly the arts, media, designers, and philosophers to support with such a historic cultural shift.

Implications

The implications of the degrowth vision and analysis are many. Deep structural change is necessary, in other words a social ecological transformation, so more best-practices and micro projects will not cut it. Any solutions focusing on green growth and more

technology are not viable as these only enable localized places to achieve sustainability on the backs of others; and there will be resistance to this kind of systemic change and thus political power is key to this change, not only better ideas but translating them into political action.

So how do we manage to get from here to there?

Degrowth and political action. Or in other words: why strategy matters

Strategy can be understood in this context in the broadest sense of how to get from our current status quo to realize a social ecological transformation in line with a degrowth vision, so a theory of change, how to combine different actions and tactics across time. Firstly it must be said that within degrowth there is not consensus on how best to achieve social ecological transformation and there are many currents. Some more anarchist and prioritizing bottom-up approaches, others more statist and top-down, some advocate for an abrupt break with current institutions, others imagine a slower transition with institutions adapted to degrowth principles, some are policy-oriented and think more/better policies are the key and the task is to convince policy-makers, some believe a political party is key, others are in-between or undecided, etc.

Degrowth previously was not particularly engaged with the question of strategy but myself and others in the degrowth community encouraged degrowth to move beyond this kind of indifference that embraced

an “anything-goes” approach, where all strategies are pursued simultaneously without any distinction or discussion about which is more fitting for different contexts (or which may be incompatible), we called this “strategic indeterminism”

But that was 6 years ago that we began advocating for more focus on strategy in degrowth, and since then we organized a conference on the topic and published a collected volume on strategy and degrowth. So the importance of strategy can now be considered an emerging consensus within the degrowth community.

Without considering seriously the issue of strategy we risk naively imagining a better future, but the immense barriers to transformation are overlooked or downplayed because immense structural change, either that imagined by degrowth (or that imagined by your field of landscape architecture and design) are both contested processes, a power-sensitive analysis is necessary, which accounts for how the necessary change can materialize (and also who wants to block or challenge such change).

If we are researching a different way of organizing society, the economy, and space – then we must embrace a political vision of how these realities may (or may not) come into being, thus we must do the difficult, messy but also brave and necessary work of examining how to get from here to there and engage with socio-political processes. As Marx famously said:

it is not enough to analyze the world, the point is to change it!

Unfortunately, I do not come to you with a magic solution for the best strategy, but I appeal to you to take seriously the importance of strategy, political action, power, governance, and organizing to make a social ecological transformation possible.


But I did have some questions in mind that might help us to collectively move forward:

- How can landscape architecture and design be an ally for social ecological transformation ?
- What can possible alliances look like?
- How to move away from another best-practice or award-winning project, to instead achieving structural, political and institutional change in the field of architecture and design?
- How can you mobilize your power (which is technical expertise and knowledge that many do not have) in service of social ecological transformation?
- You have the concepts and ideas for how to build and design in a more sustainable and equitable way, how to mainstream this?

As my presentation comes to an end, I have one last thing I wanted to share before I finish: I read a great webarticle before the conference by Benjamin Wells on the links between degrowth and architecture, in

the article he cited Keller Easterling who said that *"architects are well positioned to master methods of subtraction"*, which I think fits beautifully to the ethos of degrowth.... so with that I now turn the floor to all of you.

Thank you !

A woman with dark hair, wearing a black dress and an orange wristband, is speaking into a microphone on a stage. Behind her is a large projection screen displaying a quote in white text on a pink background. The quote reads: "THERE ARE PROFESSIONS MORE HARMFUL THAN INDUSTRIAL DESIGN, BUT ONLY A VERY FEW OF THEM." Below the quote, in smaller text, it says "Papenek (1985); Design for the Real World, p.ix". The name "Sandra Groll" is also visible in the bottom left corner of the projection.

THERE ARE PROFESSIONS
MORE HARMFUL THAN
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Papenek (1985); Design for the Real World, p.ix

Sandra Groll

Keynote speech on design theory by professor Sandra Groll

Designing for ecologies

One cannot not design systems

Keynote speaker

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Design is far more than the functional-aesthetic shaping of more or less usable consumer goods. As an attempt to improve a situation or transform a problematic condition into a better one (Simon, 1968, p. 153), design is not only part of many professions with little to do with applied aesthetics, but is more fundamentally a central element of human cultures. Design enables us to survive on this planet despite our poor natural adaptability to the environment (Gehlen, 1940). At least that's what we believed. Today, it's clearer than ever that design, as one of the tools of progress and improvement, also produces side effects of all kinds – effects that threaten this very survival. Design impacts not only our environment but also the designers themselves – often in surprising ways. "Design designs" (Willis, 2006), and in a systemically complex world, this means creating interactions that are difficult to foresee – especially when designs consider only simple systemic relations and methodically ignore broader contexts, because they appear irrelevant from design's human-centered perspective.

In a world composed less of inert things and more of living systems – social, biological, cognitive – that form complex system-environment relationships including artificial and socio-technical systems, our attempts to design situations, relationships, and environments around human needs alone become paradoxical: they claim control, yet the attempt itself creates the unforeseen. Conditions are simultaneously improved and worsened. For constructivists

and cyberneticians, this is not new. Since the shift toward second-order cybernetics (Von Foerster, 2003), we've known that observers and designers are part of the observed – and that every observation has a blind spot. Paradoxes such as the fact that every design also actualizes the undesigned are not inherently problematic. Typically, they are concealed by pretending as if they don't exist (Richter & Groth, 2025). Only when this pretense no longer works – when consequences can no longer be ignored – do we see shifts in direction, which require learning processes and lead to the replacement of guiding distinctions, paradigms, or orientation values. This has already happened repeatedly in design history. A broader understanding of design has since become established – one that no longer sees design solely as operating at the level of products, goods, or brand identities (Krippendorff, 2006).

Beyond Aesthetics: Design as Systemic Practice

The classical understanding of design describes it as a practice that gives everyday artifacts their shape, considering their functional and contextual usage. On a larger scale, design as a professionalized practice with specialized training and its own institutions became necessary with the industrial revolution (Meurer & Vinçon, 1983). With the emergence of mass markets, the basic contingency of artificial things became a problem. For producers in anonymous mass markets, it was unclear how things should be shaped in form and function so they would make