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Degrowth is an idea associated with the economy, yet others have approached it from an ecological and environmental perspective. In this conversation, degrowth is discussed in terms of sufficiency, a concept that helps frame who and how it can be practiced. From scholarly work around questions of informal and incremental housing in Latin America to evaluating contemporary architectural projects under a degrowth lens, including an inquiry about who can afford sufficiency against overconsumption, the discussion opens frameworks to help situate degrowth in multiple territories and geographies.
La curva ambiental de Kuznets (EKC) se refiere a la hipótesis de una relación de U invertida entre la producción económica per cápita y algunas medidas de calidad ambiental. La Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC) refers to the hypothesis of an inverted U-shaped relationship between economic output per capita and some measures of environmental quality. Fuente / Source: ScienceDirect
Marcelo López-Dinardi (MLD): Alejandro, there are multiple reasons I thought about your work in relation to the topic of degrowth. To start, can you tell us something about your research?

Alejandro de Castro (ADC): Thank you, Marcelo. My inquiry is rooted in how architecture can embed social justice into its practice. This initial question took me first to work on urban informality and self-construction, and, more recently, I have tried to understand how architecture and urban planning could work more closely toward questions related to climate and environmental justice. As a postdoctoral researcher at the Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development in Dresden, Germany, I’m interested in exploring how global environmental justice can be embedded in spatial practices, be it architectural or urban planning.

This inquiry points to spatial problems connected by resource overconsumption in high-income contexts and environmental injustice in low-income contexts.

MLD: My interest in talking to you is primarily based on your previous work in informality, particularly in the context of Brazil, where you have worked. What you’re referring to as climate justice is an excellent way of expanding our understanding of informality beyond notions of precarity or even as a model. I hope you can tell us more about the challenges, complexities, and contradictions of the concept of informality. This issue includes ideas of self-made practices, self-growth, organic growth, and many other concepts around informality or non-planned self-built construction.

ADC: Firstly, I looked at the dominant architectural practices that have tried to ‘solve the problems’ of informal settlements. Then I looked at some contemporary case studies – as you said in Brazil but also Chile – to explore how those challenges can be solved or overcome today. In both stages, I have found an epistemological problem in architecture culture when looking at informality: there is confusion in how it perceives the spatiality of these self-made locations. The issues manifested in informal settlements differ from those that cause informal settlements, yet architectural culture reduces the causes to what is visible. This can be seen when looking at significant projects successful in mainstream architecture culture, like PREVI in Peru or Quinta Monroy in Chile. When you look at these projects later in history, you see that their success is very ambivalent, to say the least, or is just not such. In my opinion, the cause of this problem is the fixity of architectural culture to cartographic space. There is no recognition that social issues in urban contexts do not belong to a spatial area but are based on conflicting human-to-human relations across areas – social problems are relational. I will give you an example to clarify this.

We studied once the community of Rio das Pedras next to the Lagoa da Tijuca (the Tijuca Lagoon) in Rio de Janeiro. Rio das Pedras is an informal area built several decades ago to house the construction workers of the Barra da Tijuca. The formal and wealthy residential towers of Barra da Tijuca are, in fact, on the other side of the Lagoa. Today, some of the problems in Rio das Pedras are related to the prevalence of infant diseases caused by the water pollution of the Lagoa, which was ‘invaded’ by the informal settlement.

The interesting point here is that neither the informal nor formal settlements of Lagoa have a sound sewage system, which means that all of them – the wealthy and the poor – are directly polluting the lagoon. And however, all the solutions for the problems at Rio das Pedras, which were discussed with several institutions, were about the formalization of Rio das Pedras and not about improving the sewage system of the wealthy residential towers. This shows the lack of relational perspective given to informal settlements, which links the problems of environmental justice and degrowth in the context of uneven forces of wealth.

MLD: One of the main things I take from your example is the unequal level with which, by default, we approach places. We don’t usually look at the more affluent neighborhoods. We tend to fix the informal but don’t look at the problems that are not visible. So, by bringing the concept of an uneven set of relations, uneven infrastructures, and sewage, in this case, we inevitably arrive at the concept of economy. If the political economy is not questioned, we’d never be able to ask what the limit of thinking regarding those possible solutions is. It seems almost impossible to sustain the idea of improving things little by little within the climate and the political economy collapses. So, if we don’t think about the more significant implications of these political-economic structures, it seems harder to think about any form of improvement. Improving situations that will affect the wealthy neighborhoods and the informal settlements will clearly affect them in uneven, unequal ways. With that in mind, I wanted to ask how much of the political and economic discussion is part of your work. Does that discussion enter? Is it paralyzing to think about economic superstructures? How have you confronted this challenge when thinking about informality?

ADC: That’s an exciting question. I think there’s a critical problem that architecture and urban cultures must address, which is precisely the fictional division between the macro issues (associated with the political economy) and the micro problems (related to spatial practices) that have been created in architectural discourse. This division reinforces the machinery of a political economy that leads to the climate crisis. In my opinion, what connects these two scales is the argument that architects make about spatial projects. So, the problem is not precisely that a project cannot solve our current political and economic landscape, but, rather, that the arguments about the projects’ wishful use make very superficial connections to link these scales. This is the case of the incremental project by Elemental in Iquique, in which the overall alternative for informal settlements is reduced to a medium density and self-help housing that cannot be generalized but is rather exceptional. As in many other cases, the celebratory arguments about this project take anecdotal or unique solutions as paradigmatic ones.

In this sense, the narrative given to projects which address challenges in informal settlements needs to change. This will help to better situate their contribution and to recognize the limitations of spatial interventions. Right now, poverty and inequality, climate change, green roofs, economic profitability, and social justice are all blended in a bag that is ultimately evaluated by an image. Of course, architectural culture should influence the political and economic context where it is set, but to do that, it must learn to argue.

MLD: I think of how to change or adjust the narrative and recognize the limits of language. We need to think about that, particularly regarding the word sustainability. That’s a word that, as an educator, I don’t allow students to use in learning and designing projects. It’s not because ideas in sustainability are wrong, but because they have been mobilized through an image of things. And that image is not really transformative because it doesn’t speak to realities of labor, extraction of materials, locations, sources, etc. If we don’t embed that reality, I think we will miss the potential of creating sustainable architecture. In other words, I don’t think of sustainability as complying with something but rather as a way to become aware of material resources, infrastructure, labor, and so on.
Degrowth departs from this idea to propose a different environmental paradigm: environmental benefits can only be produced if we downscale material production and reduce the material throughput produced by humans. In this critique, degrowth intellectuals have showcased that even when green technologies increase the efficiency of materials, they recirculate more matter faster because of their growth-driven dynamic.

So degrowth tries to recirculate matter at a lower rate, and I agree that architecture is antithetical because so far, architecture cannot reduce its throughput below zero. The attempt for degrowth thinkers is to ask, however: how can the production of the city reduce the material throughput to a minimum? In this sense, what I have done in my research is to look into degrowth texts that describe radical urban development futures and try to find what type of spatial or urban characteristics they identify. I have found hints of how radical environmental materials can work in practice – with reversible and compostable construction systems, for example. On an urban design scale, degrowth can occur with retrofitting and refurbishment that is not made in the name of financialization. And at a city-wide scale, ideas around de-urbanization, renaturation, and public mobility systems are also ideas that are aligned to degrowth.

MLD: It is interesting that you have transitioned from the concepts of economic growth to a form of radical environmentalism and how the economy cannot be decoupled with the environment and the resources that make it. It is a powerful way to link the notion of degrowth from abstract economic principles to architectural ideas. But I wanted to interject the concept of the city as the main scenario where these situations can or must be improved. One of the intents of this issue was to indirectly decentralize the look at cities as a starting place where we think about everything else. Primarily because of one of the things you linked earlier, the uneven gain in the case of the Lagoa da Tijuca concerning pollution, the resource and wealth extraction location versus where their products go, how
the historical development of the concept of degrowth, the problem of overconsumption in high-income contexts is coupled with the critique of neocolonial development and resource extraction in low-income countries, following Arturo Escobar’s thesis.Degrowth can be seen, in this sense, as a concept complementary to environmental justice, which describes the uneven distribution of environmental burdens in the places of resource extraction. 

In my opinion, an environmental concept that helps to situate degrowth spatially is the concept of sufficiency. Under the green growth paradigm, sustainability relies on the idea of efficiency, measured by the increasing economic value of each mass-produced unit through technological innovations. Steel is ever lighter; windows are better; and so on. The environmental concept of sufficiency, which is complementary to efficiency, does not mean autarchy. A city is sufficient when it fulfills the needs of its citizens with minimal actions or alterations. In this way, a green city is made not by continuous technological upgrades but by simple interventions that lead toward emancipation. The critical point is to ask how much we need to change our cities to fulfill our needs. Under this perspective, things like having green lawns or trees hanging in skyscrapers become irrelevant. And the picture of cities becomes much more straightforward. One could say that cities in the so-called ‘Global South’ already apply degrowth principles, although it is ultimately paternalistic to say that because it romanticizes poverty. So, one must frame discussion around degrowth only in places where material overconsumption occurs.

I think it helps to ground the concept and recognize that degrowth cannot necessarily be applied everywhere and cannot even seek to be framed in a way that it could be used evenly. In some of the literature on the degrowth movement – with evidently well-thought-out arguments, in the book *The Case for Degrowth*, for example – there are ideas about how these concepts can be applied to these less developed territories. It seems we should recognize that we don’t necessarily need universal concepts to appeal to everyone and everywhere, even if we acknowledge that sometimes the problem is located somewhere that is not where the consequences manifest themselves.

To continue, I wanted to ask about your experience with architectural and urban projects that you have analyzed and studied through the lens of degrowth. Can you tell us more about these projects?

MLD: I think that’s a crucial point. I appreciate the concept of sufficiency as a lens to look at overgrown over-developed cities and locations. But sufficiency for whom? It’s a very challenging idea in terms of who deserves what level of sufficiency. But, again, I’m thinking about this in the long arc of time. How do we think about practices that have impacted territories and places over decades or centuries and are now asked to remain sufficient versus other newer, exuberant, or developed forms of existence?

ADC: The analysis that I carried out revealed that, at a theoretical level, one can find a good number of authors that make a frontal critique of developmentalism and even ecomodernism, but very few that create an agenda for alternative forms of urbanism. Therefore, at a practical level, one can find projects implicitly aligned to some degrowth tenets, but very few are explicit about that. For example, when it comes to construction materials, there are very few examples of technologies that make materials compostable and reversible. Some examples of architectural projects reuse carpentry to do their work, particularly Rotor in Belgium, trying to create a market for salvaged construction materials. The problem is not the supply of these materials but the demand, and they’re trying to grow on a scale to the point that they are so visible that these materials enter the construction market. Some other examples of earthworks are trying to use compostable materials. But basically, they’re still using earthworks as a material for finishings, not a structural one. Of course, I do not include these examples of green rooftops and facades because they are often just decorative elements placed into a concrete slab made for greenwashing.

In terms of retrofitting, there are some good examples of architectural projects that minimize the outline of interventions, which I think aligns implicitly with degrowth. The architectural practice N’Undo does work based on the premise of negative interventions (un-building and de-constructing), and I find their work extremely interesting; they do design by subtracting built elements and sometimes relocating them. They have won several competitions but still have very few projects that have been realized or exist as planning schemes.

The project by Lacaton and Vassal for the Plaza de Leon Aucouc in Bordeaux is acknowledged as one of the first projects that pointed at degrowth ideas. It’s a public space renovation where the solution was to recognize the value of the existing plaza and literally do nothing but move the trash cans and take away parking areas. The project’s story is a bit complex: it was executed, and later on, the cars came back, so it was not a happy ending, but it signals the right direction. At a city-wide level, I would say the project for the superblocks in Barcelona is definitely an example of how we could deurbanize the city to gain green, pedestrian, and social spaces. However, it has remained anecdotal. Many examples of urban areas have greened brownfields with nature-based solutions, but they are very heterogeneous.
I think degrowth might be an interesting theory in the background, but I don’t think it has the spatial properties that architectural and urban practice needs. For me, the concept of sufficiency has enough ties to material and environmental dimensions to be used in our professions (architecture and urban planning). The question then would be simple. If you ask how a project uses the minimal amount of matter to fulfill given social goals, you have a strict architectural and urban design question. And I think the question can lead to a genuine innovative architectural design strategy, a construction and material strategy that defines labor roles and economic distributions. And in that sense, I think that sufficiency, as linked to radical environmentalism, is a concept parallel to efficiency that might be useful to use in practice.

I have recently done two urban design competitions using the concept of sufficiency and degrowth. In these projects, I tried to answer the question about minimal material throughputs through an architectural project, and I am fascinated by the richness of the way it made me rethink the space, the building, and what is necessary. As you said before, it made me question the standard of needs. Where do I set it? These are questions that are very material, environmental, and social. Do we need to change the pavement of a road, for example, when we make it pedestrian? Do we need to plant grass when we have a green area? Do we really need to have a certain height for rooms, etc.? I did not win those competitions, of course. Still, I realized that the question of how I can minimize the material throughputs in these projects leads to a promising and complex professional development that I think is profoundly architectural and radically environmental.

MLD: I appreciate this latter concept and the discussion on sufficiency, material premises, and material practices and how they center some of our shared societal challenges ahead. I think they point to the main flanks that allow us to question the notion of growth. In the discussion on how to think about it further in terms of architectural practices, it’s interesting that, after the significant work you have made associated with the transit from informality to degrowth, one of the aspects you highlight is the material nature of things as well as their. Connections to the environment and climate, and of course, the climate collapse – where we seem to stand as global news report record-braking wildfires, flooding, and heatwaves.

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