

Planum. The Journal of Urbanism n.29 vol II/2014

WITHIN THE LIMITS OF SCARCITY

RETHINKING SPACE, CITY AND PRACTICES

Edited by
Barbara Ascher
Isis Nunez Ferrera
Michael Klein

Special Issue in collaboration with **SCIBE**



Planum. The Journal of Urbanism n.29 vol II/2014
in collaboration with **SCIBE** Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment
Peer Reviewed Articles 

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Published by
Planum. The Journal of Urbanism no.29, vol. II/2014
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ISSN 1723-0993
Registered by the Court of Rome on 04/12/2001
Under the number 514-2001

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The publication has been realized by
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CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

Barbara Ascher, Isis Nunez Ferrera, Michael Kleinp.7
Scarcity - Local responses to “lack”

Camillo Boanop.13
Notes around design politics: design dissensus and the poiesis of scarcity

Bo Tangp.29
Negotiating shared spaces in informal peri-urban settlements in India. The role of amenity buildings and the effect of the post-hoc introduction of infrastructure towards the creation of common places

Federico Venturini, Ersilia Verlinghierip.51
Scarcity, post-scarcity and local community: L’Aquila as a case study

Piero Sassip.71
Degrowth urban policy? The contemporary debate on post-growth alternatives and the challenges posed by soil consumption

Sheikh Serajul Hakim, Joseph Lim Ee Manp.83
Scarcity, control and negotiations: an interpretation of form in urban informal settlements

Tomaz Pipanp.103
Territorial Compromises: limits of morphological and civic negotiation

Sante Simone, Mejrema Zatricp.117
Voids as modern ruins. The project for the city in the face of the new spatial scarcity

dedal S-Train station, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2008 © Piero Sassi

#post-growth alternatives
#green growth
#degrowth urban policy
#soil consumption

Degrowth urban policy? The contemporary debate on post-growth alternatives and the challenges posed by soil consumption

Over the past four decades, resource scarcity and strategies to overcome finite resource depletion have been a major subject of political debate in Europe. Among other things, advocates of degrowth approaches proposed a radical cultural shift towards new production and consumption patterns by questioning the underlying assumptions of growth. However, these models were disregarded in mainstream economics and urban planning. Recently, insecurity regarding the global economic recession and acknowledgment of the threats of the current ecological crisis have provoked a new wave of interest in post-growth alternatives. Most noteworthy are the influences from Serge Latouche's *Petit traité de la décroissance sereine* (2007) on the international and Reinhard Loske's *Abschied vom Wachstumszwang* (2010) on the German debates.

Based upon these two major contributions, this article aims to discuss whether and to what extent post-growth alternatives, mostly related with small-scale projects, could help address large-scale challenges such as those posed by soil consumption. This paper argues that some of these proposals could define new ways of dealing with current soil consumption patterns if implemented through urban policies. However, given the diversity of the claims, it is nearly impossible to identify a shared concept of “degrowth urban policy”. For this reason, it would be superficial to look at post-growth alternatives as a panacea for soil scarcity.

The discussion on “degrowth”

Concerns about limits of growth-oriented production and consumption patterns are by no means novel in political discourse. Social injustices and environmental problems brought about by industrial society already represented the focus of the work of several scholars and intellectuals in the 18th and 19th centuries. More recently, *The Limits to Growth*, the 1972 report by the Club of Rome, warned about the threats of economic strategies based on finite resource depletion. By selling more than 12 million copies worldwide, the report strongly contributed to spreading awareness about some of the issues that still characterize the growth vs. degrowth debate. These informed several movements with diverse aims: among others, those opposing the realization of large infrastructural projects throughout Europe, such as the Turin-Lyon high-speed railway in Italy and the Stuttgart 21 project in Germany, and those advocating for new and more aware lifestyles such as *Slow Food*. Thanks to the efforts of some scholars to popularize the major issues of the growth vs. degrowth debate, they have gained increasing attention in political discourse in the last years. After having been relegated over decades to the grassroots dimension of the political debate, the growth vs. degrowth debate entered the agenda of green parties throughout Europe in the 2000s (Latouche 2007). The internal debate within the German Green Party (*Bündis 90/Die Grünen*) represents in this regard an interesting, though to some extent controversial, example.

Serge Latouche's *Petit traité de la décroissance sereine* appeared in France at the end of 2007, almost simultaneously with the beginning of the global financial crisis, as a compendium of the main issues debated in the degrowth discourse for the public at large. Latouche, Professor Emeritus of Economics at the University of Paris XI, has been actively engaged in the international debate on post-development and degrowth for two decades. In the years following his publication, we witnessed a new wave of interest in the growth vs. degrowth debate. The global economic recession, along with the current ecological crisis, provoked a widespread feeling of insecurity about future prospects of mainstream growth-oriented economics. On the one hand, advocates of the "growth gospel" (most of the European governments and institutions, among others) put forward a new mismatch of growth- and austerity-oriented strategies as a panacea to revive national economies. In this fashion, concepts like "green growth", "sustainable growth" and "green capitalism" are gaining an increasing consensus in current political discourse. On the other hand, by acknowledging the irrationality of present consumption patterns, made possible through the depletion of finite resources, an increasing number of scholars and activists are questioning the underlying assumptions of mainstream economics. These are often referred to as "degrowth advocates". In fact, it is nearly impossible to outline a shared degrowth concept. Degrowth may be described rather as a motto under which the current overwhelming growth paradigm is criticized in different fields and based upon diverse arguments (Latouche 2004). Its advocates thus propose a radical cultural shift towards new production and consumption patterns, informed by the acknowledgment of resource scarcity. In this context, *Petit traité de la décroissance sereine*, which has been translated into several languages, achieved immediate resounding success among a broad international public, being acknowledged as a "tool that can be used by anyone who is actively involved in environmental politics or political activist, especially at the local and regional level" (Latouche 2009: viii).

Given the diversity of the claims put forward by movements and scholars advocating for post-growth alternatives, their in-depth analysis is far from being the goal of the present paper. Nevertheless, some of the proposals, summarized by Latouche as the "eight r's"¹, are worthy of being considered to tackle the issue of resource scarcity.

The radical cultural shift towards a new value system. The underlying assumption for a new value system is the shift from the consideration of the human being as a "homo oeconomicus" to the acknowledgment of its vital relation with the cultural, social and environmental context (Loske 2010: 22). Hence, our understanding of "well-being" needs to be based on an analysis of life quality. In this view, the importance of abstract economic parameters such as GDP becomes somewhat marginal (Latouche 2007 and Loske 2010). The redefinition of the relation between the core concepts of "growth" and "well-being" in present society was (2011-2013) the main task of the commission *Wachstum, Wohlstand, Lebensqualität* (Growth, Well-Being and Life Quality), a working group in the German parliament composed of politicians and scholars.

New lifestyles informed by an awareness of resource scarcity. The acknowledgment that strategies based upon green growth and "efficient resource depletion" do not represent serious options to overcome threats from present and future resource scarcity is

¹ Latouche describes the changes necessary for the transition towards a post-growth society in eight actions to be undertaken: namely "re-evaluate", "reconceptualize", "restructure", "redistribute", "relocalize", "reduce", "re-use" and "recycle" (Latouche 2009: 33).



one of the assumptions shared by degrowth thinkers. Hence, claiming that present lifestyles are sustained through irrational resource depletion, they propose a radical change in our habits. Contracting and redefining our consumption trends, and thus drastically reducing our ecological footprint, are essential conditions to overcome the ecological crisis. Food production and consumption patterns formed with these issues in mind, for instance, would have a very strong impact on the agricultural sector, and thus on land use and soil consumption. These principles inform several movements focusing on various specific issues and challenges. Among others, the *Cittaslow* movement, founded in Italy in 1999 and present nowadays in several countries around the world, is based on the implementation of urban policies aimed at the creation of “human-friendly” cities and “contraction-based” societies.

Focus on the local level in redefining new economic, political and social models. Post-growth alternatives often focus on the institutional frameworks of local politics associated with awareness raising and the participative administration of resources. In this regard, they are comparable with Ostrom’s “enduring, self-governing common-pool resource institutions”.² The focus on the local dimension of politics is motivated by the aim to reduce the ecological footprint of cities by developing integrated and materially self-sufficient local societies and coupling local consumption patterns with local production and resources. In regard to the concern about the local dimension of urban policies, the *Transition Towns Movement*, founded in England in 2006, represents a paradigmatic example. Aiming for local ecological resilience in response to threats from the global ecological crisis, the movement consists of a network of small cities and towns with the goal of local self-sufficiency in fields like energy and food provision.

Green growth vs. Degrowth debate in urbanism

There is no doubt that the proposals put forward by degrowth thinkers over the past few years contain innovative approaches, which deserve to be taken into consideration both in current discussions on resource scarcity and the development of new policies to tackle the depletion of finite resources. Nevertheless, post-growth alternatives still occupy a minor role in the present discourse on sustainability.

Abschied vom Wachstumszwang was published at the end of 2010 in Germany; it was written by Reinhard Loske, then Senator for Environment, Construction, Transportation and European Affairs in Bremen and currently Professor for Sustainability and Transformation Dynamics at Witten/Herdecke University. In his book, degrowth alternatives are analyzed within the broader debate on sustainability. Loske points out the main limits of the proposals embedded in the discourse on “sustainable growth” and advocates for a more radical cultural shift in our habits as the prerequisite to avoid current irrational resource consumption patterns. Via discussion during several lectures and conferences throughout Germany, *Abschied vom Wachstumszwang* immediately provoked a controversial debate, to the point that the author decided to tackle questions and criticisms in a further book (*Wie weiter mit der Wachstumsfrage?* 2012).

The most controversial contributions are included in the first chapter. Here, Loske warns about the threats of increasing divergence within the debate on possible paths out of the current ecological crisis. The strengthening of different positions could

2 For accounts of how “enduring, self-governing common-pool resource institutions” work, see Chapter 3, “Analyzing long-enduring, self-organized and self-governed CPRs”, in Ostrom (1990).

eventually lead to what he calls a “[green] schism” (p. 5). With “green schism”, Loske means a prospective separation between rather consolidated opinions, namely those supporting a radical cultural and political change towards a degrowth society and those based upon a sustainable growth concept (Loske 2011: 63). Likewise, if we focus on the present debate on sustainable urban forms, a growing fracture is noticeable between advocates of mainstream “sustainable urban growth” and degrowth thinkers.

Supporters of the “green growth approach” advocate for technology as a panacea to overcome current resource scarcity. They claim that challenges posed by an increasing population and finite resource depletion can be met through efficient resource consumption patterns, made possible through technological innovation. In other words, a “green growth” in production (e.g., in food production) would be key to managing the food supply for an increasing population. Since this option implies a growth in production and occupation rates, it is welcomed by economic elites on the one hand and unions and Social Democrats on the other (Loske 2010). The so-called “rebound effect” is often undermined in green growth strategy. In several circumstances, technological innovation has failed to meet the goal of decreasing resource consumption, since improved resource efficiency was accompanied by increased consumption rates, a classic example being the production of more ecological cars accompanied by a quantitative increase in car production rates.

Focusing on the production of the built environment and on the major issue of soil scarcity, a green growth approach can be found in the production of “sustainable” settlements. From the construction of new towns in emerging countries like China to the development of sustainable, well-connected, eco-efficient suburbs on the outskirts of European cities, we have witnessed over the past few years the rise of urban projects informed by a green growth approach. By proposing sustainable urban growth, inspired by the ideal model of the compact city as opposed to the urban patterns of the sprawled city, these projects have the merit of trying to channel urban development into a more sustainable path. Nevertheless, this kind of approach shows two major limits. Possible “rebound effects” connected with the depletion of resources (e.g., land and soil resources) necessary to build the new settlement in many cases threaten the overall sustainability of these projects. Furthermore, if not integrated into broader political and economic strategies, these projects fail to bring more than small and isolated contributions to tackle resource consumption challenges.

On the other side of Loske’s prospective green schism, degrowth thinkers put forward a radical cultural shift towards a contraction-based post-growth society. Spatial structures often refer to networks of small urban centers with a high degree of autonomy in regard to political and economic administration and food production. At the local level, these urban centers are characterized by public spaces that facilitate social relations.

Scholars, intellectuals and practitioners have put forward diverse proposals over the past few decades, most of them based on self-sustainable local development and participation. By proposing a shift not just in the way we plan our cities, but also in their administration and political systems, social relationships and consumption patterns, they are based upon the assumption of a broader political, economic and social change, without which they would lose their underlying meaning. From Murray Bookchin’s *Ecomunicipalism* to the *Transition Towns Movement*, we have witnessed several attempts to implement post-growth alternatives in our cities.



Noteworthy both for theoretical production and for attempts to implement its concepts in planning practices is the work carried out by the so-called *Territorialist School* over the past few years. Founded by Alberto Magnaghi, Professor Emeritus for Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Florence, and developed around the work of a group of Italian scholars, the territorial approach is characterized by an understanding of territory based upon its specific natural and social features, its *bio-region*. Magnaghi (1994) suggests a network composed of small urban units to increase participation, livability and self-sustainability in urban areas. The “ecopolis” (p. 60), an ideal polycentric urban structure composed of small and partly autonomous urban centers with strong identities and a high degree of integration with the surrounding landscape, is opposed to unlivable, contemporary megacities. Being based upon a high quality of life for its inhabitants and a strong concern for environmental issues, it is one of the possible implementations of post-growth alternatives through urban planning. The soil scarcity issue is tackled by underlining global environmental consequences (e.g., air pollution) of uncontrolled local urban growth and proposing the reuse of existing urban areas to avoid further soil sealing.

Though relegated to a minor role in scholarly discussion on sustainable urban development, some of these concepts have been implemented in recent years in planning practices on different scales, the Landscape Territorial Plan of the Region Puglia (*Piano Paesaggistico Territoriale Regionale*, PPTR) being one of the most recent experiences. In the next few years, it will be possible to draw some more precise conclusions about the prospects and limits of these planning practices. It is, however, plausible to assume that the acknowledgment of the unsustainability of current urban consumption patterns will motivate further implementation of similar urban models in the near future.

“Peak soil”: an urgent environmental challenge in a fragmented political context

The issues of soil scarcity and consumption are without a doubt among the most compelling environmental challenges facing urban planning in Europe today. Addressing the larger political context of soil scarcity and soil protection policies through the inclusion of the debate on post-growth alternatives offers two benefits. On the one hand, the ideas proposed by these debates offer the potential to define new methods to change current soil consumption patterns. On the other hand, this opens the general discussion on the limits and risks of such an approach when dealing with planning and environmental challenges that exceed the local scale.

Soil is a non-renewable, scarce resource that carries out essential functions, food production being the most acknowledged in public opinion. Once consumed or eroded, it is nearly impossible to recover its original features. Its essential role was very clear in ancient agriculture-based societies, which underlined its importance by referring to soil in their mythologies. The acknowledgment of soil as a finite, scarce resource should be even clearer nowadays in the face of dramatic challenges posed by population growth and consequent food security challenges. Soil scarcity and soil consumption should thus be found at the top of the agenda of politicians, practitioners and scholars. Nonetheless, soil has been depleted in different forms and for different reasons throughout the planet over the past few decades, to the extent that the expression “peak soil” emerged in political discourse to describe the threats connected with current soil consumption patterns.

Challenges posed by soil scarcity and prospective ways out of current soil consumption patterns were broadly debated by scholars, practitioners and politicians from all over the world during the first *Global Soil Week*, which took place in Berlin in November 2012.³ The conference-issued paper *Towards integrated governance of land and soil: Addressing challenges and moving ahead* (Weigelt *et al.*, 2012) clearly points out two of the main problems hampering the implementation of soil protection policies: namely fragmentation in scholarly discussion and the difficulties in outlining coherent strategies to tackle soil consumption on different scales. The authors describe the lack of integration between the academic discourse on land use policies, focusing on the local political economy of land but disregarding the global consequences of land use, and the discourse on soil consumption, centered on the physical aspects of soil depletion but often undermining its social and economic drivers, as one of the limits that future integrated land and soil governance practices need to overcome. Moreover, they underline how the understanding of the soil scarcity issue, and thus of policies to deal with it, differs consistently depending on the considered scale. On the one hand, on the local scale, the discussion of land and soil issues is strongly based on the supremacy of private property and interest. On the other hand, if considered on the global scale together with their vital environmental functions (e.g., carbon storage), soil resources are “common-pool resources”⁴ that must be preserved for the next generations. Considering the strong influence of local land use policies on the preservation or depletion of soil resources on the larger scale, it is easy to define the integration between the different academic fields and the different policy scales as one, if not the most compelling, challenge of soil protection policies (Weigelt *et al.*, 2012).

Soil sealing is considered among the most dangerous factors of soil consumption and is deeply connected with the physical growth of urban areas. Europe witnessed the urbanization of more than 8,000 km² in the 1990s (EEA, 2006). Although this trend has “slowed down” in more recent years, there is no evidence that uncontrolled urban growth will stop in the future. Some major consequences of this phenomenon are the fragmentation of the ecosystem, the increasing use of private cars and the loss of good agricultural land to urban use. Thus, by avoiding uncontrolled urban growth on the one hand and by directing urbanization processes towards areas unsuitable for agricultural production on the other, urban planning and urban policies can deliver an important contribution to soil protection policies. Nonetheless, the contribution of spatial planning to the preservation of soil resources cannot be considered more than marginal unless urban and regional planning practices are integrated with and supported by interdisciplinary policies, taking socio-economic drivers of soil depletion on the different scales into account. This is the case, for instance, with the urban patterns created by small and medium enterprises in so-called *distretti industriali* (industrial districts) in some northern Italian regions. Here, uncontrolled urban growth has been driven for decades by complex social and economic phenomena that go far beyond those addressed by conventional spatial planning tools. The “positive” goals of an economic strategy based on the flexibility of small industries produced “negative” environmental effects connected with land consumption. Uncontrolled urban growth should thus be tackled here more as the

³ The Global Soil Week is an international meeting of scholars, practitioners, politicians and other representatives of civil society who are engaged in soil protection. For more information, see www.globalsoilweek.org.

⁴ Common-pool resource “refers to a natural or man-made resource system that is sufficiently large as to make it costly (but not impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from its use” (Ostrom 1990: 30).



physical effect of a broader and longer-lasting economic strategy rather than as a mere planning issue.

Degrowth urban policy?

Over the last decade, an increasing amount of concern has been invested, both in academic discourse and in planning practices at different levels, in threats from soil scarcity and strategies to limit soil consumption. In planning discourse, the negative consequences and environmental implications of uncontrolled urban growth have been acknowledged. Its socio-economic drivers, disregarded for a long time, are gaining growing attention in the debate. Simultaneously, we witnessed the development and implementation of programs that, at different scales and by using different approaches, tried to limit the land consumption phenomenon. The German *30-hectare goal* represents a paradigmatic example in this sense. Conceived as part of the *National Sustainability Strategy*, approved in 2002 by the red-green government, its goal is to reduce land take through urbanization processes from an average of more than 120 hectares a day during the 1990s to 30 hectares a day in 2020. Though great effort was put into its development and implementation, the 30-hectare goal is far from meeting its target, as the consumption of land in Germany is still around 74 hectares per day (BMUB, 2013). The same happened for several other programs, at different planning levels and in different fields, throughout Europe. We are far from finding convincing solutions to serious issues like soil scarcity and soil consumption. New strategies and approaches thus need to be experimented with.

Hence, it is plausible to imagine that some of the proposals embedded in post-growth alternatives will likely play an important role in the discussion on strategies to tackle soil scarcity over the next few years.

The integrated approach advocated by the promoters of degrowth for debates on urban policies.

If urban planning practices and urban policies are coherently considered and developed together with other policies (e.g., economic and environmental ones), they are more likely to be effective in reducing land consumption and soil depletion. Considering the vital functions performed by soil, not just in the production of food but also as a platform for human activities, soil protection is at the top of the agenda for degrowth advocates. In a society where social, cultural and environmental values could compete with economic ones, the overall “land development” concept would be reconsidered by uncoupling it from “land revenue” and mere economic profit.

The contraction of individual consumption habits. Phenomena like land grabbing, driven by multinational companies acquiring large amounts of land in developing countries, cannot be explained without the disproportionate consumption habits in industrialized countries. Degrowth advocates suggest more awareness in food production and consumption based on local products. This would allow for a redefinition of the broken relationship between inhabitants and surrounding agricultural areas. In the same fashion, it would raise awareness about the importance of soil resources on the one hand and about their outstanding scarcity on the other.

Focusing on the local scale to address global issues. It is a common feature of post-growth alternatives. Taking the soil scarcity issue into consideration, land use policies that take not only the local political economy of land into account, but also the global environmental consequences of local decisions, would represent an important contribution to reducing soil consumption. Furthermore, implementations of post-growth alternatives like those observed in the Transition Towns Movement, being based

on the attempt to realize self-sufficiency in food production and energy supply on the local scale, are likely to reduce land and soil consumption. With regard to these issues, uncontrolled urbanization processes represent a serious threat. On the one hand, they imply a growing demand for energy supply; on the other, in many cases, they cause the loss of good agricultural land to urban use.

There are two problems inherent to the alternative approaches of the degrowth discourse to overcome current resource consumption patterns (e.g., soil consumption).

*The “scale problem”*⁵. The implementation of post-growth alternatives on the local scale appears to be rather problematic if not supported by coherent policies on the larger scale. Harvey Molotch, in his classical essay *The City as a Growth Machine* (1976), appropriately describes the mechanisms through which land developers, “land-based elites” (p. 309) in his text, impose economically convenient land use policies through their influence on politics. The implementation of post-growth alternatives on the local scale requires the overcoming of local “growth machines”. This appears to be one of the biggest challenges for degrowth alternatives. Even though small-scale projects can contribute to limiting soil consumption on a local level, they appear to be inappropriate to tackle soil scarcity on a global one. In order to overcome this “scale problem”, soil protection policies developed at the upper level appear to be the necessary support for responsible land use policies at the local one.

A definition of “degrowth urban policy”. In the same way that it is not possible to define a shared “degrowth” concept (Latouche 2004), it appears to be nearly impossible to consider “degrowth urban policy” as different than an alternative to a growth-oriented one. The claims made within the degrowth discourse are many and diverse. This represents on the one hand an advantage since it enables for the addressing of a wide range of issues and at the same time a broad audience. On the other hand, it is superficial to talk about “degrowth urban policy” in general when discussing concrete planning issues (e.g., soil scarcity and soil consumption). Thus, when talking about the potential role of post-growth alternatives to address concrete planning and environmental challenges, attention should be paid to the specific proposals of the single degrowth initiatives.

With respect to degrowth movements, there is no evidence that they will succeed in the coming years in gaining enough political power to put their proposals in place on the national and global scales. Both Loske and Latouche recognize that degrowth alternatives can hardly be imagined as political programs in the classical meaning of the term. For different reasons, very few politicians could endorse a degrowth program without at least losing popularity (Latouche 2007 and Loske 2010). Nevertheless, we witnessed in recent years an increasing number of projects inspired by the degrowth discourse. The irrationality of our current resource depletion, the seriousness of the present ecological crisis and widespread insecurity about future prospects of mainstream economics suggest that a radical shift in our production and consumption patterns is a compelling necessity rather than a utopian ideal.

5 David Harvey (2012) describes a “scale problem” (p. 68) as the difficulties we meet in attempting to tackle large-scale challenges (e.g., food security) through small-scale projects.



Acknowledgments

During the *Questioning Growth. Theoretical and Practical Challenges for Planning* seminar that I held in conjunction with Sergiu Novac at the Institute for European Urban Studies of the Bauhaus-University Weimar (Winter Semester 2012/2013), I benefited from constructive discussions on the growth vs. degrowth debate. I was able to improve the first version of this article thanks to the critical comments from Sergiu Novac and the participants at the SCIBE PhD conference *Within the Limits of Scarcity: Rethinking Space, City and Practices* (University of Westminster, London). Furthermore, I wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments, Paul Harris and Karl Eckert for carefully examining this paper and giving suggestions regarding English style and grammar.

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