

Degrowth Perspective for Sustainability in Built Environments

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Degrowth, as a social movement, a political project, and an academic paradigm, aims to find ways that can lead to harmonious co-existence between humanity and nature, between humans and non-humans, and within humanity, including oneself. Seen through the lens of degrowth, everything becomes subject to reflection, critique, re-evaluation, and re-imagining. This concerns environments created by humans in a long process of interaction with nature, i.e., built environments. Built environments are always in becoming. This entry contemplates the implications of degrowth for intentionally directing this becoming towards genuine sustainability.

degrowth

post-growth

built environment

sustainability transformations

Degrowth does not have a single definition, nor is degrowth a single discipline. It is at once a social movement, a political project, and an academic paradigm [1]. What unites these pursuits is a desire for sustainable, harmonious co-existence between humanity and nature, between humans and non-humans, and within humanity, including oneself [2][3]. The name of the concept, degrowth, reflects the roots of the concept, i.e., a critique of prevailing economic growth orientation which disregards the negative effects of pursuing economic growth, such as ecological and social degradation [2][4]. Despite its name, degrowth is not opposed to growth, but the growth that it advocates, supports and encourages is mainly non-material, such as growth in care, solidarity, empathy, creativity, generosity, and connectedness. Neither is material growth fully alien to degrowth thought. Selective growth (such as in renewable energy provision, in organic agriculture and permaculture) is welcomed, as are improvements in material conditions of those whose genuine needs are not met. While degrowth originated in the 1970s with the rise in prominence of a variety of ecological movements, the ideas which degrowth scholars explore originated much earlier and have longer intellectual heritage and histories. For instance, degrowth calls for simpler living, deviation from consumerism, and viewing non-humans as one's neighbours, calls that could be readily found in the 19th century (see, e.g., [5]). Likewise, in the 19th century, the "hunger for wealth, which reduces the planet to a garden", and the need to live harmoniously in and with nature, were noticed [6] (p. 161). Going even further back in time, harmonious co-existence with nature, as well as with other humans, were prominent thoughts in ancient China [7].

As an academic paradigm, degrowth is very broad. While influential scientists within this paradigm can be identified [1], including perhaps most notably Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen [8][9] and Serge Latouche [10], currently, multiple scholars from a wide variety of disciplines are working with the concept of degrowth which contributes to the diversity within this academic paradigm. They include sociologists (see, e.g., [11]), political economists (see, e.g., [12]), and geographers (see, e.g., [13]). In recent years, adventurous inter-disciplinarity has become even more evident in the broad and growing field of degrowth. For instance, degrowth has been included in dialogues with

philosophies such as existentialism [3] and critical realism [14], and with diverse economies thinking [15]. Degrowth thinking has been applied to multiple phenomena, such as business and organisation [3][13][15][16][17], housing [18], tourism [19], and technology [20]. Many other strands within academia share similar pursuits with degrowth, exemplified in a desire for a good and harmonious life for all, including humans, nature and non-human beings. Such strands include, for instance, diverse economies [21], deep ecology [22] and technological scepticism and pessimism [23], which are often found in dialogues with degrowth. Outside academia, a variety of movements and initiatives can be seen as degrowth compatible, whether they explicitly identify themselves as such or not [24]. Implicitly degrowth compatible movements such as voluntary simplicity, the tiny house movement and the zero-waste movement share many commonalities with degrowth but do not necessarily identify themselves as part of degrowth, though some practitioners might. As a political project, degrowth is likewise diverse. In terms of political ideologies, some see degrowth as an eco-socialist project [25], while others advocate for anarchism [26] and call for bottom-up transformations. Such transformations entail, first and foremost, changes in individuals' values and worldviews, and progress in moral agency rather than (high) technology [3][27]. Yet others do not propose a single political ideology but rather see the current political systems as diverse. They propose a variety of pathways of how degrowth can be achieved, which includes both top-down and bottom-up strategies [12]. The journey of degrowth as a social movement, a political project and an academic paradigm is unfolding, and the collection of knowledge is becoming ever deeper, more diverse, and broader. Since degrowth seeks answers to the question of how a harmonious co-existence can be achieved, nothing remains unquestioned. Every social domain, phenomenon, norm, institution can be looked at from a critical degrowth perspective. Likewise, the deep and broad knowledge that degrowth has accumulated so far can be used for proposing better alternatives that ensure a good life for all humans and non-humans far into the future. This includes built environments.

Built environments are environments that humans have created in a long process of interaction with nature, claiming nature's own spaces and transforming them into their own. Such human spaces can be viewed as "cocoons that humans have woven in order to feel at home in nature" [28] (p. 13). Such cocoons span across the face of the earth, affecting even those areas where human presence is not immediately visible. Untouched natural environments that, for instance, von Humboldt [29] describes, largely remain in the past. Even where no human activity is visible to the naked eye, the effects are felt due to human imposed activities resulting in climate change, ocean acidification, pollution, and other detrimental effects.

Built environments are diverse, ranging from simple dwellings to large and complex cities [28]. They depend on cultures, geographies, and topographies, and are always in development. They are constantly unfolding and changing. Thus, the past and past participle form of the verb, as well as the adjective, "built" gives a false sense of completion, stability, and finality. In critical realist terms, reality consists of social and physical realities [30]. Built environments are where social and physical realities meet, empower, and impose constraints onto each other. A question arises: what could be implications of degrowth thinking for sustainability in built environments?

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