

# **SPATIAL ASSEMBLAGES: THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE(S) BEYOND THE IMPERATIVE OF GROWTH**

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What sort of spatial practices may respond, in a systematic way, to the challenges of post-growth economies? Though stressing social and environmental concerns, politically committed spatial practices and their theoretical counterparts emerging since the 1960's have not aimed at responding directly to such challenges. <sup>1</sup> In the light of the present, and of successive, financial and economic crisis, this may be, however, a relevant question for spatial disciplines, particularly for architecture and planning practices which have been lately involved in the production of 'global commodities'. As debates on 'shrinking cities', growth imperatives and socio-environmental externalities of economic development gain public recognition, a radical revision of processes concerning the production of space(s) is being called upon to accommodate claims from ecological economics and political ecology. It could be argued, therefore, that spatial disciplines are ill-prepared for future challenges and that a new set of spatial practices must be convened and debated. But, in order to do so, one must previously clarify 1) what is meant by post-growth economies, 2) what are their founding assumptions and 3) how can they be translated into a set of urban policies consistent enough to inform spatial practices. Only then can we try to understand what sort of practices may be convened, what concepts can act as mediators between them and possible framing discourses, and finally argue on their expectable impacts.

## **WHAT DOES 'POST-GROWTH ECONOMIES' MEAN?**

Post-growth economic models comprise a series of different discourses and scenarios. A clear-cut separation must be made, firstly, between unintended shrinkage and planned degrowth. In the words of Herman Daly:

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A condition of nongrowth can come about in two ways: as a failure of a growth economy, or as the success of a steady-state economy. These two cases are as different as night and day. No one denies that a failure of a growth economy to grow brings unemployment and suffering. It is precisely to avoid the suffering of a failed growth economy (we know growth cannot continue) that we advocate Steady State Economy (Daly 1992, 186).

Claims such as this have a long history in the discipline of economics. Adam Smith, John Stuart-Mill and Keynes have all predicted a time when economic growth would become unsustainable and even unprofitable, thus giving way to deeper concerns with overall prosperity

and well-being in a zero-growth economic environment (Martínez-Alier, et al. 2010). However, it was in 1972 that this concept earned scientific and political legitimacy with the publication of 'Limits of Growth' report (Meadows et al. 1972) which presented to the United Nations assembly the irreversible effects of human activity on finite natural resources, asking whether or not we could continue expanding our economies within a limited world. Approximately at the same time, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, a former student of Schumpeter, came to question the idea of economic development by applying the second law of thermodynamics - the Law of Entropy -, to economic theory. Considering the irreversible losses of energy implied in every act of ordering, Georgescu-Roegen predicted that in the nearby future economic growth would surpass the earth system's carrying capacity: the continuous depletion of finite water, land and mineral resources would cause an inescapable economic recession despite all attempts to dematerialise economics by means of continuous technological advances. Confronted with his own findings, Georgescu-Roegen concluded that a planned downsizing of economy would be as inevitable as advisable, a process he coined as 'degrowth' (Georgescu-Roegen 1971).

Since then, the concept of degrowth has followed different and diversified paths. In the words of Martínez-Alier, 'it is not simple to capture the meaning of sustainable de-growth in a nutshell. Such explicit opposition to the motto of sustained growth does not imply an exact opposition to economic growth. It advocates instead a fundamental change of key references such as: the collective imagination (changement d'imaginaire) and the array of analysis, propositions and principles guiding the economy' (Martínez-Alier, et al. 2010, 1742). Serge Latouche, the main Francophone intellectual of degrowth, claims that 'the motto of de-growth aims primarily at pointing the insane objective of growth for growth' sake (Latouche, *Le Pari de la Décroissance* 2006, 6). Thus, in his own words, degrowth is a 'political slogan with theoretical implications' (Idem).

More recently, degrowth and steady-state economic models seem to have been enjoying wider public recognition in developed countries: Tim Jackson's 'Prosperity without Growth' (Jackson, 2007) has been widely read and accepted, the First International Degrowth Conference was held in Paris, in 2008, and the Club of Rome presented a new report on economic degrowth to the European Commission in 2009. This legitimization of steady-state or degrowth economics may, however, be apparent and reflect a concern, above all others, with the on-going financial crisis and the consequences of globalization, urbanisation and (de)industrialisation in the developed world. It is well known, many cities and regions in the 'Global North' are facing processes of demographic shrinkage and economic recession due to these combined factors and despite major public efforts to encourage private investment. Given, then, the visibility and proximity of this problem in developed countries, it is more likely that 'shrinkage' caught the attention of northern governing institutions and audiences instead and ahead of degrowth with its far removed concerns with, to use an example, the uneven distribution of development benefits throughout the globe. Also, one should probably argue, it would be very surprising (and, perhaps, contradictory) if dominant discourses and institutions would fully accept - obsessed as they are with sovereign debt sustainability and economic recovery - such an explicit antagonism and radical critique to existing power structures and modes of production as the one advanced by studies on degrowth.

## **'POST-GROWTH' POLITICS?**

As the Italian sociologist Onofrio Romano argues, degrowth ultimately stands as a pretext and figurehead argument for radical democracy proposals. What is being discussed in degrowth, says

Romano, are some founding political values by means of an scientifically legitimised argument that, conveniently, speaks the same language of modernity's hegemonic discourse: the (suspicious) language of economy. In a tone of admonition, he remarks that:

If the project is about radical democracy, degrowth cannot be a foundation for the same reason as degrowth advocates do not believe that 'growth' should be a foundation. Both 'proposals' are bound to merge in the melting pot of the thousand options that cross the democratic regime. Growth and degrowth, in this scene, rest in the same paradigm of the autonomous subject: their validity is the function of historical constrictants and neither of them can aspire to the throne of constitutional dogma (Romano 2008, 245).

Confirming Romano's remarks, the website of Le Parti pour la Décroissance declares the objectives of degrowth to be 'emancipation, wellbeing and fulfilment through voluntary simplicity' (Quellestratégiepolitique pour la Décroissance?n.d.) and 'the building of other worlds, environmentally and socially responsible, humanly decent and democratic' (Idem). These overall objectives comprise a whole strategy of '(re)localism' for housing, transportation, production and distribution to be implemented by measures such as: 1) the adoption of LETS, 2) the emancipation from forced (paid) labour, 3) the establishment of minimum and maximum incomes, 4) free public services, 5) a sustainable usage of natural resources, 6) the implementation of an 'energy descent' plan, 7) renouncing the cult of technology, 8) the emancipation of educational and cultural institutions from competitive towards cooperative behaviour, and finally, 9) the deepening of democracy to prevent people from being caught by power. Similarly, the programme defended by The Green Party of the United States - which stands for 1) grassroots democracy, 2) social justice and equal opportunity, 3) ecological wisdom, 4) nonviolence, 5) decentralization, 6) community-based economics, 7) feminism and gender equality, 8) diversity, 9) personal and global responsibility and, last but not least, 10) future focus and sustainability (The Ten Key Values of The Green Partys.d.) – points out to this intertwining of radical democracy and political degrowth agendas.

## **WHAT SORT OF 'POST-GROWTH' CITIES?**

Not surprisingly, the same correlation between political degrowth and a '(re)localised radical democracy can be observed in terms of urban policies. In the II Conference on Economic Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity that took place in 2010, in Barcelona, a set of working groups has been assigned to discuss the relation between degrowth and the various dimensions of urban lifestyles and public policies, addressing topics of infrastructure, housing, cities, consumption, education, etc. The group working on cities presented a 'work-in-progress' vision for a 'degrowth city', a vision resembling a 'transition town' with, maybe, deeper undertones of 'criticality' (given its on-going debating of 'squatting', 'cohousing', liberation from paid work, etc.). Regrettably, and despite the much emphasised provisionality of this vision, this 'degrowth city' has reflected no more than a meagre and instant assemblage of the 'compact city' model, 'cradle to cradle' production processes and a set of explicitly translated 'right to the city' claims.

'Degrowth city', for instance, concerns 1) urban renewal instead of urban sprawl and the building of 'edge cities', 2) the deepening of democracy through participatory planning and co-design strategies, 3) the disinvestment in mega-projects and infrastructures, including those of transportation, 4) food sovereignty, 5) the extension, collective management and governance

of common resources, etc. Disregarding the multiple and persistent critiques to 'localist' and 'progressive/leftist ideal(s)' (Fainstein 2006, 3) of cities that underline the 'practical difficulties of implementation, and [its] inequitable outcomes' (Idem),<sup>2</sup> growth objectors attribute these shortcomings to the capitalist system in which space is being forcefully produced. In their viewing, it is capitalism that prevents the translation of urban ecology and human rights into a coherent set of urban policies: sustainable urban development, as it is being promoted worldwide by all kinds of governing institutions, remains indifferent to the accounting of most socio-environmental externalities despite on-going studies on ecosystem services. Yet, not only capitalism, but also disciplinary boundaries of sciences so dear to degrowth partisans as urban ecology, make it difficult to translate further ecological concerns into a set of consistent post-growth urban policies. Focusing solely on the environmental consequences of urban nature's metabolism, urban ecology perpetuates (maybe unintendedly) the artificial nature-society divide by ignoring the fact that 'the social appropriation and transformation of nature produces historically specific social and physical natures that are infused by social power relationships', (Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw 2006, 7); and in doing so, urban ecology excludes the concerns for socio-environmental justice that, though uncomfortable for 'green capitalism', cannot be disregarded in the light of an increasingly uneven process of global urbanisation.

Contrarily to the previous, research on 'shrinking cities' (Oswalt 2006) has extended the debate on post-growth beyond the separate discussions on 'civil rights' and 'ecology' by looking closely at the intertwining of political, economic, cultural, social and environmental implications of actual city-wide (unintended) shrinkage. It has taken shrinkages not as a taboo or a problem to be reversed by 'green development' or 'instant utopias' but, inevitably, as a starting point for a profound and transformative cultural change that cannot be thought without a correlative transformation of epistemological and ontological frames steering the construction of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, it departs from the studying of actual cities' survival strategies - in their succeeding or failing capacity to transform institutions and institutionalised behaviours (Idem) - to, only then, launch itself into inconclusive debates on property regimes, economic models, work policies and cultural actions that, altogether, accommodate interdisciplinary critiques to current modes of production of the built environment. Indeed, if there's one conclusion to be taken from these studies, is that shrinkage remains a widely unknown territory for 'planners of growth', thus revealing the inadequacy of standard spatial planning approaches and tools to embrace it as a potential instrument for transformation. In this light, it can be argued, research on 'shrinking cities' offers a cautionary argument, based on existing examples, to premature 'assemblages' on what post-growth cities should be composed of and how, by taking 'the production of space' as a primary matter-of-concern (Latour 2005).

Concerns with 'the production of space' are far from being novel; they have long entered the social sciences debate with the contributions of Burgess, Park and McKenzie on the 'mosaic city' - 'The City: suggestions for the study of human behaviour', published in 1925; Lefebvre's reflections on 'the (social) production of space' - 'The Production of Space', published in 1974; Foucault's rendering of the spatialisation of discipline and punishment - 'Discipline and Punish', published in 1975; and, De Certeau's argument for deviational tactics in the making of everyday life against institutionalized and technocratic strategies - 'The Practice of Everyday Life', published in 1980. Later becoming a central theme for Urban Anthropology (Low, 1999; 2003), the production of space also influenced theories of collaborative planning (Healey, 1997), strategic design (Manzini&Jégou, 2003) and collaborative (urban) governance (Kooiman, 2000).

In regards to the architecture discipline, the production of space also influenced numerous collaborative practices throughout the world and has been debated in texts such as Giancarlo Di Carlo's 'Architecture's Public', published in 1969; Colin Ward's 'Housing: an anarchist approach', in 1976; John Habraken's 'Supports: An Alternative to Mass Housing', in 1972 and John Turner's 'Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process', published in 1972. With the economy and financial market's globalization in the 80's and 90's, however, pushing architecture to produce 'global commodities' within a 'starchitecture' system (Benítez, 2010), the production of space as a process by which the collective is composed (Latour, 2005) lost its primacy as a crucial matter-of-concern for architecture. Nevertheless, and considering the current economic crisis and the questioning of 'business-as-usual'- or status quo - modes of production of the built environment, it may well claim back its centrality, particularly if backed up by politically and socially relevant spatial practices.

### **'POST-GROWTH' SPATIAL PRACTICES: SPATIAL ASSEMBLAGES?**

Having reached this point, time to ask again: what sort of spatial practices may respond to challenges of shrinkage or degrowth? In order to try an answer, we may now have to look for 'spatial assemblages', or, local and creative processes of collective and interdisciplinary composition of space(s) aiming at transformative social change (Schmidt and Hersh 2000). The term 'spatial assemblages' is here advanced to cluster both Lefebvrian notions of 'differential space(s)' and urban studies' readings of assemblage theory. Ignacio Fariás, in its introductory chapter to the book 'Urban Assemblages' (2010), describes how the concept of assemblage allowed urban studies to look at cities, for the first time, as hugely complex sociomaterial and sociotechnical landscapes; an assemblage of assemblages being composed of relational – and diagrammatic - sets of human and non-human actants ever actualising as precarious (and heterogeneous) agencements. Embracing, on the one hand, Deleuze and De Landa's stances on 'assemblage' and, on the other, Science and Technology Studies research on Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005), Fariás follows to suggest that 'urban assemblages' bear the emergent capacity of enabling agency (Fariás, 2010, p. 15) in their continuous movement between (re)territorialisation (formation of habits) and deterritorialisation (breaking of habits) (Dovey, 2012) processes. Thus, the borrowing of the term 'assemblage' here presented is intended to highlight spatial practices that potentiate the creation of difference (and social transformation) in their mobilisation of agency<sup>4</sup>.

'Spatial assemblages' include CBO-driven planning processes, initiatives of artistic activism, actual buildings or even critical readings on cities and the production of space. Some of these transformative spatial practices have already been categorized and described by various authors over the last decades, resulting in publications such as 'Action Planning for Cities' (Goethert and Hamdi 1997), 'Architecture and Participation' (Blundell Jones, Petrescu and Till 2005), 'Architecture of Consequence' (Bouman 2009) and, more recently, 'Microplanning' (Rosa 2011), 'Collective Architectures' (Benítez 2010), 'The Nightmare of Participation' (Miessen 2010) and 'Spatial Agency' (Awan, Schneider and Till 2011). In 'The nightmare of participation' – part three of a 'participation' trilogy -, Markus Miessen (2010) argues for unsolicited interdisciplinary 'Spatial Practices' that, within Chantal Mouffe's agonistic approach to democracy, use conflicting interests and topics to prepare the ground for potential (social) change. Awan et al (2011) present 'Spatial Agency' as motivating spatial (transformative) praxis – buildings, installations, exhibitions, maps, networks, sets of instructions - that, being able to engage transformatively with organizational and social structure(s) present a new paradigm on how to operate in architecture.

Benítez (2010) presents Santiago Cirugeda's 'Urban Prescriptions' as collectively produced and politically committed projects that, working in contexts of 'social emergency', aim at the creation of a 'Manual for Open Code Architectures' that fuse technical and legal questions such as assembly instructions, legal supports, safety conditions. Finally, Rosa (2011) documents 'Microplanning' initiatives in São Paulo, Brazil, as bottom-up 'urban creative practices' capable of creating common spaces for people living in destitute neighbourhoods by consolidating intra- and inter-neighbourhoods' social connections.

Given the divergent theoretical renderings of all these practices, their grouping as 'spatial assemblages' might seem problematic and, indeed, raises crucial and still pending questions: do all these practices aim at being 'situated micro-utopias' (Benítez 2010) or participate in the construction of an 'emancipatory common-sense' (Santos 1991)? Do they all relate in the same way to democracy, 'spatial justice' (Soja 2010) or political ecology? Are (all) these practices interchangeable? These questions wait for a thorough and proper answer. However, and regardless all their possibly describable differences, one can still assert that 'spatial assemblages' share two major matters-of-concern. Firstly, they push for transformative social change and, secondly, they all consider the 'production of space', even if unwittingly, as a shared/collective, impermanent/dynamic and political enterprise. Whatever their specific objectives and outcomes, therefore, all 'spatial assemblages' aim at transforming a current 'state of affairs' in trying to irreversibly change its most obstructive components: the behaviour of intervening actors, constraining regulations, bureaucratic planning procedures, etc. Secondly, 'spatial assemblages' address the production of space(s) beyond its physical or abstract dimension in order to compose (a) 'differential space(s)' of, and for the intrusion of 'otherness'; in other words, 'spatial assemblages' take space as a matter-of-concern and not as a matter-of-fact (Latour 2005).

## **WHAT, THEN, MIGHT 'SPATIAL ASSEMBLAGES' EXPECTABLE IMPACTS BE?**

It may be argued that 'spatial assemblages', as concerned with the production of differential spaces contribute to the spatial sustainability debate beyond 'eco-friendly' or 'green' concerns (Daly and Farley 2004, Jackson 2007, Latouche 2007). 'Spatial assemblages' provide a counterpoint to the current economic crisis debate and, in their concern with transformative change, create interstices of other possibilities beyond those attached to the so-called 'irreducible' need for economic growth. Indeed, and as the mentioned debates on 'Shrinking Cities' and post-growth economic models - and its political translations - gain public recognition, these heterodox practices may be important field experiments for urban sustainable living in the light of recent redefinitions of 'prosperity without growth' (Jackson, 2007).

Additionally, 'spatial assemblages' may also contribute to the questioning of architecture's production processes, boundaries and political responsibility. Firstly, they dangerously invite architecture to draw its attention from 'objects' to 'processes', that is, to analyse its recent production processes and products; now, as most contemporary architectures became 'global commodities', to accept this suggestion eventually means to scrutinize these commodities as 'black boxes' (Latour 2005), enquiring their eventual externalities or (lacking) transformative potential (Benítez 2010). Secondly, 'spatial assemblages' press architecture to work on an expanded and interdisciplinary field, intersecting the boundaries of planning, art and political activism. As once the acknowledging of objects as being socially constructed allowed sculpture to expand its field towards architecture and landscape (Krauss 1979), a similar process might now occur to

architecture by hand of 'spatial assemblages'.

Finally, 'spatial assemblages' may imply a critical assessment to the 'immutable mobiles' (Latour 2005) or, the institutional and regulatory 'frames' in which spatial (organization) disciplines operate. Though the topics of 'informality' and 'governance' have long invaded the urban discourses and policies (Healey, 1997; Kooiman, 2000; Roy, 2005), most countries are still recalcitrant when it comes down to implement de facto non-statutory instruments based on negotiation and shared decision-making. It is expected that 'spatial assemblages', if well-equipped and constructed, significantly reverse this tendency and push forward framing institutions and regulations.

## **WHAT ACTORS, THEN, MUST BE IN PLACE FOR 'SPATIAL ASSEMBLAGES' TO SUCCEED?**

Beyond contributions for the widening of sustainability debates and architecture's disciplinary corpus, it has been mentioned that these practices aim at pushing political and regulatory institutions towards a new paradigm that acknowledges space as a collective and political enterprise. For 'spatial assemblages' to fulfil their potential, then, many more actors - and their networks - must be allowed to participate in the production and governing of space. This is not a new claim, but one needs to stress it continuously due to the tendency of experts and governing institutions to avoid devolving their power beyond tokenism.

Unfortunately, the mental frame of most planners, architects, engineers, politicians, development practitioners, is still that of 'après moi, le déluge!' a frame consistent with linear modernity. This modernity, however, has been long and thoroughly criticized and does not fit our currently globalised - and liquid - world. Change is becoming a growing necessity more than a choice; this change however, in Marina Silva's opinion - a Brazilian politician and activist - does not aim at adaptation but rather at a slow and creative inadaptation process. The predicted 'revenge' of a silent Gaia may urge us to collectively engage into a new ecology of practices.

'Spatial assemblages', though operating in a 'local' scale, provide the right strategies and tools to embrace this collective endeavour. In their urge to invent 'differential space(s)', these practices are privileged actors in the (re)activation of political subjects and communities. This, however, is not enough to affect structural change: the empowerment of political assemblies requests consistent and continuous efforts and attachments to solid networks, whether rhizomatic or hierarchically organised. But if collective inadaptation is as inescapable as shrinkage or degrowth, one should not be concerned: all institutions may be eventually summoned to participate in the making of unsolicited 'spatial assemblages'.

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## **Acknowledgements**

This paper has been partially developed with the kind contributions of Dr Tatjana Schneider, Senior Lecturer at the Sheffield School of Architecture.

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