

Growing Realisations



**Architecture
and post-capitalism**

**A conversation between
Matthew Dalziel, Maria Smith,
Tania Tovar Torres, Liva
Dudareva and Eduardo Cassina**

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Progressive Degrowth

“Degrowth is not about moving in the opposite direction, it’s just moving along a different vector.”

If the “end of the world” is not an individual event, then perhaps the same logic necessitates that architects think not of how to reconstruct or build anew in the future, but rather the role they could play in the deconstruction of conditions in the present fuelled by unhampered growth, like inequality and accelerating climate change. In this conversation, Matthew Dalziel and Maria Smith, two of the curators of the 2019 Oslo Architecture Triennale, a Future Architecture platform member, discuss how the title and theme of this year’s edition “Degrowth” finds parallels in the work of two projects from the FA 2017 open call: METASITU (Eduardo Cassina and Liva Dudareva)’s The Degrowth Institute and Tania Tovar Torres’s In Articulo Mortis.

Matthew Dalziel Let’s begin by explaining our own relationships to the term “degrowth”.

Maria Smith Our winning proposal for the 2019 Oslo Architecture Triennale focused on exploring the architecture of degrowth, thinking about what architecture practice can do to aid a transition to a post-capitalist economy and considering what practicing architecture is going to be like afterwards. I learned about the term “degrowth” from an architecture student I was critting, who had been researching it whilst working on a project to create a marketplace. They were disillusioned with the idea of creating a space for trade and started to consider what different economic models might look like physically. I immediately became fascinated with the idea and started doing some reading myself.

The call for the Triennale asked entrants to think about the future of architecture in a broad way and I’m generally

Matthew Dalziel

Matthew Dalziel is an architect and maker working across architecture, education and research. An associate at Interrobang, Matthew now collaborates with clients from artists to airports, previously working for Stirling Prize-winning Haworth Tompkins on housing, theatres and cultural buildings. He has taught in the postgraduate schools of Kingston University and the London School of Architecture.

Previous spread: In Articulo Mortis image: Barcelona Pavilion Construction Drawing, over Mies van der Rohe, 1929 Barcelona pavilion reconstruction (image: Pete Sieger, 2014).

Maria Smith

Maria Smith is an architect working across architecture, engineering, journalism, education, and events. She is founding director of the transdisciplinary architecture and engineering practice, Interrobang. She is also a columnist for the RIBA Journal; a member of the RIBA National Awards Panel; co-founder of Turncoats and a Design Advocate for the Mayor of London.

quite obsessed with its overlaps into engineering and economics. Architects as people are, on the one hand, at the very frontline of capitalism – helping developers make as much money as possible from an inflated property market. But on the other, many of us have ideals like that student: thinking about how space creates or enables different kinds of social interactions and community. We have this idealism at university and then we get thrust into this world that is nothing like what we imagined.

MD My relationship to degrowth is, it's safe to say, a little bit fraught – I've spent a lot of time trying to convince my co-curators that we *shouldn't* use the term. Having lost that battle, I'm very happy to continue examining it although I have concerns about the misconceptions that come with degrowth and the potential for it to be interpreted as a negative term. The research for the triennale has helped me to recognise that as a process it's perhaps a consequence of something much bigger that needs to be addressed. Degrowth is a necessary concept to propose within the realms of planning and architectural practice, but if we manage to resolve larger social problems, then I believe degrowth will naturally happen. When &beyond first sent through the information about your two projects, our initial reaction was: "that's totally not what we mean by degrowth!" But when we looked closer, we realised that you seem to be having the same struggles that we are, in that there are negative and violent connotations to the term but actually there's an underlying sense of hopefulness to it and it reflects the sense of a need for consciousness changing.

Tania Tovar Torres: I'm currently setting up a curatorial platform and exhibition space named Proyector in Mexico City, which aims to think about how architecture relates

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to other disciplines, rather than just supporting its edification. I came in to the topic of degrowth through my In Articulo Mortis project, working more as a writer than an architect even. The project starts with the question of what happens when buildings are no longer there.



Tania Tovar Torres

Tania Tovar Torres is an architect, writer and curator with an interest in architecture narratives. She is founder and director of Proyector, a curatorial platform and exhibition space based in Mexico City devoted to the promotion of architecture research projects. Previously, she worked at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal, the Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery in New York, the University Museum of Science and Art and the National Council for Educational Development in Mexico City.

Above: In Articulo Mortis image: Cuauhtémoc Tower P.H. 2101 Abandoned Apartment (image: Tania Tovar, 2018) over Cuauhtémoc Tower Tlatelolco Housing Unit (image: Mario Pani, 2018).

Below: In Articulo Mortis image: The Times, April 29th 1986 cover over Workers Radiation Check-point at the Chernobyl Plant (image: Michael Forster Rothbart, 2015).

METASITU **(Liva Dudareva** **and Eduardo Cassina)**

Founded in 2014 by Liva Dudareva and Eduardo Cassina, METASITU was born with the goal of establishing emancipatory narratives around the way we inhabit space, targeting wider audiences than traditional architectural and urbanism circles. METASITU's work is centred on different formats of knowledge exchange and developing new tools for understanding the urban condition today for a queerer tomorrow. Through the curation of urbanism festivals, directing educational programmes, enabling real estate transgressions, proposing workshops, performing lectures and disseminating videos, METASITU opens up new discursive lines, by involving different actors into challenging spatial narratives.

Beyond discussions about physical preservation, we have to face that fact that we may need let many of them go. So I started thinking about how to preserve their memory or essence and to question what it really means to talk about architecture: could we talk about it in contexts beyond just the physicality of the object? I started writing stories, creating constructions of buildings by drawing from personal accounts, archival records and notes – anything that I could get my hands on. I was trying then to see if buildings could live in another format, a process that starts to challenge what preservation actually means.

I recently spent time in Estonia where these questions are being discussed a lot in relation to Soviet buildings that are sitting empty: should they be kept, demolished or refurbished? And this is all connected to the degrowth of many different things – of population, of industry and so on. That's when I began to understand the link between degrowth as a concept and my own work. I was interested in one of the quotes from Jill Stoner that &beyond shared with us about how architecture needs to turn its attention to “a politics of selectively taking buildings apart”. I wouldn't say that I am actually taking anything apart, but rather documenting what is being taken apart by other forces. That's how I start to fit into this conversation.

MD I've been reading some object-oriented ontology theory (OOO philosophy) in relation to degrowth, which is really akin to Western philosophy discovering Buddhism and the idea that all things are connected on an ontological level. Tim Morton, for example, has written about the strange collective idea we have of “the away place” – the notion that when you throw something away, it just goes to this away place. Human capacity to understand or engage with death is linked to our lack of imagination

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about this place and how it's connected to us. We don't like thinking about our own death and this may contribute to our failures in imagining the death of our objects. We prefer to just let them disappear into this abstraction. But what's happening now is that the away place is starting to colonise the real: global warming is effectively the physical manifestation of the away place. We can't hide from it anymore. We do a similar thing as architects in that we dwell in the excitement of imagining and then realising buildings, before moving on to the next project. But there's often very little reflection on what the life of a building actually is. Another idea Morton has developed is "hyperobjects", which are things that exist in a time-space larger than we can comfortably comprehend. Global warming is a hyperobject but I also think that architecture is a hyperobject in the sense that it's a challenge for us to understand the life cycle of a building outside the abstract.

The inherent problem we have is that we understand that in order to be as sustainable as possible, buildings need to leave no trace and effectively decompose, like everything else in nature. But there is a certain visceral understanding that comes from seeing wear and tear, of seeing the traces of human occupation. How can those two things be reconciled? I'm excited by your project, Tania, because considering the life cycle of buildings is, in a way, similar to how some thinkers are now suggesting we approach global warming: by recognising that one is terminally ill is the beginning of starting to behave differently. Recognising the death of buildings, then, is the beginning of starting to recognise and understand the hyperobject of architecture.

MS METATSITU, what about The DeGrowth Institute project? How do you relate to the term in its title?

“We don't like thinking about our own death and this may contribute to our failures in imagining the death of our objects.”

Liva Dudareva We are an artistic duo based between Athens and Kiev and both Eduardo and myself have architectural backgrounds, which is why our work is related to cities, fiction and urban futures. We work to encourage people to look at their surroundings in a different, more emancipatory way, often via knowledge-sharing formats, such as video or installations, workshops and events. The Degrowth Institute is one of our latest endeavours that focuses on shrinking cities in post-Soviet contexts but has parallels beyond these situations, as this is a global phenomenon. Our relationship to the term “degrowth” has been shaped by the fact that degrowth is not a concept but reality in those cities.

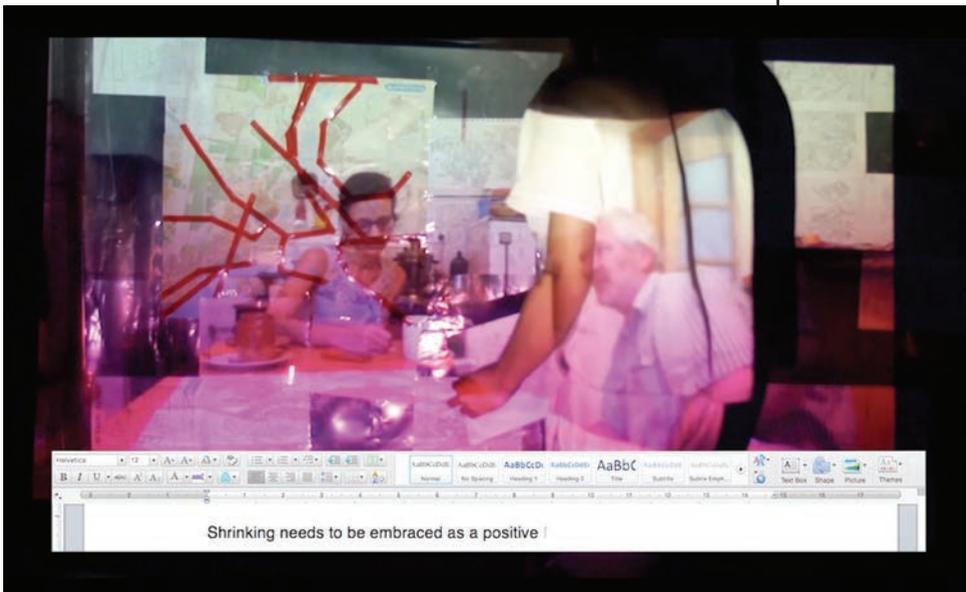


DeGrowth Institute workshop
at Fondazione Pistoletto.
Image: METASITU

The shrinking city in the post-Soviet context the result of a model that was built around one industry. That industry was supplying at least 30 percent of the revenues and essentially sustaining the citizens economically and culturally. Now those factories are slowly shutting down. Given the lack of national subsidies to regenerate these territories or reliance on injections of foreign donations that are often not sustainable, how do you approach cities that will not grow? Because growth is absolutely *not* an option in this context.

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Eduardo Cassina A few years ago we went to Ukraine and were asked to make a piece that reacted to the situation in the city of Mariupol, which is in the south-east, right at the border of the conflict in Donetsk. It's a harbour town that is organised around a huge steel factory.



You could feel that the war was very present, but there was also a strong sense of desperation about the lack of jobs and the worsening situation, because the factory was becoming increasingly robotised and production was being outsourced. We went to talk to the city planner of Mariupol and her small team about the future. When we asked her to explain her vision for the city and tell us what we could expect to see if we returned in 2050, she said, "I hope you would see a city with a lot of gardens and skyscrapers and a very busy harbour, something like Hong Kong." This is a city that has been losing people at a rate of ten a day since 1991! This city planner was highly intelligent, yet her answer sounded delusional.

Mariupol video essay still.
© METASITU

This did not have to do with her personal ambition, but with her job description per se: she needs to plan for *growth*. She had a huge map of the city behind her desk with a colour code for the new areas they were planning to build. But there's no investment. She was spending time and resources thinking how that city could expand whereas if her job description was put differently, she could be using them to think "how are we going to deal with the potential situation, ten years from now when just 100,000 people are left?"



Mariupol video essay still.
© METASITU

That was the trigger for us to think about how we need to shift this paradigm, because almost everyone we spoke to during the trip viewed this shrinkage as the worst thing that could happen. But it could be thought of as positive. We understand the very practical idea that the more people live in one place, the more tax revenues there are but it's also true that it creates a greater demand on the government. Monaco is probably wealthier than

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Jakarta – population isn't always the determining factor. It's a question of what the economic model is: Jakarta and Monaco have very different economies.

LD In that way resisting growth is something very positive because it subverts capitalist rhetoric. The way we want to approach the subject of degrowth is by working with locals in some of those shrinking cities, and to encourage them to use it as a tool, to make an empowering statement about being proud of being smaller rather than having to “attract new populations”.

MD I think there's something very interesting which has become obvious through this conversation that perhaps wasn't apparent upon first reading your project briefs: there are two very distinct versions of degrowth. There's the kind that we're working with for the Oslo Triennale, degrowth as a thought experiment for globalised society, which is about how to develop limits and a new kind of epistemology that works in places that are growing feverishly as well as in places that are shrinking. Then there's another form, the real, on the ground degrowth that's happening in the places you're describing. I understand Degrowth Institute as helping to deal with the trauma of degrowth. I love your idea of helping people to feel proud and to have a positive relationship with degrowth. Growth is an addiction, so any response to it requires recognising that and then dealing with the trauma of that addiction, in a grounded and reflective way. It doesn't need to be that when a city is shrinking that it feels like there's an absence of growth and therefore there's an absence of substance. There are other forms of substance, like community and ritual and having a sense of place that can rebalance a community of any size.

“Growth is an addiction, so any response to it requires recognising that and then dealing with the trauma of that addiction.”

MARIUPOL WIN

A person in a white shirt and shorts stands in a dark room, holding up a sign that reads "MARIUPOL WIN" in red neon letters. The scene is lit with blue and purple light, and there are horizontal light streaks in the background.



“ Resisting growth is something very positive because it subverts capitalist rhetoric.”

Previous spread:
Mariupol video essay still.
© METASITU

**“‘Smart decline’
is a form of
terrorism.”**

MS There’s been an interesting shift on this. Traditionally, environmental concerns have been associated with the political left. But more recently there’s been a reframing of environmental concerns through nostalgia. And then the conservatives love it! Suddenly the political right is starting to embrace environmental sustainability and climate issues as a means of harking back to the past.

EC And the nostalgia is often misplaced because the lifespan of a city is larger than the lifespan of a human being. In some of the Soviet, post-industrial centres, there are people alive today who have seen the “peak” of those cities. For them, imagining a time when they were larger is very nostalgic and I can see exactly how that falls into right-wing agendas. The problem is the lack of examples to point to, precedents to show how successful degrowth can be. Many cities in the rust belt in the US have adopted policies of “smart decline”, which can involve extremely violent processes like demolishing houses or cutting off communities from public services – as if the term degrowth was already well within our capitalist preconceptions. This is a form of terrorism.

LD This idea of how to degrow in a non-violent way links our project with Tania’s. It’s about a sensitivity towards a place and the people who have lived there their whole lives. But that also needs to be applied to the shutdown of industries and the feeling of disempowerment that results. A lot of this industrial heritage is not really seen as such, it’s seen as a cancer that’s destroying everything at this point. Through memory and reflection on this, perhaps what’s also needed is the creation of an immaterial heritage. That’s not only about nostalgia for the past but also about building something for the future. I see it in the

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way you described writing and retelling as tools that can help to reconcile the past and carry forward those aspects that are most important.

TTT We're asking people to be ok with the idea of degrowth and having things disappear. But it's something quite unnatural for them - we want to see our things grow old with us. When talking about memory and history, it's not so much about remembering how things were "better" before, but rather finding a way to help us move on to what happens after. The idea of starting to think about buildings and consider their death within our planning is an important one, but at the same time there are so many things that have already been built, with no thought given to their demise. Perhaps introducing a step within the cycle where we acknowledge not just their death but how to preserve their history could be helpful. Maybe something similar to the Mexican Day of the Dead: a rite of passage, crossing a threshold between something disappearing and the acceptance of that. It's one thing for those who are involved in city planning to understand the need for degrowth, but it is much more difficult for the wider community to engage with that kind of thinking.

MS I think it's about humility. We need to recognise that any piece of material that we use to create some edifice for some period of time is not *us*. We shouldn't think that we can superimpose our will onto something and that by creating this magnificent thing that will outlive us we can live forever through architecture. Instead it's about a negotiation between our needs at a particular moment and the material, be it bricks or wood, whatever. These materials have their own agency and intent - we're just borrowing and collaborating with them.

“We need to recognise that any piece of material that we use to create some edifice for some period of time is not ‘us’.”

“If we’re going to live sustainably on Earth, then we need to very actively change the way we think about creating buildings.”

What you were saying about degrowth, Tania is connected to the circular economy: thinking not of a linear path, where you just put waste in the away place, but instead view everything as cyclical. If we’re going to live sustainably on Earth, then we need to very actively change the way we think about creating buildings – the way we create anything – according to these circular economy principles, whereby there is no such thing as waste. Everything that you produce has to be an input to another process, whatever that process may be. We have to create every building knowing that it can be taken apart and that its constituent parts can become part of something else in the future.

EC Degrowth is not about moving in the opposite direction, it’s just moving along a different vector. I don’t think it’s so much about reversing processes as it’s about challenging the linearity that is projected upon those processes.

MD That’s why it’s so important that any discussion around degrowth concerns changing our thoughts and our actions rather than having a “plan”. If we start thinking about making new buildings differently, that’s already summoning this tabula rasa idea, saying that “from *today* onwards, everything’s going to be different”. But yesterday’s buildings are an externality to this solution. Whereas if you think and react in a degrowth fashion, then all of the existing built environment becomes part of it too.

We’ve been very careful in our work to not speak about the literal deconstruction of buildings or non-building. One of the first things we encountered during our first interview for the Triennale was the assumption that that’s what we meant. We were asked: “does degrowth mean not building any more buildings?” We answered “no”, that as

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practicing architects, we are interested in the practice of architecture and that degrowth is actually about thinking differently about how we make and care for things. What we need to address, as we have started to do through this conversation, is the difference between the thought experiment of Western thriving growth and changing the way it operates, and how places beyond the West, which aspire to that kind of growth, can find a different way of being. There isn't necessarily a singular solution. ■