

**A scientific conversation with Jin Xue
on socio-ecological sustainability and
post-growth spatial design and planning**
edited by Silvio Cristiano

Silvio Cristiano: What has been the trigger for you to dedicate to post-growth urban studies?

Jin Xue: This is a good question because it helps me to trace the trajectory of my research and interests in this field. Actually, it all started in 2009, alongside my PhD at Aalborg University, when I became interested in degrowth. At that time, green growth and ecomodernist thinking were very dominant and popular in society in general, but also in urban planning. The degrowth movement had just had its first international conference in Paris, developing important perspectives and debates. With such a background, my PhD work was quite driven by the question of whether it is possible to decouple green growth within the housing sector and urban development from environmental impacts, with the latter including land consumption, carbon emissions and so on. I also wondered to what extent such a decoupling had taken place already and would be likely to take place in the future. Starting from these research questions, I focused on two city-regions: one in China and the other in Denmark, i.e. Copenhagen. These were very different contexts, but – in terms of urban planning and urban development – both were experiencing quite rapid growth in the building sector. Regardless of all of their differences, I found they both displayed some relative decoupling between the buildings' growth and the bad consequences on the environment. I therefore made some theoretical reasoning discussing whether real, absolute decoupling is ever possible. That led me to conclude that if we really want to achieve an absolute reduction in the environmental impact, we have to degrow per capita consumption; it would not be enough to just rely on eco-efficiency, on "green" technologies, on land use efficiency measures in urban planning and urban development. The trigger for me to work on post-growth lies in those findings, i.e. in the outcomes of the above-mentioned doctoral research. Both during and after my PhD, I have followed the degrowth movement very closely.



Gradually, I became quite frustrated because there was no one addressing spatial issues in the early degrowth movement and related academic debate. On the contrary, I feel that often urban issues, including urban planning, are considered some sort of blame in the degrowth world – at least when we talk about *institutionalized* planning. Degrowth scholars tried to bypass cities and [spatial] planning while trying to find [socio-ecological] solutions out of the mainstream urban domain and the mainstream [spatial] planning institutions. For example, early degrowth scholars addressed localism, e.g. ecovillages. As a planner, I was quite frustrated about such research development, this spatial blindness, and the sentiment against cities and planning. This frustration became one more trigger for me to make counter-arguments and bring the spatial and the planning into the degrowth debates. I agree with degrowth scholars that institutionalized or mainstream planning is growth-oriented and growth-dependent.

I am quite sympathetic to this kind of criticism. That is because the origin of planning was closely associated with growth thinking, not only in terms of economic growth but also based on projections of population growth and the associated growth, e.g. in mobility, in land use, in the freedom of choices, etc. So, planning is heavily influenced by growth mentality and mainstream political ideologies. It makes me ponder how it would be possible to transform [spatial] planning to be more apt to the societal changes envisioned by degrowth. Therefore, I deviated from the “mainstream” degrowth scholars – e.g. scholars dealing with political science, ecological economics, or development studies – and delved into the [spatial] planning and explored how we can make changes to the mainstream planning thinking, theories, and paradigms to make it a driver of change. What can planners do? What kind of institutions need to be in place? What changes are needed for planning thinking, theories, and paradigms in order to bring a change to society? These discussions on spatial planning are inspired by degrowth.

SC: In your opinion, what are the most interesting and useful aspects of post-growth (and/or degrowth and beyond growth) urban studies up to now? On the other hand, what is left out and what should not?

JX: This question leads me to reflect on the development of post-growth urban studies. Post-growth studies on urban issues are definitely growing, with an increasing number of scientific papers, special issues, and books. I would say the research is mostly boosted by urban studies scholars, namely scholars with urban studies and [urban] planning disciplinary backgrounds. Nonetheless, this is still a relatively small network within the relevant disciplines: only a small portion of urban scholars takes explicitly the degrowth thinking in their studies. The majority of urban scholars are not familiar with this thinking, even though there are many potential links and shared values. Post-growth urban studies have also grown in diversity, involving more and more disciplinary backgrounds: in addition to planners, one can also find urban political ecologists, human geographers, urban sociologists, and scholars working on urban metabolism, justice, sustainability, critical urban theory, etc. Topics that are addressed are also more varied and broader: housing, mobility, regulations, institutions, and so on. In the most recent *International Conference on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity*¹, I noticed an increased interest in the discussions on cities in the Global South. This interest is also reflected in recent literature on urban studies, particularly in some special issues published this year, where promising works have emerged around the topic of Global Southern cities. The studies of urban degrowth in such contexts are very different from those focusing on the North. In relation to this, one topic that needs to be further studied is the relations between the North and the South, especially incorporating a decolonial perspective in post-growth urban studies and planning in the Global North. Having said this, we still need to develop the research and debates around these issues further. There are relatively few researchers working on post-growth urban studies. We would need to further expand the alliances and build up research connections both within and beyond urban studies. Post-growth urban studies in education, i.e. urban studies and planning programmes. On the other hand, the spatial dimension ought to be addressed more in degrowth research, which I think has not received as much attention as

1 "Planet, People, Care: It Spells Degrowth", Zagreb, Croatia, August 29 – September 2, 2023 (<https://odrast.hr>).

other dimensions. Efforts need also to be made in this direction in the future.

SC: Building on your stimuli, perhaps sometimes there are colleagues of ours who come from spatial studies and who have some sensitivity for social and ecological issues but do not necessarily fit the post-growth and/or degrowth realms. They may address – still in a political way – some spatial dimensions that are common to our discourses, e.g., spatial justice, but they do not really consider degrowth or post-growth as larger transdisciplinary, systemic frameworks. It would be a pity not to engage with them: similarly to what you said about the “mainstream” degrowth scholars, who tend not to consider spatial aspects, some urban and regional scholars who address social and ecological issues may not consider paradigms that are so critical toward economic growth *per se*; nonetheless, questioning growth at any cost may be a more comprehensive way of critically engaging not only with capitalism – which is often shared with those urban and regional scholars – but also with productivism, developmentalism, and elitist aims passed off for prosperity and power². We wish to problematize that those not explicitly engaged with degrowth and post-growth are not necessarily pro-growth, so a more nuanced criticism may emerge from the meeting, discussion, and collaboration with those scholars. Together with a more radical critique, we would like to raise the variegated criticism on the pro-growth paradigms, through this Special Issue and previously through the international seminar out of which this publication emerges³. As a matter of fact, systemic issues may underlie spatial, social, and ecological issues that are not (currently) read through the lens of post-growth or degrowth meant as a liberation from growth come hell or high water⁴. We should also consider that

² Krähmer K., Cristiano S. (2022). *Città oltre la crescita*. Roma: Castelvecchi Editore.

³ International seminar *Cities and Urbanism Beyond Growth. Ecological transition: where is it going? Ecology, economics, and urban planning between European Green Deal and Post-Growth paradigms*. PhD programme in Engineering-based Architecture and Urban Planning, curriculum Urban Planning, Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza, in collaboration with the *Tracce Urbane* Network. Rome, Italy, May 31, 2023 (<https://aesop-planning.eu/resources/news-archive/members/urbanism-beyond-growth>).

⁴ See: Cristiano S. (2018). «Systemic thoughts on ecology, society, and labour». In: Id., ed., *Through the working class ecology and society investigated through*

engaging with post-growth or even just questioning economic growth in our academia can mean being rather isolated, with various possible consequences that regard careers but also credibility and legitimation, and in some cases, voice.

JX: I completely agree with that. Maybe this also has something to do with a general trend in academia, with scholars not willing to take evaluative-normative⁵ positions. In planning studies, many researchers do not really take these substantive values as part of their research and are rather interested in taking part in the planning processes, but without taking positions about what *should* be done, about what is right and what is wrong. And I think degrowth is the opposite: degrowth is very normative in terms of what is considered right and wrong, which future we should achieve, and what ethical premises we should prioritize. This may lead some scholars to take distance from the degrowth thinking. But there are also – as you said – some research fields, e.g. eco-gentrification, that actually share many similar [interests and] values with degrowth, but they probably do not really reflect on that through the lens of degrowth, and probably some even position themselves in the general framework of [economic] growth. I can see big potentials to work with some of those researchers.

SC: And not taking position is *per se* a way of taking sides, of accepting, seconding, supporting the mainstream system and its hidden ideology. What are the (epistemological and/or operational) risks that are or can be related to current post-growth urban studies *per se* and to possible transfer to bottom-up initiatives and/or top-down policy making? How do we shift from visions, also *normative* visions indeed, to coherent practical outcomes?

JX: I would identify three risks here. The first one is to neglect finiteness with respect to planetary limits⁶ – the fundamental

the lens of labour, Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, vol. 8, pp. 9-23 .

⁵ Jin Xue uses the adjective “normative” in its philosophical meaning, therefore referring to something related to an evaluation or value judgment: the «attribution of a particular symbolic value to certain social actions» (Cambridge Dictionary); see also: Darwall S. [2001]. «Normativity». *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. doi.org/10.4324/9780415249126-L135-1.

⁶ See: Meadows D. H., Meadows D. L., Randers J., Behrens III W. W. [1972]. *The limits to growth: a report to the Club of Rome's project on the predicament*

aspect of degrowth⁷. I feel that sometimes degrowth research forgets finity as the primary principle. When finity is so taken for granted by degrowth scholars, we tend to forget it. Two examples: regarding spatial justice, the concept or perspective is not new, but it is important to reflect on the conditions under which we talk about it and how and when the concept can obtain new meanings; degrowth provides unique conditions, i.e. social spatial justice within [ecological] limits, and that has quite different implications from socio-spatial justice in a growing society, both in terms of the theoretical dimension and the policies to pursue socio-spatial justice. Another example is about how discussions on finity can be indifferent to spatial scales: if we take urban development at the city (or city-region) scale, respecting finity and the planetary boundaries would perhaps mean that we need not build more, but rather look at what is already there; instead, if we do not address finity at this level, but focus on housing projects at the local level, we may take it for granted that housing projects need to be built, and we would focus on how they are built, maintained, and managed, instead of questioning whether, in the first place, these dwellings need to be built. This lack of awareness of finity is quite risky. Similar housing projects may share some degrowth values, e.g. reducing their [ecological] footprints, creating community ties, experimenting with autonomy in their management, and so on. Taking finity into account, instead, may suggest that we do not need to build these projects anew but rather to redistribute existing buildings. This is why I believe it is quite risky not to always be aware of finity at all scales.

A second, very related risk is that post-growth urban studies and planning are paying more attention to how we build and manage in line with degrowth principles. The risk here is that for both policymakers and scholars, we oversee the need to transform and renew existing building stocks and infrastructures. In

of mankind. New York, NY: Universe Books; Meadows D., Randers J. (2012). *The limits to growth: the 30-year update*. London: Routledge; Raworth K. (2017). *Doughnut economics: seven ways to think like a 21st-century economist*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing; Khmara Y., Kronenberg J. (2023). «On the road to urban degrowth economics? Learning from the experience of C40 cities, doughnut cities, Transition Towns, and shrinking cities». *Cities*, 136, 104259. doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2023.104259.

⁷ Albeit ecological concerns are re-politicized and connected to the social ones – although a risk exist to have the former dwarfing the latter.

this sense, degrowth would mean fewer constructions and less growth of urban physical volumes, both horizontally and vertically; of course, here, we need to consider the context since in some cities – due to population growth – new dwellings are necessary. Anyway, transforming the existing urban spaces is perhaps the most needed strategy for degrowth. But do we really have enough supporting institutional settings to do so? For example, can we find any planning tools to facilitate such transformations? Institutional settings comprise not only the regulative dimension but also the normative and the cultural-cognitive ones. Take Norway as an example. The planning is oriented towards how to plan for new developments. I see a gap in post-growth studies that focus on transformations of existing urban physical settings and related institutions.

The third and last risk is about the issue of context dependency and diverse degrowth pathways. I do absolutely agree that degrowth pathways must consider the geo-historical, political, and cultural contexts, so we cannot find any “one-fits-all” degrowth solution for all contexts. However, I think it is essential to search for common dimensions that distinguish urban degrowth from other imaginaries. If we venture too much into diversity, everyone and everything may fall within the degrowth narrative, and we risk losing its core meaning. We should, therefore, welcome diversity, but we also discuss what the commonalities of urban degrowth imaginaries are that distinguish them from other perspectives.

SC: What are the main differences between post-growth urban studies as we know them today and “competing” approaches inspired by (or taking advantage of) the current crises? We are here talking about approaches dealing with – or allegedly dealing with – social and ecological issues altogether in spatial terms, possibly adopting the same keywords but not being necessarily driven by the same goals, by a genuine will to achieve *increased* social and ecological sustainability – and I say “increased” since full sustainability may be not even thinkable on this planet in the presence of industrial economy.

JX: In my opinion, the general competing approach is eco-modernism. When addressing city development policies, local governments do not explicitly talk about economic growth but rather about providing employment, improving well-being,

reducing inequalities, etc. Those goals are shared by degrowth, but with the eco-modernist approach, the pathway is still to build new structures and infrastructures and try to take care of the social and environmental while growing economically. Similar narratives are, therefore, often accepted by local residents. Post-growth urban development has the same goals but interprets them differently and within planetary boundaries. With the eco-modernist approach to planning, social and ecological aspects tend to be treated separately, in a fragmented way, and this lack of a holistic perspective has consequences on urban development.

SC: What is your scientific relation to the non-urban? In your vision, what are its boundaries, and what is its relation to a post-growth era?

JX: My general relation to post-growth is the space, and space is connected to land use and spatial policies, including planning. Just like “the urban” can be large cities and city-regions as well as smaller towns, also the definition of what is non-urban is context-dependent. Nonetheless, my approach to the urban and to the non-urban in a post-growth perspective is quite concrete, i.e. how to stop or even reduce human appropriation of nature, land uptake, and the environmental impacts through spatial strategies, which ought to be adapted to the specific geographical context. The reduction of environmental impacts has to be done in a way that is socially and spatially just. My concern is about how the surrounding institutional settings could facilitate this. I can also mention an ongoing research project that is focused on non-urban or rural settlements with very small population sizes, as defined by Norwegian standards and statistical categories. And that is about holiday homes, which are often located and spread out in rural areas with easy access to nature: forests, mountains, coastal areas, even distant from the villages. Here, peculiar challenges exist, and in the research project, we partly address the issue from a degrowth perspective.

SC: Actually, holiday homes, second homes, and leisure, in general, are among what Lefebvre⁸ considers as part of the urban phenomenon, i.e. the city extending to what is considered

⁸ See: Lefebvre H. (2003). *The urban revolution*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

non-urban to perform urban-like activities, which I would say are often performed by urban dwellers and functional to some sort of urban life, that indeed tends to be replicated where we go to escape from it; and this may bring urban expectations, infrastructures, services, and purchasing power to the countryside, to the mountains, to the forests too.

JX: Actually, what you described applies here in Norway too: there is a strong urban-rural relationship with these cabins, which – as you said – can be considered as the expansion of the urban recreational hinterland⁹ for city people. A very special challenge here in terms of degrowth or sustainability is the transportation between the urban and the rural areas, between primary and second homes. So – especially for post-growth urban and regional studies – the issue is not about the urban and the rural separately but about dealing with these dimensions altogether in a relational manner.

SC: I agree. And what are the directions you would like post-growth urban and regional studies to explore in the future?

JX: The first direction I would like to focus on is the spatial scales: there is quite a consensus among degrowth scholars that a multi-scalar strategy is needed. Yet I do not think this is only about local scale initiatives being scaled up and avoiding being co-opted; it should also be about how to scale down and scale in, and about a certain scale that has its own potential and cannot be substituted with other scales. Studies on the multi-scale approach ought to be expanded. Another important topic that post-growth urban studies can address is the Global North and South – which we have already touched upon – especially from a relational perspective; for example, how can a decolonial perspective on socio-spatial justice be integrated into local planning? In local spatial plans, socio-spatial justice is usually covered, but often in a very limited way, e.g. only considering local inhabitants, but how about the Global South? For instance, construction materials may have been produced somewhere else, imported from the South; however, sustainable building standards rarely consider the impacts of such building

⁹ The term “hinterland” is here used based on e.g. Brenner N., Schmid C. (2015). «Towards a new epistemology of the urban?». *City*, 19 (2-3): 151-182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2015.1014712>.

materials on the Global South. If such a perspective is taken in local planning, how would that change local land use towards a different direction? A third topic I would like post-growth urban studies to explore is planners' transformative agency. Very few post-growth studies touch upon planners' agency; however, I think any societal transformation is driven by agents and agency, so what can planners do? What potentials do they have? How is their agency related to the larger economic and political structures?

SC: And in all of these trajectories, what major challenges (or barriers) can you envision in their development if the ultimate goal is to ensure real social equity and real ecological sustainability altogether? Anything that we may collectively explore further – even refining our current expertise?

JX: This is a broad question. First of all, the economic structures have to be changed if degrowth initiatives are not to be co-opted. We do not imagine a situation where isolated degrowth islands lie in a growth ocean characterized by the capitalist system. This is also about scaling in degrowth by addressing the capitalist structures. We know from history that capitalism is very adaptable and persistent, even with all the crises the system has experienced, including the pandemic, which provided opportunities for radical societal changes but were later absorbed by capitalism's wires. Transforming the capitalist economic structures is a huge challenge. Also, if we look at the big technology companies, they are becoming more and more powerful and defining social, political, and economic life. I think this is a non-democratic process and ought to be re-politicized and checked. This is related to the very deep capitalist economic structures; that is why I think that, of course, planning and planners can be a driver of societal change, but they are also quite constrained by the larger societal conditions, i.e. the capitalist neoliberal market economy and its ideology.

An additional challenge I can refer to, based on my experience, is about mobilizing the larger society, especially in the presence of representative democracy where parties and the political landscape are so much influenced by the opinions of voters: if degrowth or post-growth does not gain popularity among the larger public, changes will not be made by politicians. Thus, actions are important at the level of the degrowth imaginary,

namely, how degrowth can tell a very coherent narrative that is able to compete with mainstream growth thinking and neoliberalism?

SC: At least at present, mainstream narratives are indeed more appealing and reassuring – perhaps regardless of their being credible, just, and feasible in the long run. I think additional transdisciplinary (and purely, more highly political) discourses may be done to address the real representativity of the so-called “representative democracy” and the event of politicians only acting based on the majority will, without considering the deep capitalist structures that you have just mentioned, i.e. a system that – after centuries of refining – works in a given way, oriented to given goals, and where actions in the overall imaginary may help walk toward reaching some leverage point for change¹⁰, but a change in the imaginary may not necessarily imply some change *per se*, in the absence of consequent (coherent) actions to shift some socio-ecologically unsustainable system – upon which we still depend and that we still fuel – to different goals, based on different values.

10 See: Meadows D. H. (1999). *Leverage points: Places to intervene in a system*. Hartland, VT: The Sustainability Institute; Abson D. J., Fischer J., Leventon J., Newig J., Schomerus T., Vilsmaier U., von Wehrden H., Abernethy P., Ives C. D., Jager N. W., Lang D. J. (2017). «Leverage points for sustainability transformation». *Ambio*, 46:30-39.

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