

# Curating change: Spatial utopian politics and the architecture of degrowth

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**Abstract:** Geographical scholarship has done much to help us understand how we have arrived at the current juncture of socioecological disaster, but the discipline has been far less successful at imagining and enacting alternative systems and practices. In response, this article examines the potentials and challenges for creative geographers to build critical projects that consider how socioecological alternatives might be imagined and/or enacted. The focus is on the author's own experience as a geographer curating the Oslo Architecture Triennale 2019 with the radical theme of "degrowth". The article centres around the critical-creative methodologies as well as politics of architecture stemming from this curatorial experiment.

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ground the arguments presented in this article, as well as the three anonymous reviewers that provided helpful feedback. I extend my gratitude to my co-curators Matthew Dalziel, Maria Smith and Phineas Harper for accommodating my research on and with the Triennale in such a generous way.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

We have to “act now” to avoid the cascading tipping points of multispecies disaster, so we are told in the recent IPCC report (2018). Without social, political and economic change, the future of our planet is seen to be at risk. Global environmental and social justice movements drive multitudes to action all over the world, encouraging nonviolent and creative civil disobedience in order to change the world. In this unprecedented moment, an urgent question is cast into relief: how can the discipline of geography respond and contribute to this growing energy by enabling forms of creative practice that imagines and engenders just and sustainable alternatives to existing political, economic, and ecological practices?

This question presents a key challenge for geographers today. As Braun (2015) observes, although geographical literature has done much to help us understand how we have arrived at the current juncture of socioecological disaster, the discipline has been far less successful at imagining sustainable alternatives. In response, this article makes two key contributions to geographical scholarship. Firstly, it outlines a politics of architecture that consider how socioecological transformation might be imagined and/or enacted. And secondly, it explores how this form of politics can be developed and put to practice through my own work as a creative geographer curating the Oslo Architecture Triennale 2019, and the critical-creative methodologies stemming from this curatorial experiment.

Oslo Architecture Triennale is the Nordic regions’ largest festival for architecture, attracting 50.000 national and international visitors. Since its foundation in 2000, it has become one of the world’s prominent arenas for dissemination and discussion of architectural and urban

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challenges. In a wide programme of exhibitions, publications, conferences and discussions, the Triennale explores themes such as sustainability (2013), innovation (2007), future visions (2003) and belonging (2016) during a 10-weeks festival every third year. The Triennale aims to reach a broad audience consisting not only of built environment professionals, but also the general public, and one can attend (most of) the events for free. The curator(s) of the Triennale are selected through an international open call, following its three-year cycle. I responded to the call together with the practising architects Maria Smith and Matthew Dalziel, and the architecture critic Phineas Harper. We proposed, and won the bid, to curate a festival exploring what we coined as “the architecture of degrowth”. Degrowth is an idea and social movement proposed by scholars, public intellectuals and activists (see e.g., Gorz, 1975; Latouche, 2009; Kallis, 2018), acting as a powerful call to reject the obsession with economic growth and seek out alternative ways of organizing society in which social and ecological flourishing matters most. The architecture of degrowth accordingly promotes a long-term commitment to planetary care as the most important perspective for architecture and urbanism in our times of catastrophic social and environmental degradation. Hence, it is rooted in a feminist-inspired, relational care approach to architecture (see e.g., Fitz et al., 2019).

The article’s first key contribution to geographical scholarship then, is to outline a politics of architecture that explores degrowth as a way to promote imaginative openings and dislocations in order to direct architectural thought and practice in new ways. By focusing on the role of the architect in situating her work along the lines of care giving and interconnectedness rather than economic growth and the individual architect-genius, the article does not only discuss and critique existing politics and power relations within architecture, but it proposes ways to reconfigure them. The article accordingly contributes to recent efforts within the geographies of architecture that have sought to reinvigorate the politics of architecture. These efforts have been important to foreground the various power relations at play in architecture and the struggles to overcome them (see e.g., Dekeyser, 2017; Kraftl, 2014), as well as to encourage geographers to work more closely with architects in terms of exploring creative, applied and action-led modes of working with space (see e.g., Lorne, 2017; Jacobs and Merriman, 2011). However, the problem with the notion of politics that is activated through much of this work, according to Kullman (2019), is that it has lost some its distinctiveness as everything about architecture is seen to be political. At the same time, Kullman is wary of setting up principles for political practice in architecture, as this

endeavour also comes with the risk of making generalisations of the political character of the whole field. Kullman therefore suggests understanding the politics for geographies of architecture as moments of disruption: the users of architecture destabilize the given identity and/or dominant uses of a building so as to (re)configure spaces in ways that improve their living conditions. In line with this understanding, I see the politics of architecture as a dynamic process aiming to open up new configurations of spaces. However, I am wary of how focusing solely on the use(rs) of architecture risks positing political practice as being merely reactive to what is presumed to be there already, rather than being generative of new and different spaces and ways of living. Hence, I shift focus from the use(rs) of architecture to the architects themselves in order to outline what Kraftl (2007) terms a “spatial utopian politics”, that is a spatial politics that embraces architecture’s long-standing relation with utopianism in various forms in order to envision and engender alternative future spaces and ways of living (see Pinder, 2005; Kraftl, 2007).

There has been a widespread suspicion and rejection of utopian thought and associated prescriptive or normative approaches to political or ecological change within geography (Braun, 2015). This is not surprising given the significance of Marxism for critical geography. Marx and Engels were famously critical of how utopias may serve to harmonize rather than critically leverage present conditions (Pinder, 2015). As blueprints of the good society, utopias could be seen to constrain, rather than expand, future possibilities. Spatial utopian politics should not be conflated with associated architectural attempts to program the future in advance through planned and built “solutions”. Rather, spatial utopian politics relate to an unplanned and processual notion of utopia, in which architecture is seen as a form of “spatial agency” (Awan et al., 2011) that provide avenues where alternative societal structures and systems can be explored. Lorne (2017) defines spatial agency in line with currents of political praxis within architecture in which architectural skills and expertise are deployed not just in the design of a specific building but in more open-ended and politically progressive ways. Examples include architects who seek to expand project briefs, who design for indeterminacy, and who appropriate and re-use under-used resources and oppose neoliberal and oppressive agendas. In discussing Oslo Architecture Triennale as a platform for developing and promoting such architectural practices, I respond to Lorne’s call for geographical scholarship that arises from a direct collaboration with “a growing body of socially-orientated, politically-motivated architects who go significantly beyond the designing of material objects” (2017, p. 269).

The second key contribution of this article is to explore how spatial utopian politics can be put to practice through the creative practice of curation. Moving away from the traditional idea of curating as an activity that seeks to transmit knowledge through objects on display, “the curatorial” is introduced as an open-ended and speculative process that aims to intervene in the world by going beyond what is known, given or deemed inevitable. The curatorial, then, provides an avenue for examining the creative expression produced by geographers as a form of political critique. The article accordingly responds to recent criticism of the lack of engagement between the creative and the critical in relation to geography’s creative (re)turn (see e.g., Marston and de Leeuw, 2013; Tolia-Kelly, 2016; de Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017). De Leeuw and Hawkins (2017) link this lack to a situation in which creative geographers predominantly focus on creating geographic understandings about the world, rather than on challenging and changing how people live in the world. Hence, despite the long relationship between geographical knowledge-making and creative practice, there is a need for more attention and assessment of the potential political impacts and implications of critical-creative work in geography (see e.g. Marston and de Leeuw, 2013). In response, this article lays out the sort of political work creative expression can be understood to do in geography by outlining a critical-creative curatorial approach to architecture, through which socioecological change might be imagined and/or enacted.

I present my argument in five parts. Firstly, I introduce more fully the utopianism of degrowth, spatial utopian politics and the architecture of degrowth. Secondly, I argue that the field of architecture is a tricky context to promote and imagine socioecological change. In the third part, I nevertheless outline a curatorial approach that aims to work productively within this tricky context. In the fourth part, I illustrate this curatorial approach through concrete examples, and finally, I discuss how the Triennale reconfigured the grounds on which architecture is thought and practiced.

## **2 THE UTOPIANISM OF DEGROWTH**

Degrowth, as an idea and movement, originates in activist and intellectual circles in France, where the social philosopher André Gorz coined the term “décroissance” (degrowth) in 1972. Some thirty years later, the term gained traction in activists circles, such as the anti-globalisation movement, marking a rebirth of radical environmentalism against the perceived apolitical consensus of sustainable development (Kallis and March, 2015). The most prominent advocate of degrowth is perhaps Serge Latouche (2009) for whom degrowth is a

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project of decolonizing the imaginary from growth. The ideology of growth is seen as continued colonial relations “with a pretence of generalized betterment” (Demaria et al., 2019, p. 439), while securing a resource expansion that only benefits the rich minority of the world’s population. Degrowth, in this sense, is not a material process of lowering consumption, an irrelevant demand for those who are living below limits, but a sustained critique or resistance to the destructive and extractive processes of growth and “development” (Kallis and March, 2015; Demaria et al., 2019; Paulson, 2017). As such, degrowth is not simply an affirmative imaginary that signifies the opposite of growth. Rather it can be described as “a horizon chartered through confrontation with hegemonic worldviews” (Kallis and March, 2015, p. 362). This can be seen as a utopian horizon because it points to an altogether qualitatively different world that evolves through confrontation with the existing one in order to open up new imaginaries and spaces (D’Alisa et al., 2014).

As curators of the Triennale, we conceptualized degrowth as this form of utopian horizon and linked the idea of the architecture of degrowth to what Lefebvre calls “experimental utopias” (1996 [1968]) – a concept he developed in close collaboration with architectural practice. Experimental utopias navigate two pitfalls in envisioning possible futures: firstly, that of projecting the future based on circumstances that are already accomplished and thus extrapolating only from the given; and secondly, that of a priori constructions of abstract utopias which are concerned with ideal cities and spaces that are disconnected from specific situations (Pinder, 2015). Key to experimental utopias, then, is that they refuse what is presented to us as given, but at the same time they do not lose sight of what already is and always begin from the activities in which people are engaged. This way, experimental utopias constitute a dialectical process in which one steps back from the real in order to cut a path that leads beyond the actual world already realized and toward a possible world yet to come (Purcell, 2013).

As an experimental utopia, the architecture of degrowth poses a political critique that imagines a preferable system to the status quo. In doing this, the notion of degrowth faces two key challenges. The first challenge is that this critique risks being misunderstood as a romanticization of poverty, of oppressive non-Westernized societies (Navarro, 2013, cited in Kallis and March, 2015), and/or as a fetishization of the local (Romano, 2012). These misunderstandings seem to situate degrowth as part of what Krafft terms “comforting utopias” (2007, p. 122). Comforting utopias are rooted in the idea of utopia as a prefixed

positive destination and are bound up in a desire for safety, comfort and homeliness in which, for example, community-based rural visions and practices provide a remedy for the “fragmentation” of postmodernity (Silk, 1999, cited in Kraftl, 2007). As an experimental utopia, the architecture of degrowth, however, is not comforting but “unsettling” (Kraftl, 2007, p. 125): it disrupts the comforting, stable “good” to imagine spaces that are unknowable and perhaps for some even “unthinkable”.

The second challenge relates to the first: the unknowable and unthinkable often takes on a negative dimension in public debates. Yusoff, for example, observes how the wider discussions around climate change have “revolved around the questions of what do we know, how do we know it (is it a valid form of knowledge production?), and what should be done about it” (2009, p. 1011). There is little or no room in such discussions for the ambiguities inherent in the unknowable and unthinkable, despite the fact that these aspects are an essential part of human experience. According to Yusoff, this has had a dramatic effect on responses to climate change that tend to focus on the production of models, predictions and scenarios that in their eradication of uncertainties tend to fulfil political rather than scientific objectives. The result is less of an empowering arena for debate around wide ranging future socio-environmental possibilities (that we do not yet know), and more a system focusing on certainty and reason, providing clearly defined parameters of what is open for debate. Absent from this system is a “politics of the possible” (Swyngedouw, 2018) and a naming of different socio-environmental futures that may introduce what is currently unthinkable and ultimately broaden our scope of actions.

As I demonstrate in this article, spatial utopian politics has the potential to introduce a “politics of the possible” to public debates by accommodating, rather than suppressing, the lack or underdevelopment of ideas. This way, it may explore what is currently thought of as impossible. Indeed, as de Leeuw et al., citing Marx, point out, “[i]t is to a lack, a space of the still undefined and unknown, that we must turn for some kind of always-open illumination” (2017, p. 157). Kraftl further relates this “lack” to the potential of unsettling utopias to incite a “dialogue between incompleteness and the imagination” (Woodward, 2001, p. 15, cited in Kraftl, 2007). This concern with the unknowable, he argues, opens out onto performative visions of utopia that relates to nonrepresentational styles of working. I appreciate how these nonrepresentational styles of working pay attention to creative practice, to embodied ways of being, doing and knowing, and to the imaginative ways in which space and place are made.



However, I am sceptical about the ways in which notions of performance and performativity are often applied in nonrepresentational theory, specifically in relation to the idea of utopia. For example, in his attempt to conceive a performative and architectural understanding of utopia through nonrepresentational theory, Kraftl, citing Thrift, emphasises how “performance conjures up the precarious ‘emptiness’ of the now” (Thrift, 2000, p. 233, cited in Kraftl, 2007). This emptiness, Kraftl argues, implies an inherent creativity from which something new might emerge. There is a risk with this focus on emptiness to reproduce colonial imaginations of an empty space ripe for exploration/exploitation. The metaphorically blank canvas, as Deleuze suggests is never blank but densely populated with virtual clichés (Deleuze, 2003, cited in Yusoff and Gabrys, 2011). The work of spatial utopian politics, then, is not to cover a blank canvas with new images, but to rid it of all the clichés already occupying it. As Yusoff and Gabrys explains, clichés in this context, can be understood as “habits of sight and thought, or apriori imaginative framings, that prevent the imaginative openings and dislocations that might direct thought and practice in new ways” (2011, p. 528). The prefix “de” in degrowth signifies this form of utopian approach: “a *de* for decolonialisation, a *de* for liberation from” the dominant imaginary of growth (Kallis and March, 2015, p. 528). In similar vein, the Triennale attempted to liberate architecture from the ideology of progress and growth.

### **3 ARCHITECTURE, POWER, GROWTH**

In modernity, architecture has predominantly been based on an ideology of progress and growth with a promise of building a better future. As a practical activity, this ideology inevitably requires time, money and resources. Not surprisingly, then, architecture has always been entangled with the ruling power of the current economic system. Today, current conditions of accelerated neoliberalism, oligarchism and authoritarian populism have further locked architectural production to market-driven logics. These logics are extremely averse to the idea of an architecture of degrowth, which we – the curators – aligned with a relational and caring approach to architecture. To feminist scholar Maria Puig de La Bellacasa care is defined through connectedness and interdependency, as an activity that thinks of “subjects in connectedness with others” (2017, p.70). Tracing the historical development of architecture, Krasny (2019), observes how the idea of the modern architect directly contradicts this notion of care. Modern architecture, she observes, is linked to detachment, autonomy and the independent, almost exclusively male, genius. Hence, despite the fundamental function of

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architecture to provide shelter indispensable to the continuation of human life and survival, the glorification of independence which is closely linked to the intellectual and creative capacities of the genius, positions the architect's work outside the realms of connectedness, dependency, social reproduction and care giving. As she concludes, "the notion of the architect being a carer, traditionally gendered female and considered menial labour performed by racialized others, has been completely absent from the discourse on architecture" (p.33). The reasons for this, she notes, are as much political as they are economic:

"They have to do with the classed, sexualized and racialized division of power and labor that historically excluded spatial practices performed by black, indigenous people, people of color, women or workers from the idea of Architecture with a capital A as it was discursively shaped by Western thought" (ibid.).

As a consequence, modern architecture, she states, "is very often built on a tabula rasa claim, a deeply colonial mechanism that annihilates nature and everyone and everything that existed on and with the land before" (p.35). This is illustrated in much contemporary architecture. Lejano and González (2017), for example, observes a tendency in urban (re)development processes in which planners and architects project an imagined community on to a place and direct growth and change toward the same. Invariably, they argue, this turns the focus away from the existing community, effaces it, and through a series of disciplinary mechanisms, unravels the social fabric of everyday life. In similar vein, the use of computer generated images (CGIs) to express visions of future urban space in architecture and urban planning, is critiqued for projecting the future as a terrain that is empty, open and subject to colonisation (see e.g., Adam and Groves, 2007; Dunman, 2017; Speight, 2013). The CGIs are criticized for transforming the urban environment into sleek promotional images, displaying racial homogeneity, economic inequality, atomised subjectivities, cultural appropriations, speculative global investments and a privately managed public realm. The future is predicted, transformed and controlled for the benefit and wealth creation of the present.

The architectural theorist Jeremy Till (1994) argues that the ways in which we conceive of and eventually build cities, and the buildings that constitute them, are to a large extent determined by the way that we represent them. He accordingly problematizes the

diagrammatic, large scale and rationally orientated techniques that are predominantly employed in standard modes of architectural presentation. Through these techniques, the architectural project is reduced to a coherent and rational system presented through stable, unified and ordered elements: “[it] proceeds in steady manner from the scale of the city, through the scale of the building and finally to the scale of the architectural detail” (p. 239). The production of the built environment is depicted as a linear process that reduce the city to a series of codes that are reductive and exclusive: the scale excludes the realm of the body, the graphic excludes the social and political, and the rational method of representation exclude the imaginative, the suppressed and the irrational. In other words, the city is presented as a form of master plan and system to be controlled, rather than as a social product of inhabitable difference. Till argues that the diagrammatic, large scale and rationally orientated techniques that are employed in these presentations remove architects from a personal involvement in the construct through abstract codes and methods. As a result, architects tend to see themselves not as citizens but as “detached orderers”. The intentions behind this detached form of ordering might be benign and well-founded, but the method of ordering is not: the removal of the architect from a personal involvement in the construct may inevitably lead to a structure of power being imposed.

Considering how the origin and trajectory of modern architecture result in a somewhat detached practice, it is perhaps not surprising that the origin of architecture triennials and biennials is the World Fair. The World Fairs provided institutional backing for the internal “nation building” of the colonial and industrial nations during the nineteenth century. They were “colossal hegemonic machines of a globally Western culture” (Marchart, 2014, p. 2) that played key roles in the development of moderns visions of cities (Maycroft, 2001). These visions promoted images of capitalist utopias whose realisation was made to appear inevitable. Maycroft (2001), for example, describes how the World Fairs in New York city (1939/64) coupled technological futurism with commercial interests through utopias such as the General Motor’s sponsored “Futurama”. The installation featured a model city of Le Corbusierian style skyscrapers arranged around the intersection of two gigantic superhighways.

Since the creation of the first architectural biennale in Venice in 1979, architecture biennials and triennials have, however, evolved to be less about the displays of commercial architecture and more about knowledge production and social engagement. The growing

number of architecture festivals worldwide are increasingly becoming important platforms for formal experimentation, testing architecture's relationship to, and relevance for, larger social and environmental issues (Szacka, 2019). But, while for example Oslo Architecture Triennale has made it an explicit aim to reach a wide variety of publics, the audience of architecture festivals mainly consists of white middle-class architectural scholars and practitioners. This is a tricky context in which to promote and imagine socioecological change, as those that are benefitting from a system are more unlikely to see its injustices. The architectural curators Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley accordingly describe architecture biennials and triennials as mainly being devoted to "a small, safe extension of the present" (Szacka, 2019, p.97):

it allows the city to stage possible futures in a way that is not really dangerous. You know, like how to stop the future from being the future, or how to not be surprised. There is no work being done that is scandalous, that is completely irrational and unthinkable, absurd, adventurous, obscure. Everything is clear and relates to concepts that everybody pretends to agree upon, like sustainability, community, biodiversity, interactivity, smartness, and so on (ibid.).

My fellow curators (Maria, Matthew and Phineas) and I were accordingly sceptic to the 'show-the-latest-greatest-while-drinking-prosecco' exercise that we perceived the biennial and triennial culture of architecture to be. While we acknowledged that most biennials and triennials were working with the best intentions, we were painfully aware of how the institutionalized context of architecture festivals risked (re)producing and entrenching norms of ubiquitous white-centric, heteronormative and/or patriarchal colonialisms that privilege certain disciplinary histories over others. Calling for degrowth within this context risked setting a global agenda in a neocolonial manner.

Degrowth is a term conceptualized and promoted in the Global North, and many people in the Global South see it simply as one more intellectual term arriving to them from Europe, insufficiently sensitive to their realities (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). There is an important difference between frugality as a choice and frugality as a social condition. Yet, critiques to development articulated in the Global South and alternative and/or Indigenous projects promoting alternative life-worlds have much in common with the degrowth project. Hence, in order to avoid unintendedly creating new forms of intellectual domination and

imposing a homogeneous and prefixed model for transformation, degrowth practitioners need to cultivate specific practices of solidarity with other people's struggles and concern. This raises the obvious question: is it not rather privileged to curate an architecture festival on degrowth in one of the richest countries in the world, to claim that economic growth is bad and opt for the long-term vision of socio-ecological justice, when the lived realities of many people are shaped by struggles for survival?

#### **4 CONTRADICTION, CURATION, CO-PRODUCTION**

By curating an architecture triennial, we, as curators, were inevitably part of the very forces we wished to resist. In addition to the risk of setting the global agenda in a neocolonial manner, the organisation of the Triennale involved the pursuit of corporate sponsorship, the reproduction of unpaid and voluntary work models, the embracing of the role of city-marketers and the appropriation by governmental creative industries agendas. Our edition of the Triennale was certainly caught in the contradiction of promoting degrowth while contributing to an industry with an unsustainable growth imperative of its own.

Broto (2015) observes that the diagnostic mechanism to contradictions is always the same: "contradiction points towards an impossibility that needs to be resolved through the annihilation of one of the terms of the contradiction" (p. 461). The problem with this mechanism, she argues, is that when trying to resolve contradictions by countering static opposites there is a risk of positing alternatives as a liberatory exteriority to the everyday sphere of the production of knowledge, discourse, and institutions. The idea of this liberatory exteriority constitutes a common paradox in which attempts to change the world are accused of hypocrisy because these attempts inevitably are still part of how the current world works. As curators of the Triennale, then, we were faced with the challenge of having to navigate between the perceived naiveté of calling for degrowth within a privileged growth-based system, and the evils of imposition, in which the concern with social and environmental justice is regarded as a surrogate of oppressive practices posing the question: "who are you to say what is just?" (Campbell, 2012).

The challenge above is well familiar to social scientists dealing with the issues of power, privilege, location and authorship that pervades all research practices. As with the Triennale, a central question for researchers is how knowledges can be produced across multiple divides (of power, geopolitical and institutional locations, and axes of difference) without

reinscribing the interests of the privileged. In partial answer to this question, feminist geographer Wendy Larner (1995, cited in Nagar, 2014) states that working with an understanding of positionality involves developing frameworks that integrate conflicts and contradictions. The goal of these frameworks is not to assert unity based on common experience, but to reach a somewhat workable compromise that enable us to coalesce around specific issues. The question is not who is producing the knowledge, but what kinds of struggles the knowledge makes possible. The philosopher Alexandre Kojève accordingly argues that “one can in fact overcome contradiction of a given existence only by modifying the given existence, by transforming it through actions” (1969, p. 462). Hence, as Broto (2015) points out, contradictions can be seen as activating a desire for intervention and action by enabling a diagnosis of instances of concrete reality. The point, then, is not to resolve the contradictions but to acknowledge them as a step towards a heightened awareness and an active, political mode of being in the world (Rogoff, 2006). Our concern as curators in this regard was to explore various ideas about what an architecture of degrowth is and could be through a collective endeavour based on the interconnectedness between the multiplicity of experiences, struggles and strategies that stem from different histories and territories.

Approaching curating as this kind of collective endeavour requires a rethinking of what curating means. Conventionally, curating is defined as a gamut of (professional) practices concerned with setting up exhibitions and other modes of display (de Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017). Geography has a long-standing engagement with such curatorial practices, which historically have centred around landscape art exhibitions. However, in the last decade geographers have begun to broaden their understandings of what curation is and can be as part of geography’s wider creative (re)turn (see e.g., Driver, 2013, Tolia-Kelly and Raymond, 2020). Curation is here increasingly seen as a political practice, “enabling us not only to narrate alternative stories, but also to critically intervene in particular places” (De Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017, p. 34). This understanding of curation has much in common with what art scholars, curators and critics like Rogoff (2006), O’Neill (2007) and Lind (2009) have termed “the curatorial”.

Moving away from the traditional idea of curating as an activity forcing synthesis and rushing to embody itself in, for example, an exhibition, “the curatorial” presupposes an unbound framework allowing questions, things, ideas and outcomes to be unravelled collectively, over time. The curatorial is here seen as a process of linking objects, images,

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processes, people, locations, histories and discourses in physical space, in a way that is speculative and open-ended. While traditional curating predominantly is about the curator(s) transmitting the supposedly intrinsic meaning of the objects on display (Sitzia, 2018), the curatorial focuses on meaning-making as a co-produced process. The aim is to disturb existing power relations, create friction and push new ideas, in order to go beyond the already known (Lind, 2009). In line with this aim, we decided not to present the ready-made architecture models and plans (representing the standard modes of architectural representation as critiqued by Till) that are normally put on display in architecture festivals. Instead, we replaced the traditional architecture exhibition with a fully functioning library, titled *The Library of Degrowth Futures (The Library)*.

The choice to create a library was rooted in the idea that libraries are important sites for citizen involvement and social transformation (Goulding, 2009). By decommodifying and democratizing goods and knowledge, libraries promote ideas of equality and emancipation. *The Library* was filled with lendable items that visitors could weave their own personal knowledge and experience of the architecture of degrowth from, onto and around. The items were gathered through an open call for existing or speculative degrowth ideas and projects in the form of “lendable items that empower citizens to engage more deeply with creating and experiencing architecture” in order to “challenge and shift the boundaries of what is considered permissible, desirable and possible for architecture and urbanism” (Oslotriennale, 2018). In response to the open call, we received more than 400 proposals from architects, activists, scientists, writers and artists from across the world. While we wanted to include as many proposals as possible in order to highlight the rich terrain of alternative architectural practices, logistics and budgetary constraints meant that we had to narrow the final number of items to 80. These took many different forms, including books, furniture, tapestry, paintings, tools, compost, plants, games, devices and material samples. What they had in common was that they embodied a spatial utopian politics that challenged the figure of the autonomous and detached modern architect and focused on an architecture of degrowth, promoting other ways of knowing and practising architecture. Critical here, as I demonstrate in the next part, was that architecture was situated across various scales of connectedness, dependency, social reproduction and care giving.

## 5 TOWARDS AN ARCHITECTURE OF DEGROWTH

Going beyond the needs of the client, even beyond “green” or “sustainable” architecture, and beyond the ideal of building a beautiful object, *The Library* explored an architecture of degrowth that fulfils the basic tasks of sharing responsibilities for caring for our world. This included many different approaches to care. For example, a large tapestry titled *Two Thousand Years of Non-Urban History* by the group Civil Architecture, provided an inquiry into the historic-political discourse that separated culture/nature, and architecture/care. The tapestry told an alternative history of the Arab Gulf foregrounding that the West has much to learn from civilizations that thrived before the violent imposition of industrial capitalism which is manifested in the monumental skylines emerging from a sparse landscape dominated by oil fields. The alternative history was one of communal cooperation and care, planning around scarce resources and trade, including the falaj and qanat water systems, fish traps and the desert kites of the Arabian Peninsula.

Another alternative history was presented through an installation of a kaleidoscopic living atlas *Disruptive (De)Growth Repository of Southern Ecosystems* by the Hunguta Collective. The kaleidoscope worked as a means of subverting the assumed objectivity of Western Canonical spatial knowledge production by insisting on an openness to plural perspectives. It questioned how degrowth could be understood in and embodied across the spatial practices of ecosystems in sub-Saharan Africa.

Like the two projects above, many items in *The Library* focused on how architecture starts with nature, what is already present in the world around us, rather than the tabula rasa claim of modern architecture. Nature is both the source of architecture in terms of building shelters to protect from it, but also in terms of imitating and learning from nature in the building of these shelters and making use of nature as a resource that provides the necessary materials (Krasny, 2019). Foregrounding these perspectives, *The Library* raised questions around how architects, in the process of building, care for nature and other living beings (animals, plants, trees) involved and affected by the building process. For example, one of the larger items in *The Library* was a reading table which was constructed as part of the project *Shelter for one stone, one tree, two people and four birds* by the artist Kalle Grude. The table addressed not only the needs of the human users of the table: the techniques and materials used to construct the table was equally oriented around the care for nature and other living beings. Another example was the installation *Logistics* by the architecture office Lilla Sthml. The installation



invited visitors to *The Library* to become custodians of a pine by bringing home a bag of seeds and with it the responsibility for the time and effort it takes to grow a single pine tree.

Through such projects, *The Library* explored the architect's responsibility for the entire process of building, from the sourcing of materials and the environmental impacts of these processes, to caring for the people (workers, residents, neighbours) involved along with concerns around what has been displaced and how the building will be maintained. Visitors to *the Library* could sit and read on stools made of rammed compressed earth blocks (CEBs) as part of the project *Same, Same but Different* by BC architects & studies. The earth blocks can be made on the building site using nearby resources. They thereby provide an alternative to the long-distance transportation of building materials that make up a significant proportion of construction's carbon footprint. A more radical take on the architect's responsibility for the building process was presented in the book *From Subtraction* by the architecture think tank n'UNDO. The book implicitly addresses "the transformation paradox" (Heikkurinen, 2019) in which the human urge to constantly transform the world is at the same time a root cause of the environmental crisis as too much nature is transformed and turned into human-made capital: rivers are turned into power generators, fossils into gasoline, stones into skyscrapers and so on. In response, n'UNDO proposes that "doing" forms no part of the architectural project, rather "undoing" and "redoing" are the only strategies available. True architecture, the book argues, can be found in simple and everyday interventions, such as orienting a chair to contemplate the landscape. The book *Moving House* by the architecture studio Fragment presented another option: Observing the Norwegian tradition of transporting houses from rural areas to growing urban residential areas, they asked how this tradition could be re-invigorated in Norway, as a form of radical re-use, a source of neighbourly collaboration and as a reframing of the financial models for housing development.

Focusing on caring for residents and neighbours, an installation of letters called *Inventory of Experience* by Bart Decroos and Laura Muyldermans, encouraged visitors to write an "inventory of experience" (Perec, 1997) of their homes, and proposed ways in which these could be included alongside the more technical inventories and surveys involved in architectural project briefs. The project *Away* by the artist James Carey, highlighted the maintenance labour required to keep *the Library* itself running. Foregrounding the labour of care required to maintain a building, the project presented ten glass vessels of waste material produced and collected during each week of the festival, alongside an audio commentary that

featured interviews with the cleaners working in *the Library*. Visitors were also invited to help maintain the Library themselves, by means of the *Gross Domestic Product (GDP)* by the feminist artist collective EDIT. The *GDP* was a vacuum cleaner that acted as a provocation to share reproductive labour as it could only be operated by three people using it simultaneously.

Many of the projects presented in *the Library* were tried and tested, but never at a systemic level. The question, then, was: What stops these alternatives from being normal? A partial answer is that cities are planned and built with a focus on reaching a target/goal/solution by adjusting the current situation rather than changing it (Gunnarsson-Östling and Höjer, 2011). By presenting projects and ideas for sustainable futures that could not and are not flourishing within existing structures, *The Library* highlighted that major societal changes are encouraged and necessary. To flesh out the reality of living in future degrowth worlds shaped by such major societal changes, *The Library* included literary works of fiction.

## 5.1 Gross Ideas

In lieu of the traditional exhibition catalogue that provide a guided analysis of the works put on display in exhibitions, *The Library* presented a book of fiction titled *Gross Ideas: Tales of Tomorrow's Architecture*. The book presented a series of fictional short-stories written by, among others, authors, poets, activists, engineers and architects who had been invited to explore “the buildings, institutions and streets of the near [degrowth] future, glimpsed through the lens of fictional characters, places, and cities” (Harper, 2019, p.2). The short stories included *Materiality* by the activist-author Corey Doctorow, imagining a future in which a high school class visits an old theme park to learn about a bygone and nearly unthinkable time when the materiality of *stuff* were durable rather than being ephemeral as they are used to; in *Bittersweet Building* architectural theorist Rachel Armstrong portrays a future in which architects experiment with incorporate bacteria as part of a building's metabolism ending in a situation in which themselves are absorbed by the microbes and become part of the ‘metabolic community of the landscape’; *The Aquaduct* by engineer Steve Webb, imagining a future in which water-born transport has replaced the wheel (resulting in Britain's railroads being replaced with canals) and consequently altered our relationship to time and productivity; and the graphic novel *Exile's Letter* by the architect studio Mill & Jones, tells the story of building in a low-technology future in which computer generated architecture renderings are replaced with hand drawn poetry. Along with the other stories in

the book, *Exile's Letter* required architecture to rise above the preoccupation with geometric space and develop a more profound understanding of cultural conditions and their interpretation. Architecture was here positioned as a site of interplay between material and perceptual worlds, where concepts cohere, forces pull and attract, and things, discourses, subjects, and objects are framed, contested, and brought into being. The reader, then, is not introduced to stable and premade future worlds, but are taken through the dialectics, struggles and conflicts of making it. Alongside the protagonists of the story, the readers are asked to imagine and immerse themselves in the full range of emotional challenges and difficult choices that have to be made once all the usual landscape markers and reference points have shifted or disappeared.

Citton (2017) highlights the importance of this form of literary immersion for confronting our pre-existing world views and forms of knowledge. He contrasts immersion with market-driven forms of attention such as that of projection. Projection filters stimuli through a number of criteria that we tend to project to the world around us (i.e., certain smells, views, patters we are sensitive or insensitive to). The filters enable us to navigate and feel at ease at the places we are in because they allows us to “attend” to the same things wherever we are. Immersion, on the other hand, is about diving into immersive worlds which are originally alien. He compares this with a traveller’s first arrival in an unfamiliar city where she doesn’t know the language, customs or standards and have to find her way on her own. Since she is not the master of the environment and might not even know the rules of the games played by the locals, her attention consists in an attitude of multidirectional and open-minded vigilances: dangers and rewards can come from any sides so the attention is intense but also wide and unfocused. The goal with immersion is not to reach a final explanation of something or revealing some kind of ultimate truth, rather it is to confront our pre-existing forms of knowledge and certainty with something radical alien which will help us refine and improve our possibly reductive and oversimplified worldview.

For some critics this open-ended and speculative approach was deeply provocative because it did not present any concrete plans or solutions for what a degrowth future would look like. As one critic put it: “it is simply impossible to understand why [the curators] do not inform the audience about what they precisely are after. An exhibition like this should have a sign by the entrance saying THIS IS DEGROWTH” (Brochmann, 2019). Another journalist lamented: “With these shortcomings [the curators] do not only reduce the ability of humans

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to solve problems, they are also reducing their own project. Oslo Architecture Triennale could be a provider of viable solutions in the field, but instead they are delivering science fiction!” (Choi and Austrheim, 2019). And finally, a third journalist referred to what he observed as a series of useless objects (i.e., the vacuum cleaner) in *the Library* and concluded: “Degrowth here seems like nothing more than a childish leisure activity!” (Breivik, 2019). These critiques demonstrate the idiom of economism in public debates, resulting in a situation in which we attribute value and relevance only to what contributes to the economy. Within these economic standards, practices of care are often perceived as functionless, or even childish, precisely because they do not lend themselves to the language of economic exchange and efficiency: Care work is inseparable from the person doing it, and few or no productivity gains are possible (Donath, 2000).

By insisting on the value of the care economy, the architecture of degrowth could not be made productive within the existing economic order, since it was exactly this order that it radically put into question. The inability of the critics to understand this approach points to a key challenge for projects aiming to pose radical critiques of the status quo: such projects are faced with a public debate that favours pragmatic politics over political critique, changing the register from a discussion of problems to a narrow search for solutions. As a result, projects that aim to be both critical and creative are demanded to not only create, through their critical and creative labour, a space where a radically new set of ideological coordinates can be imagined and expressed, but also to fill in that space and translate it into practicable policy for everyday situations. However, contrary to the critiques of *The Library*, I argue, in line with Wainwright and Mann (2015), that changing the world is not merely a question of transformation in politics but about a transformation of the political. In other words, it is necessary to ask not only what political tools, strategies, and tactics might achieve political transformations, but also “what conception of the realm of the political might render adequate tools, strategies, and tactics imaginable” (ibid., p. 314). The notion of “the political” that I refer to here is not about particular policies, conditions, struggles or institutions. Rather, it concerns “the very grounds on which such conditions, institutions, or struggles arise and are formulated” (ibid., p. 315). By situating architecture along the lines of connectedness, dependency and care giving rather than economic production, growth, progress and the independent genius, the Triennale reconfigured the grounds of architecture and fundamentally questioned the ethics and methods by which architecture is practiced.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The perceived inevitability of capitalism and the market economy as the basic organizational structure of society makes it hard to imagine alternative social structures and futures. As D'Alisa et al. (2015) observes, in liberal democracies politics have been reduced to a search for technocratic solutions to pre-framed problems instead of a genuinely antagonistic struggle between alternative visions. Hence, although planetary warming accelerates ecological transformation and human suffering apace, for capitalist states it nevertheless does not yet signify a fundamental transformation of the grounds of the political (Wainwright and Mann, 2015). Yet, in response to current social, economic and environmental crises, transforming the grounds of the political, and hence our perceptions of what is possible or realistic, is central to broaden our scope of action. What we need is “the construction of great new fictions that create real possibilities for constructing different socio-environmental futures” (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 228).

Addressing this need, this article have provided two key contributions to geographical scholarship and methodology. Firstly, it has outlined a spatial utopian politics of architecture that is oriented around the architecture of degrowth as a way of envisioning and engendering alternative future spaces and ways of living. The aim of this kind of politics is not to plan the future in advance by presenting ready-made solutions or blueprints for a specific degrowth society, but rather to promote “a forecast of a future still contingent” (Dewey, 1954, p. 178). That which is contingent opens up possibilities that things could have been otherwise and thus provides avenues where alternative societal structures and systems can be explored. By rooting this contingent future in the idea of an architecture of degrowth, the Triennale sought to unsettle architecture’s historic legacies of independence and push back the pressures of today’s architecture market. The architecture of degrowth foregrounded how environmental damage might be a matter of culture, with implications for how we treat each other and the environment that is much more embedded and deep-rooted than technocratic questions that only address how to reduce carbon emissions. Ready-made and technical solutions tend to see things in isolation, which is the antithesis of a caring approach to architecture. As Tronto (2019) explains: “So when men work and bring home a paycheck, they describe this activity as a form of care” (p.27). However, the paycheck money (while being a form of solution to sustaining livability) is itself not a form of care; it needs to be transformed into clean clothing, food, a safe and pleasant place to live. Doing so requires participating in the

ongoing relations of those who are cared for. Similarly, buildings give shelter, but they do not provide care by themselves. The relationship between the building, its location and context, how it was built and who it will house or displace are all aspects that fundamentally affect the nature of the caring that the building does.

The focus on care did not only promote imaginative openings and dislocations that might direct architectural thought and practice in new ways, it also foregrounded the interconnectedness between multiple discourses, worldviews, values and perspectives that can become an organic alliance between plural movements rather than a homogeneous model for transformation. While the architecture of degrowth did not offer specific recipes or mandates for action in this regard, it opened spaces for new inquiries and new ways of relating architecture to environmental problems and solutions. This did not entail turning away from pragmatic and policy agendas, but rather contributed to developing a wider vision that provides a context for such debates and raise fundamental and often neglected questions about society, processes of societal transformation and what they might become.

Secondly, the curatorial experiment discussed in this article demonstrates how spatial utopian politics can be put to practice through the creative practice of curation. Departing from the idea of curating as an activity forcing synthesis and disseminating the immanent meanings of the objects on display, I have introduced the idea of “the curatorial” as a process in which questions, things, ideas and outcomes are unravelled over time and linked together in speculative and open-ended ways. Curatorial practice is here positioned as a constitutive act of world-making, rather than occurring prior to, or following from, engagement with the world. Important to this form of world-making is that it does not stem from positions of mastery of the world, nor merely as subjects to it, but from a position of “embedded criticality” (Rogoff, 2006) and “being-with-the-world”. Rather than looking for answers and solutions, this approach aimed to enable a heightened awareness and access to a different mode of inhabitation that does not treat things in isolation but respects their relationality. The sort of political work creative expression can do in geography, then, is not simply to provide alternative accounts of those futures considered plausible and desirable and that can therefore be calculated, directed or corralled into being. Rather, creative practice is essential to enrich our sense of possibility by expanding the “politics of the possible”. This implies to engage with a spatial utopian politics that provides the opportunity to “unbound” the search for alternatives from all those categories and practices that limit the ability to explore that which

we consider to be impossible, that which we do not yet fully know or that which is not yet a complete subject in the world. Key to a critical politics of architecture in this regard is not only to use creative practice to learn and know more of architecture, but to use creative methods to unpack and debate the politics of knowing architecture. This entails to critically examine and expose architectural practices and knowledges that are deemed necessary, given and/or inevitable and present an alternative set of architectural politics, knowledges, imaginaries, logics, representations and practices by developing a new and different kind of architecture.

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