Anitra Nelson:

Community Conversation; Eco-collaborative Housing and De-growth

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I am really happy starting off a discussion here in my hometown, an incredible space of creative and sustainability-oriented activism with a culture not only of resistance to McDonalds and pokies, but also of defending our natural and built heritage in our landscape. We are building a regenerative culture as our experiences of struggle, defeat and success are passed on through generations who need to keep fighting for social and environmental justice. These conversations and many much more informal aspects of our everyday life in the Castlemaine region are part of that process.

Today, we face massive environmental and economic challenges, so big, that they call on us to not only to imagine, but also to create, a new kind of world. That new world would need to be much more environmentally sustainable and socially fair and just. I think it will be us at the grassroots who will make these changes; I think that governments and markets are incapable of that task at hand.

That doesn't mean I would give up on asking and partnering with government and even businesses to achieve certain goals and projects. But I certainly wouldn't necessarily expect them to 'dance with us' or to dance to our tune. So, if we are to achieve change, we need to engage in direct action, demanding and achieving the creation of safe and impressive spaces that are all ours, where we nurture collective governance and shared self-management.

Small is Necessary

Today, I just quickly refer to my book released earlier this year *Small is Necessary: Shared Living on a Shared Planet*— because I will talk on it at a Castlemaine library organised event at the Town Hall on Thursday at 5.30pm. *Small is Necessary* is on what I call 'eco-collaborative housing' and focuses on how to achieve small ecological footprints and low impact developments through sharing households that economise on space — making them, ideally, more environmentally sustainable and affordable.

The book covers a range of cases in the English-speaking world along with European examples and I argue that eco-collaborative housing ought to take a strong role in urban and rural redevelopment because it fulfils key criteria with respect to affordability, environmental sustainability and conviviality. The idea to write the book came as I was researching affordable and sustainable housing in the Centre for Urban Research at RMIT University in Melbourne and saw the relevance of drawing on the experiences I had of living in two Australian cooperatives and staying in intentional communities in the United States for, accumulatively, a decade. I came to the topic as an insider with a deep understanding and passion as well as being able to cast a scholarly eye on the development and future of eco-collaborative housing.

The 'small' in small is necessary points to the key criterion for me of us creating smaller, i.e. one planet footprints, that simple living can achieve. In Australia we have been building some of the biggest average-sized new houses in the world. Even though households shrank through the twentieth century from around 4.5 to 2.5 people, houses grew to become the typical McMansion. So we probably need regulations over maximum sizes for houses now rather than minimum ones.

Another solution, is for co-living in the big spaces we now have. So *Small is Necessary* catalogues a gamut of shared housing models from living with a couple of other non-kin in rented or owned dwellings, through to sharing land and associated activities, cohousing, eco-communes, ecovillages, and politically oriented squats. It's about pulling down fences and working as neighbourhoods.

I think that the most inspiring cases are housing solutions with utopian drivers and outcomes dreamed up and realised by activists, such as the cultural and sustainability based ufaFabrik in Berlin, and the rural Twin Oaks in Virginia that strives for collective sufficiency. Such grassroots groups united in Occupy!-style to form typically ecovillages independent of both state and market — drawing on rich socialist, feminist and anarchist traditions but with a contemporary concern to address climate change through radical innovations, frugal and convivial living. They have formed communities that point towards a community mode of production.

All this is a good introduction to the main topic, 'housing for degrowth', that I'll talk about tonight. The degrowth movement was born in Europe and is still centred there. Here in Australia there are scholar-activists like myself who identify with the degrowth movement. Samuel Alexander from the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute and retired sociologist from the University of New South Wales Ted Trainer are prominent advocates of degrowth but we haven't formed a formal movement here. That's partly because we all have our fingers in many pies and to some extent achieve degrowth principles through other movements and networks.

So, what exactly is degrowth?

'Degrowth', a type of 'postgrowth', is becoming a strong political, practical and cultural movement for downscaling and transforming societies beyond capitalist growth and non-capitalist productivism to achieve global sustainability and to satisfy everyone's basic needs.

To explain more, I will draw on the second chapter of our collection coming out in the Routledge Environmental Humanities series later this year, a book called *Housing for Degrowth: Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities* that I co-edited with François Schneider. François has established and lives in a degrowth centre on the border of France and Spain. In the second chapter François writes:

Degrowth challenges the hegemony of growth and calls for a democratically-led proportional and redistributive downscaling of production and consumption as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice and well-being (Demaria et al. 2013). A consensus for degrowth centres on reducing the exploitation of natural resources and humans, because 'planetary boundaries' and social limits to growth are being surpassed. Furthermore, degrowth implies other types of institutions and ethics, and an efficiency, which is frugal or based on reducing inputs and outputs.

Before I mentioned Ted Trainer and Sam Alexander — these two advocates of degrowth have very much emphasised 'simple living', or what Ted calls the Simpler Way. I come from a much more collective approach to living and creating change. To pick up again from François' second chapter:

Degrowth involves a multiplicity of actors working in complementary ways from the bottom-up (from the individual to the collective) and from the top-down (from the collective to the individual). These actors include, amongst others, practitioners, researchers, artists and activists. Degrowth involves a set of values typically encompassing the search for more justice, recuperation of ecosystems, care for future generations, preference for convivial, non-utilitarian human relations, the deepening of democracy, the importance of wellbeing and giving full meaning to our lives. Degrowth is about keeping the functional; a great deal of social and low-tech innovation, so-called 'frugal innovation'; a bottom-up refusal of certain technologies and reduction of others; the integration of limits; and the adjustment to a new systemic reality.

Now I expect many people in this room, even if not card-carrying members of the degrowth movement, actively practice degrowth. Think Lot 19, think Mount Alexander Sustainability Group, think Castlemaine Permaculture, Local Lives Global Matters and Localising Leanganook.

What distinguishes degrowth from similar, say transition towns and sustainability movements, is its foci on economic growth and political change: 'system change not climate change'. Degrowth is anti-capitalist. Still, having just returned from a 'postcapitalist' conference in Montreal, I am painfully aware that there are lots of questions around what we might mean by saying 'postgrowth' and 'post-capitalism'. I belong to those who think we need to go beyond the state and beyond the market but there seem to be lots of activists who think of 'postgrowth' and 'post-capitalism' more in terms of changing the ways in which the state and market function. So those queries remain in the degrowth movement.

To get back to housing, what François and I found was a lot of literature on sustainable planning and housing addressing decarbonisation and dematerialisation of the built environment, but most took a housing for growth approach. So our new collection *Housing for Degrowth* developed out of a session of the same name at the Fifth International Degrowth Conference in Budapest in September 2016. We had an open call, headhunted some people who'd already contributed significant works in this area and chased up everyone who presented a paper related to our themes. In the end we even had to knock back some and still ended up with 25 contributors.

The book

The collection functions as an introduction and in-depth interrogation of how urban and rural housing expressing degrowth principles and goals can be established. The book frames the application of degrowth principles: simple living for all; housing justice; housing sufficiency; reducing demand (i.e. market demand vs need); ecological housing and planning; debates around urbanisation (and decentralisation); household forms and anti-capitalist (versus monetary) values; and financial relations that insulate collective property from market prices for housing and speculation.

Our collective perspective offers a unifying narrative for the institutionalisation of housing for degrowth applied by a range of citizen, professional and political actors and actions. We see housing as a basic need and human right; we argue that too much housing for some must be curbed so all can live in decent conditions. We see housing as offering physical shelter, personal security, comfort and conviviality.

To give you an idea of the range of cases that we refer to, they include communities such as Christiania (aka Freetown) in Copenhagen that distribute housing on fair and equal bases. There's a chapter on two cases of communal support in self-building, which catalogues all the planning, building and financial hurdles of being alternative builders.

There's a chapter analysing a high-profile campaign against the demolition of a social housing estate in London, it discusses the centrality of the politics of valuation in the

wider 'demolition versus refurbishment' debate. In particular, it shows how the construction sector offered weak economic arguments for demolishing estates and building new ones, when those living in the estates would have been more satisfied with retrofitting and refurbishing their homes, and the environmental outcomes would have been positive instead of negative.

April Anson critically addresses how tiny houses do, might do and do not contribute to degrowth ideals. A tiny house builder and resident herself, April charges the North American movement with mimicking the 'frontier rhetoric of pioneering, homesteading and individual freedom tied to histories of class and racial violence' and argues that 'the tiny house miniaturises instead of challenges class distinctions'. She sees degrowth and sustainability movements having the potential to shake mainstream imaginaries, specifically of our challenged and uncertain future, and argues that they encourage transformative integration of humans and nature.

Australia architect Wendy Christie and housing expert John Salong critically report on Vanuatu where 'there is no consciously labelled degrowth movement' but the typical self-sufficient, convivial and non-market based ni-Vanuatu way of life might be considered a living example of degrowth. They show how collectively building simple, appropriate and affordable dwellings with natural local and recycled building materials expresses low impact living. They highlight outcomes from the dramatic 2015 Tropical Cyclone Pam and grassroots ni-Vanuatu achievements post-cyclone to show the advantages of the frugal and collective do-it-ourselves resilience (in contrast to the top-down and market based official response).

The chapter on squatting points out that squat might serve as a 'social centre' with some housing in it, or a housing squat might constitute activities and relationships that make it a visible part of a social movement. For example, activists in the well-known Platform of People Affected by Mortgages association squat buildings to rehouse those evicted from their homes, which constitutes one of the movement's strategies to denounce commodification of housing. Squatting to fulfil a basic housing need is easier for most to understand than the social need for self-organisation that motivates activists agitating for radical social change to address issues such as economic inequalities and environmental unsustainability. This chapter shows how many of the politicised squats have interests aligned to degrowth as they occupy otherwise abandoned buildings, often renovating or retrofitting them.

There's another Global South perspective from the point of view and current practice of an innovative architecture studio in the increasingly urbanised high-tech city Bengalura (formerly Bangalore), South India. Vishwanath shows not only how natural, renewable and erstwhile waste resources of the city can be used to build new sustainable dwellings but also how deskilled, competitive and precarious building industry work can be transformed to encourage self-building and sharing between households in the building

stage. She offers a model contribution to degrowth discourse from and for professionals that, in this case, integrates well with social and solidarity economy and sharing city approaches.

The chapter on housing struggles in Rome centres on people who occupy buildings either for need and/or political reasons. The authors develop an argument that they go beyond arguing for a right to housing in the city — a right which is increasingly being denied residents of global cities such as Melbourne, with gentrification, unaffordable rents and homelessness rising. Through interviews they show that marginalised residents argue not only for greater access to housing and services but also question the ways in which the state and market function to exclude and unfairly distribute materials such as concrete and non-renewable energy. Interviewees expressed discomfort with categories of 'private' and 'public' property, arguing instead for community-based action and use-rights of land and buildings as commons — sharing without ownership, sharing fairly and on the basis of needs.

There's an analyses of the German umbrella Mietshäuser Syndikat of housing cooperatives, residential cooperatives that develop in semi-autonomous ways to promote affordable and self-managed housing within processes and practices that express collective solidarity. The syndikat is a company that has a share in collectively owned houses ensuring they will not return to the speculative market even if the current households collapse. They have developed a model whereby established households support new ones and the syndikat has grown to hundreds of houses and households and is still growing. Radical Routes is a similar UK case.

In a final chapter, I compare and contrast two eco-collaborative housing models in terms of their processes and levels of collective governance; their models of land ownership and use rights; and their degree of collective sufficiency. These are just a few of the contributions that offer imagined and real transformations breaking through the dominant narrative and practice of mainstream housing for growth.

We argue that squatting, sharing and self-building are some of the activities that governments need to enable through changes in policies and new regulations. In short, our collection addresses key challenges of unaffordable, unsustainable and anti-social housing today, international case studies showing how housing for degrowth is based on sufficiency and conviviality, living a 'one planet lifestyle' with a common ecological footprint.