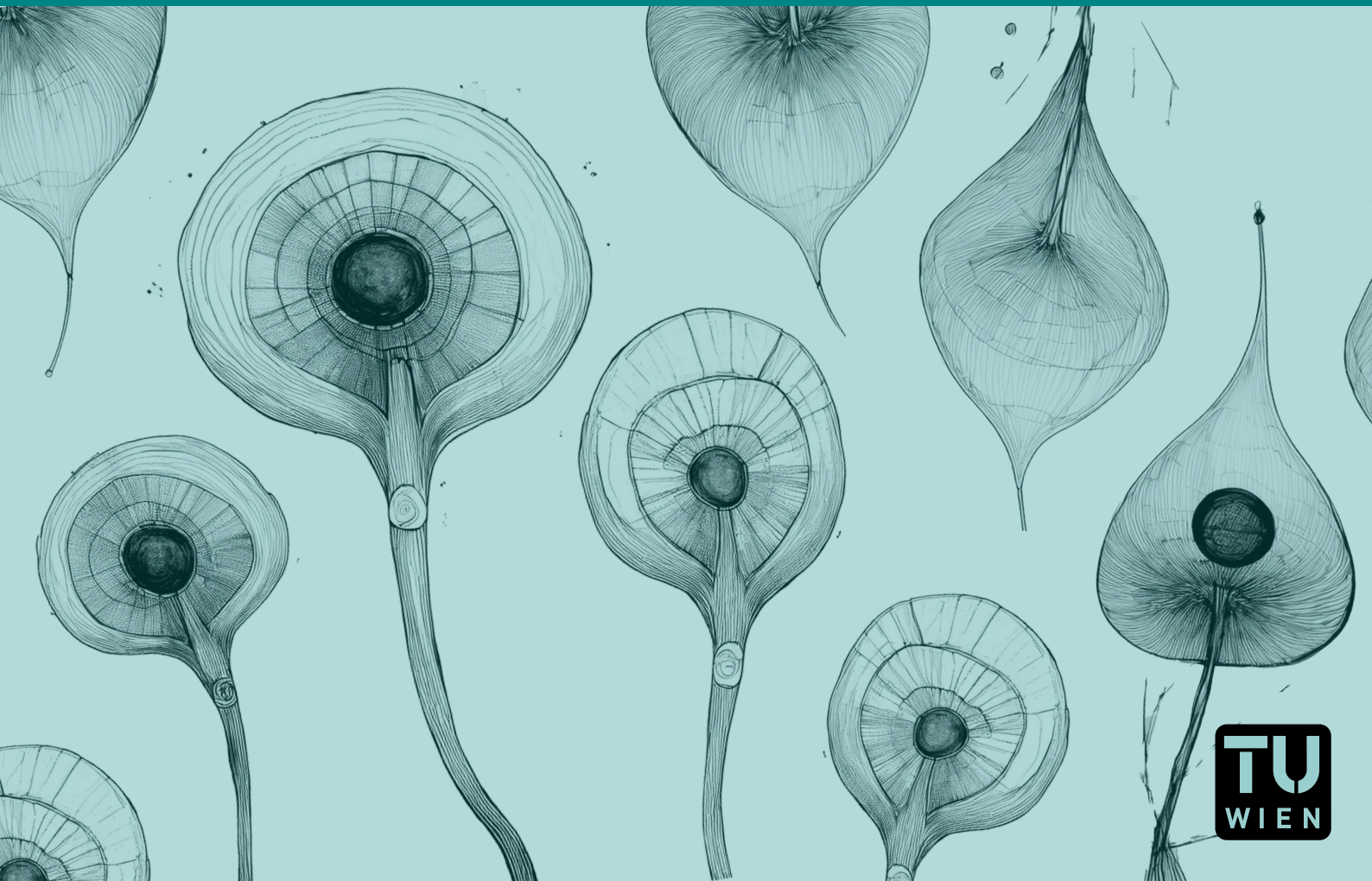


The Future of Spatial Planning:

# Strategies of Post-Growth & Degrowth



# Hello there,

## What this is about

This booklet gives you insights on de-growth and post-growth in spatial planning. It is the result of a six month long research and learning process within the frame of the master-project in spatial planning at the TU Vienna. The title of the course bears the bold name „The Future of Spatial Planning: Strategies of Post-Growth & Degrowth“.

Seven teaching lecturers and 18 participating students formed the team for a collective learning experience. To be able to understand the interdisciplinary field of degrowth and post-growth we listened to different perspectives and gathered theoretical as well as practical experiences from various projects and initiatives in the field of degrowth and post-growth.

The activities around the project took place in Vienna as well as in Utrecht and Amsterdam: In May, the whole research team travelled by train to the Netherlands to gather knowledge and understanding from people and projects. From a city walk by the researcher Cody Hochstenbach, over a visit and collective cooking session at the formerly squatted house Nieuwland Amsterdam to various student-led collaborative learning activities and a guided tour around Leidsche Rijn in Utrecht - it was all happening!

## Structure of this catalogue

### 1. Overview of results of the group work on degrowth and post-growth

The 18 participating students separated into groups and dived individually as well as collaboratively into their topics of interest. The following pages give you an overview on their different learning experiences and their results.

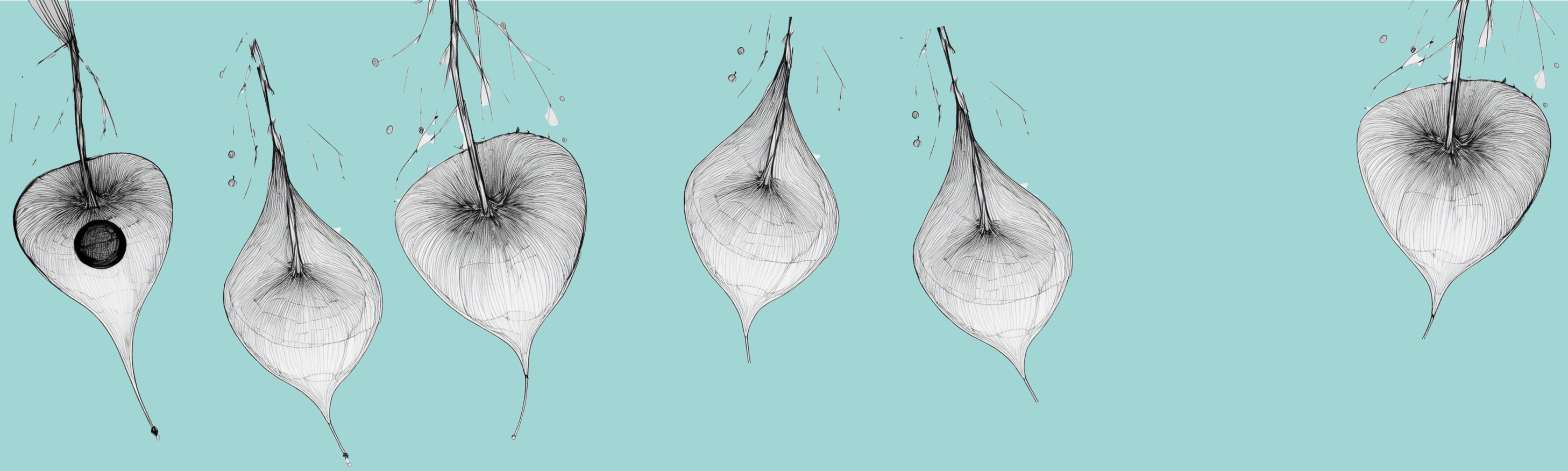
### 2. Conclusion

The conclusion condenses the results of the group works and relates and compares them.

### 3. Glossary

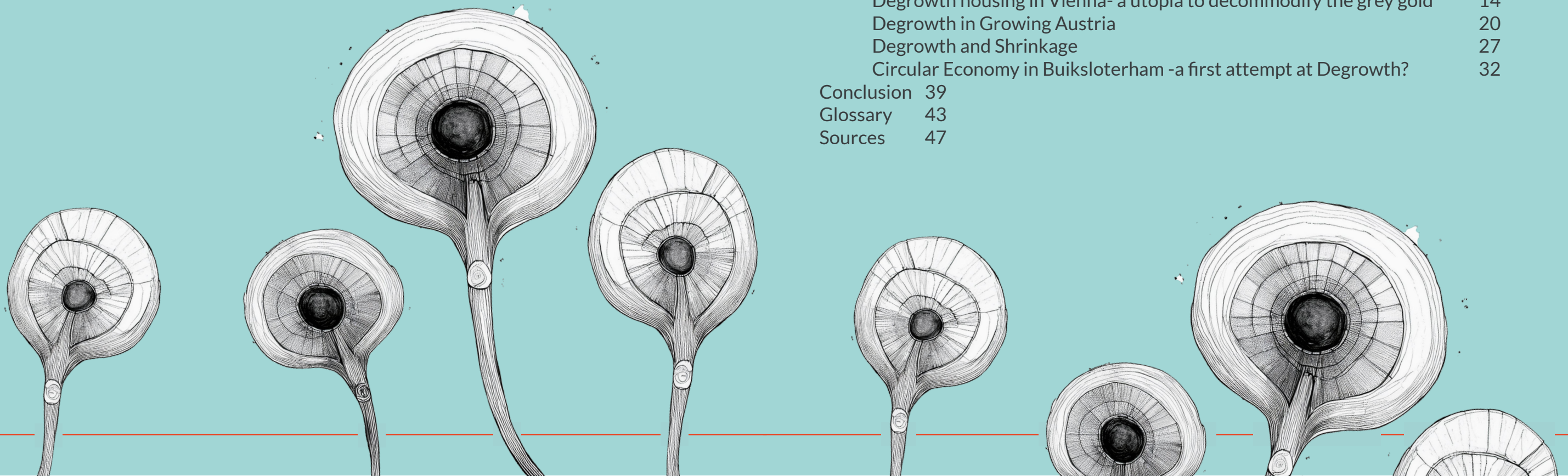
In the first month the group discussed this question as well as the meaning of other relevant terms in the context of the project. Eventually we were able to develop a common understanding on these terms which we gathered in this glossary.





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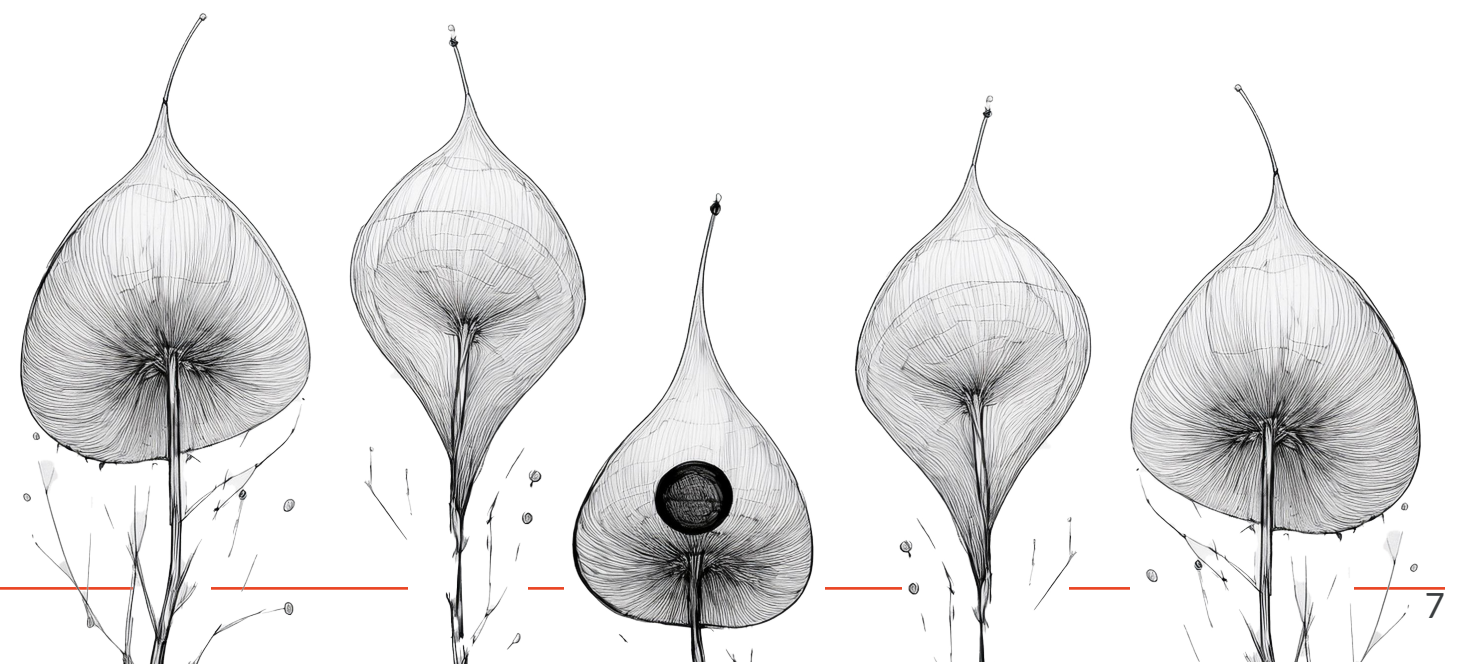


## Why degrowth and post-growth?

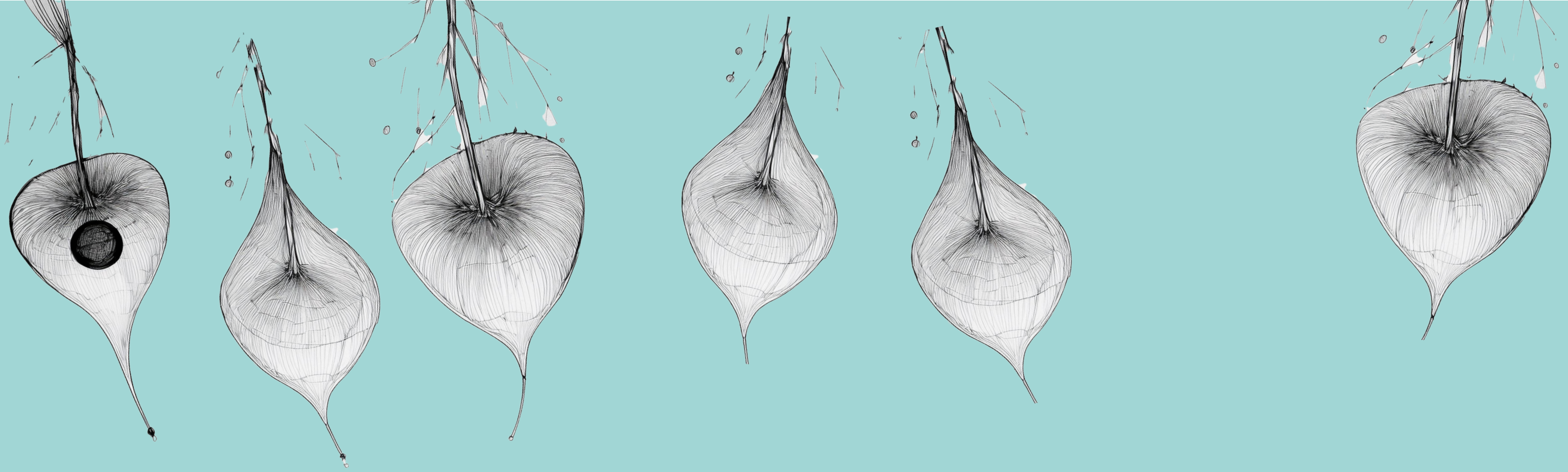
Global and local challenges show the need for change. Degrowth offers a concept, but also a stage for discourse on a social and ecological just change.

This catalogue investigates how spaces, communities and individuals can learn from degrowth in order to transition.

A common theme within the different group projects is the question: How can spatial planners change practices and patterns to pave the way for a social and ecological just transformation? Is the concept of degrowth connectable with spatial planning? Is this approach able to give spatial planners tools and ideas to tackle the current polycrisis?

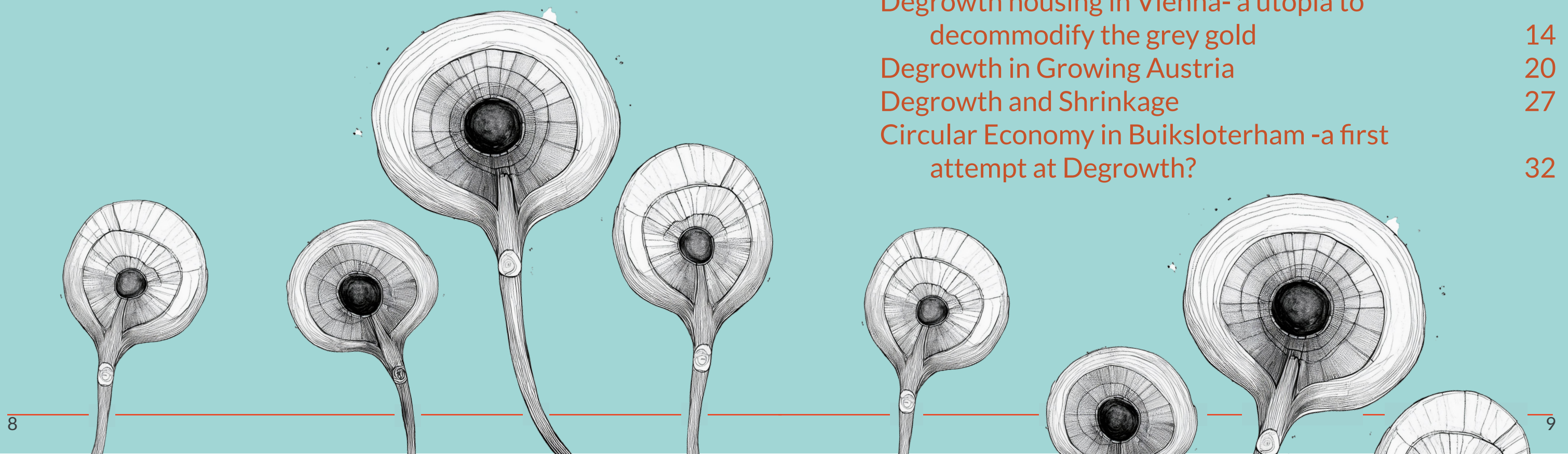






# Group Works

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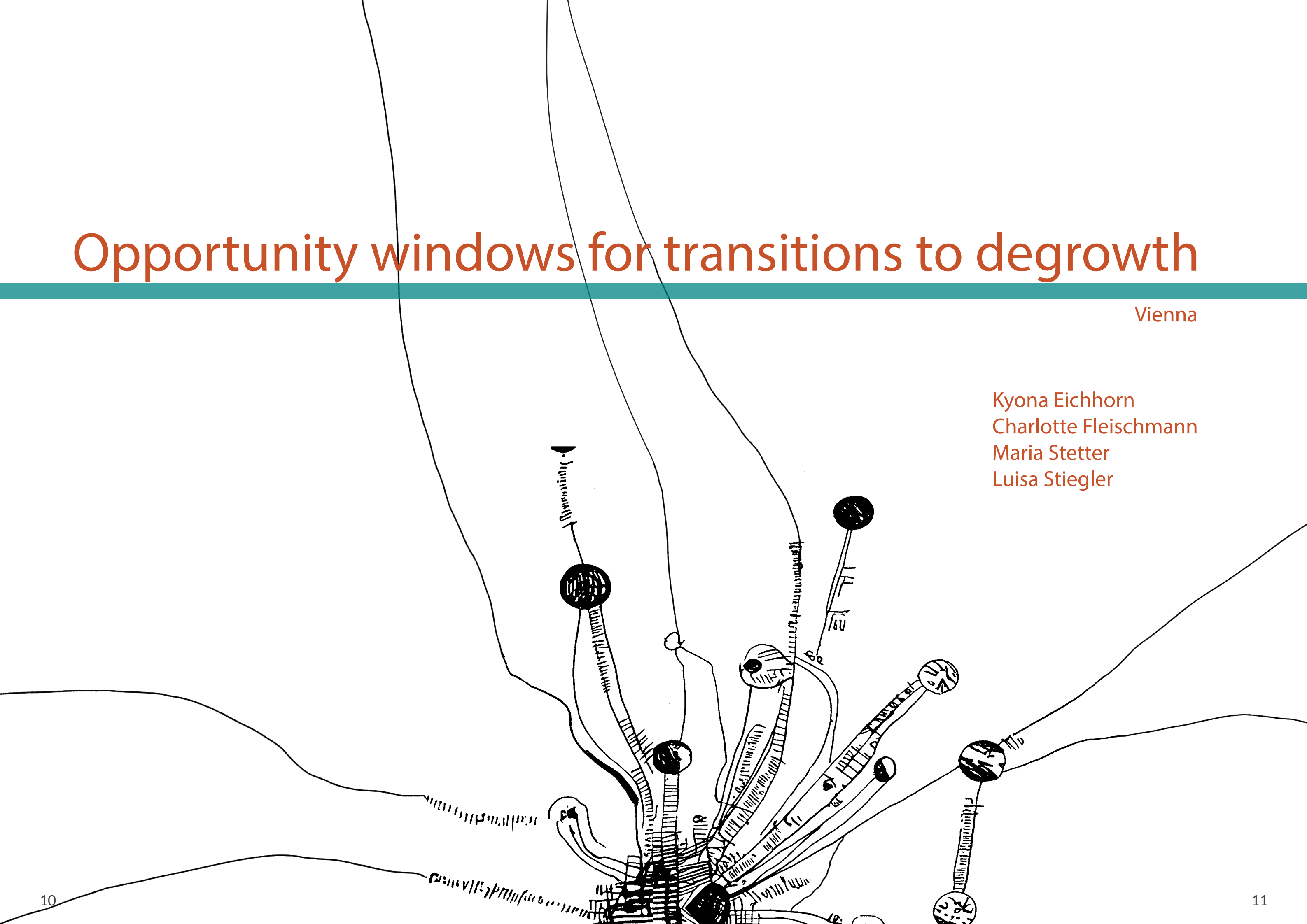




# Opportunity windows for transitions to degrowth

Vienna

Kyona Eichhorn  
Charlotte Fleischmann  
Maria Stetter  
Luisa Stiegler



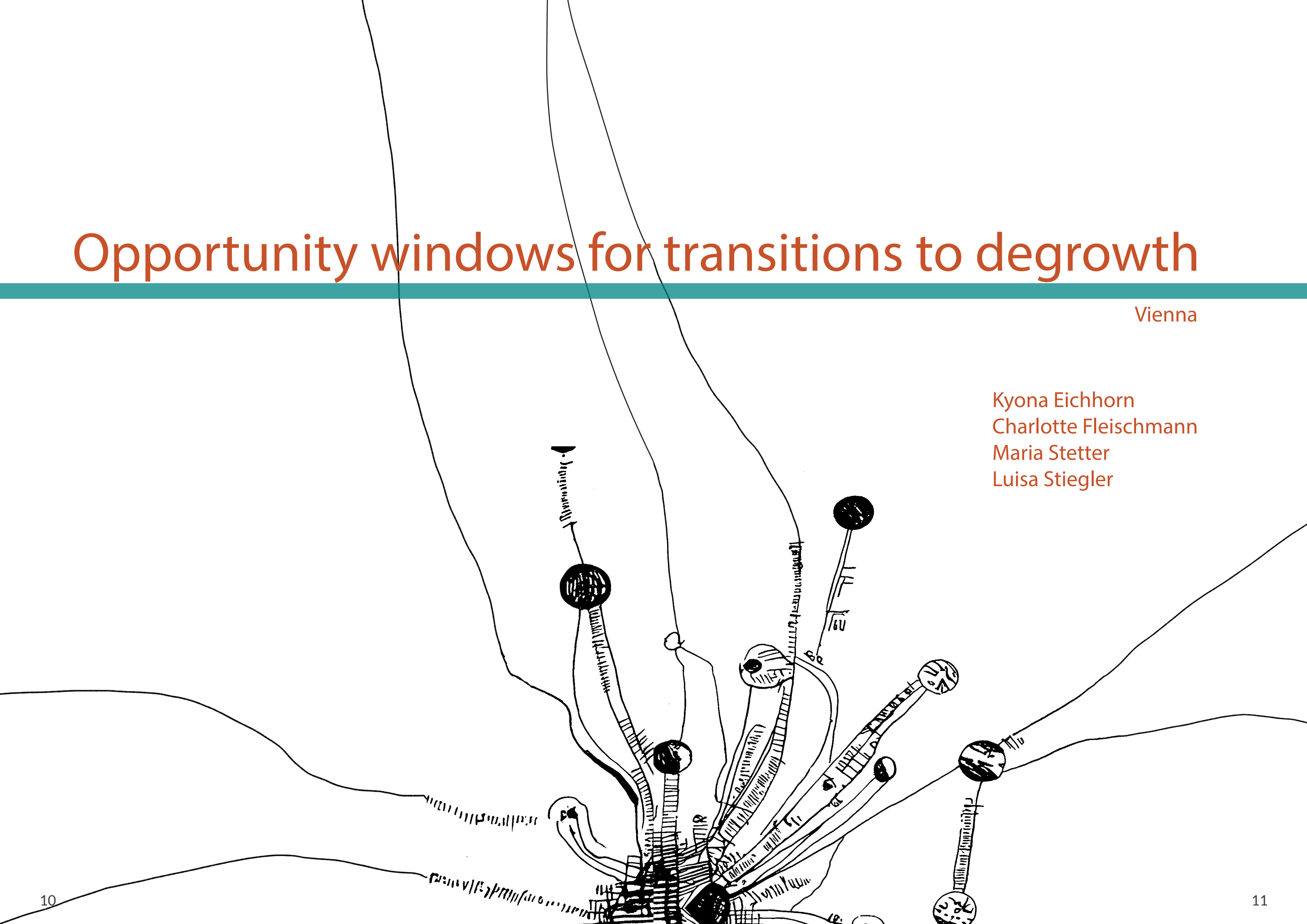
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# Opportunity windows for transitions to degrowth

Vienna

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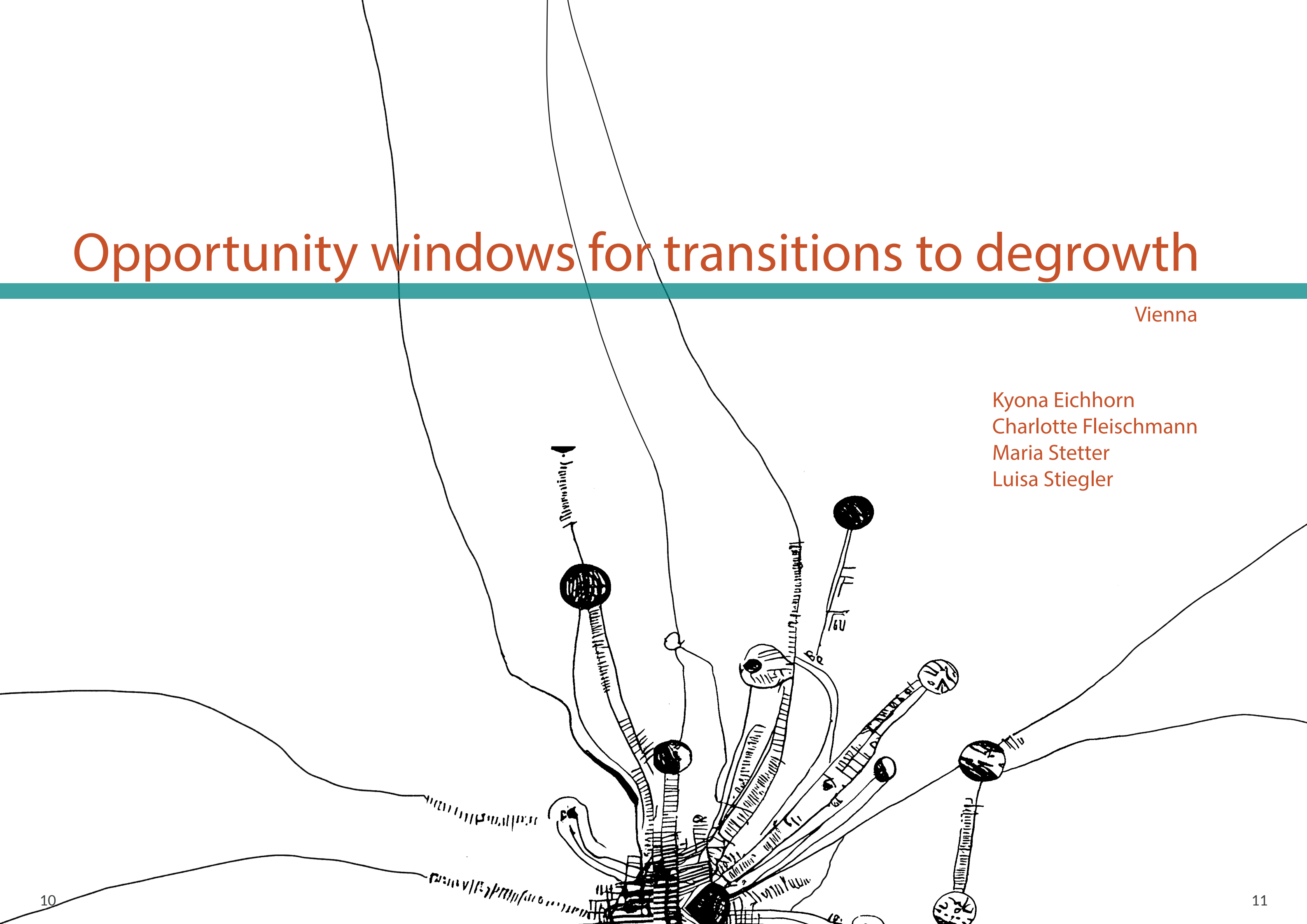
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11

# Opportunity windows for transitions to degrowth

Vienna

Kyona Eichhorn  
Charlotte Fleischmann  
Maria Stetter  
Luisa Stiegler



10

11



# Opportunity for transitions to degrowth

## Learning from the existing

The existing is the starting point of our learning process and work. Practitioners, artists and academics from the field of degrowth were interviewed e.g. on the role of spatial planning to promote degrowth, the challenges in the transformation process and future degrowth visions for Vienna. Surveys with people on the street were held to get an insight in peoples attitude and visions for a transitioning Vienna.

To learn from the existing also meant to deal with places in transition. The Althangrund is a contested place we explored through analysing its history and getting informed on its future plans - the demolition and development of a new quarter. We took part in the space, learned from projects related to the space and listened to people committed to the space who speak up for the maintainance of the builing complex.

## Scenarios of degrowth and transitions Vienna

An opportunity window for degrowth is a momentum of conditions that make it possible to implement degrowth elements.

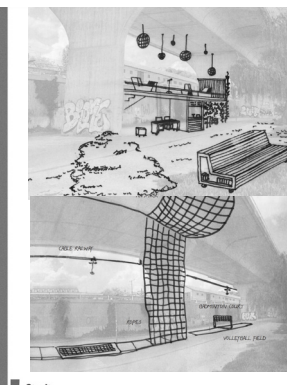
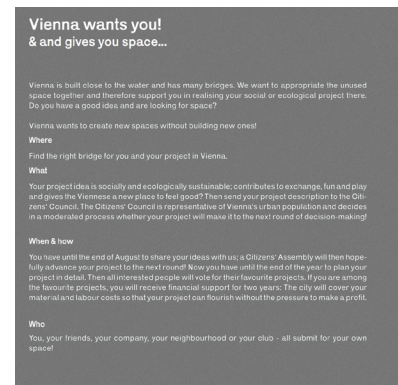


eigene Darstellung

In our catalogue, we pointed out four sites which in our eyes currently behold this potential in Vienna. For each site a specific degrowth scenario was developed. These visions are primarily communicated through images (sketches and AI generated pictures) as we believe that the degrowth approach needs new collective imaginaries. Further, they break down the academic discourse into a more practical concept, being accessible for everyone.

### 1. Under the bridge Relegasse

We identified spaces under bridges as windows of opportunity because the existing public outdoor concrete structures are often unused, underused or informally used. We envisioned and created a fake call of projects from the city of Vienna, where people are invited to formulate ideas for these spaces under bridges. Additionally we created our own submission, putting together our ideas on degrowth spaces, like a space with modular and flexible furniture, a space that is free to use, inclusive and accessible.

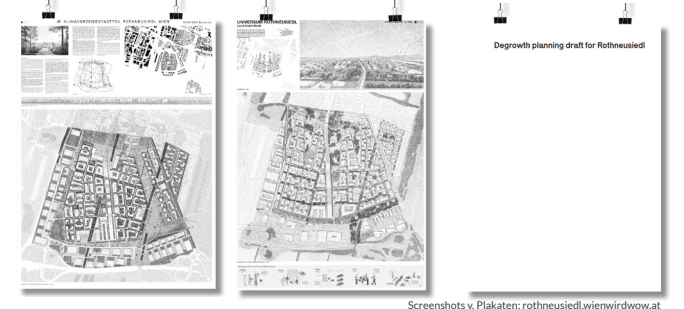


Stadt Wien eigene Darstellung

### 2. Rothneusiedl

Rothneusiedl is the last major urban development area in Vienna. From a degrowth perspective the new construction, accompanied by a vast land consumption is rejected and alternative approaches to deal with the growing demand for housing need are to be found. This statement is communicated through our blank poster for the planning competition.

Selection of two real competition posters and our idea for a „Degrowth planning draft Rothneusiedl“



Screenshots v. Plakaten: rothneusiedl.wien.wirdow.at

### 3. Gürtel

The replanning of the Viennese Gürtel opens up various imaginaries: for example can space be distributed more equally between user groups. Inspired by successful restructuring projects of ring-roads in other cities, we envisioned different future scenarios giving space for nature, culture, water or active mobility. Selection of AI-generated Gürtel visions:

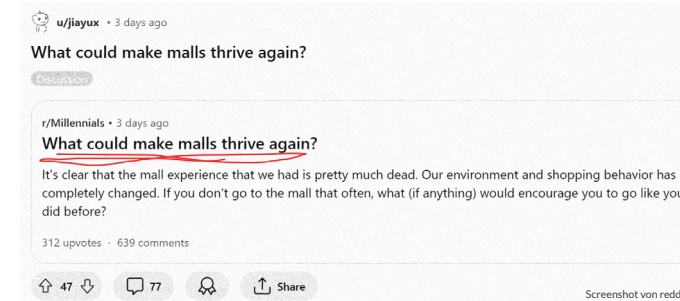


KI generiert auf Basis von Christian Ländl unsplash.at

### 4. Gasometer

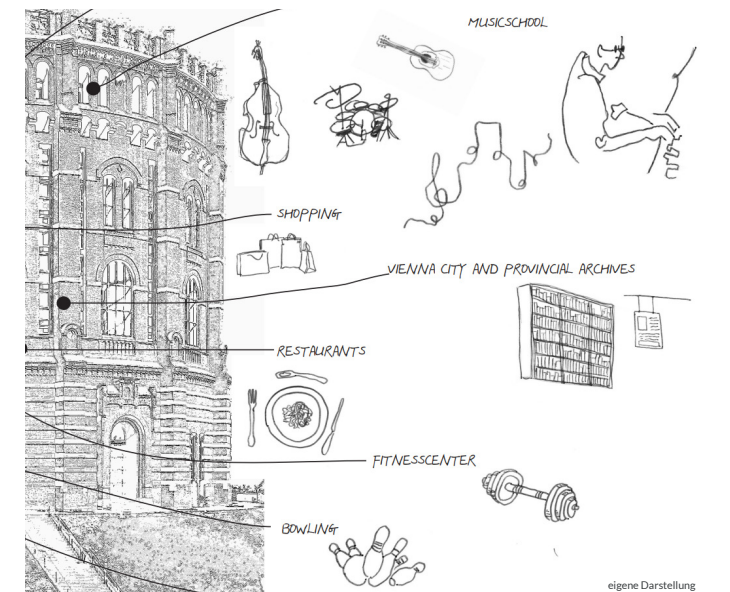
The shopping mall in the former Gasometer was discussed under the phenomena of „dead malls“ - consumerist spaces that due to changes in consumption patterns are not so frequently used anymore. We used Reddit as a digital source of collective knowledge and access to various opinions of different people.

Discussion on dead malls with 600 people:



Screenshot von reddit.at

More insight into our research process on the Gasometer:



eigene Darstellung

Eventually we visualised ideas on how spaces could be redesigned for different uses or be used more efficient over different time frames. We created these visions through prompting specific AI generated situations into existing images of the Gasometer.

## What we learned and want to give away

We used the pattern language of Christopher Alexander to point out the solutions we identified throughout the working process. It was developed for architecture and city planning. Knowledge about successful solutions is structured into patterns. Designers can use these interconnected, multi-scaled but simple sentences to find a solution for the specific context. We formulated 19 patterns for degrowth that aim to support people in their work towards transitions. Additionally, we derived indicators for degrowth from our learning process. The list of indicators that can be depicted in a spider map. It serves as an evaluation tool to make different projects, places and interventions comparable in terms of degrowth.



# degrowth housing in Vienna- a utopia to decommmodify the grey gold

01617198  
Christiana Rath  
11802416  
Marie Pointner  
12229966  
Mathis Lepel

I am so glad that there is  
no more profit with rent!

No, with all the community  
space I don't mind scaling  
down in my privat  
living space...

In our community  
I feel suported,  
we help each other out.

Finally, the inequality  
in housing is over!



# degrowth housing in Vienna

„Economic growth means more output per person. It means higher standards of living“ (Solow, 1956)

The mainstream planning paradigm has increasingly become both growth-oriented since the Industrialisation in the 19th century and has been dependent on growth ever since (Xue and Keblowski, 2022; Hirt, 2014). A shift away from growth will therefore also require spatial planners to integrate repurpose, reuse and sharing into their work (Schmelzer&Vetter, 2020).

For this to happen, it is possible that incorporating planning into degrowth could transform planning itself (Xue and Keblowski, 2022).

With this understanding of degrowth and growth, a closer look was taken at basic needs such as housing. According to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being which includes housing (United Nations, 1948, Article 25, para. 1).

From 1919 to 1934, Red Vienna's socialist government tackled housing shortages with large-scale, affordable housing projects, setting a precedent for social equity and public investment in housing (Weinzierl, 2016). The housing policy has recently undergone a shift in focus. The emphasis has shifted from social equity to market-driven approaches and financial instruments. This shift has resulted in housing issues being framed as technical rather than social justice problems, relinquishing the housing question from the political debate and handing over the responsibility to the market (Hurlin in ; Nelson, A., & Schneider, F. (Eds.)2018).

As a result, there has been a decline in the political drive to ensure affordable housing for all (Springler, 2020).

## Problem Definition/ Relevancy

In Vienna, an average of 26% of household income is spent on housing, while 34 % of the Viennese felt a heavy burden from their housing cost. However since 1991 the average living space has increased by 15 %. The average living space of home ownership is 59,6m<sup>2</sup>, while communal apartments are on average 27,8m<sup>2</sup> (City of Vienna, 2023). This is one of the factors that reveal the persisting inequalities in Vienna's housing market.

The degrowth movement presents a compelling alternative, advocating for a post-growth society where the satisfaction of basic needs, including adequate housing, is prioritized over material accumulation (Latouche, 2009; D'Alisa et al., 2014). This shift is essential as current mainstream planning heavily relies on growth (Xue & Keblowski, 2022), often leading to the exploitation of natural resources and exacerbating social inequalities (Wächter, 2023; Nelson, 2019).

In Austria, for instance, speculative capital drives housing markets, resulting in significant inequalities and environmental degradation (Statistik Austria, 2023; BMK, 2024). Addressing these issues requires a fundamental rethinking of housing policies to incorporate principles of repurpose, reuse, and sharing (Schmelzer & Vetter, 2020), aligning with the universal right to adequate housing as stated in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948).

Therefore, exploring degrowth housing is not only relevant but imperative to ensure a sustainable and equitable future.

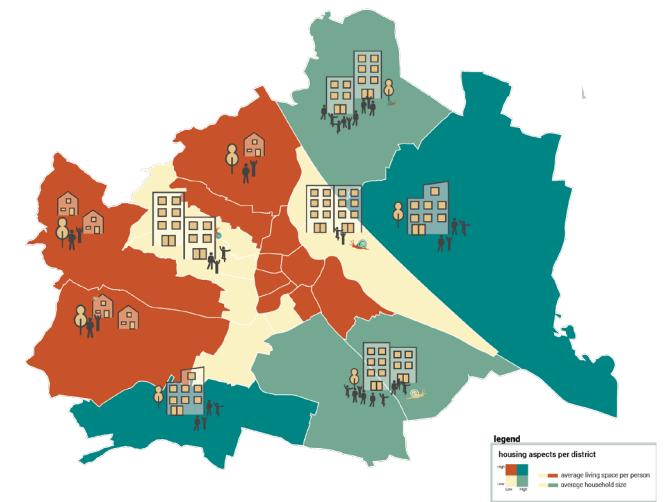
## Methodology

This analysis includes demographic trends, housing availability, affordability metrics, and policy impacts. By understanding the status quo, the research can identify gaps and areas in need of intervention. On the basis of the literature research as well as the secondary data analysis the goal is to form a “Housing Utopia” for the City of Vienna anchored in the previous findings for a theoretical framework composed from suggested policies forming an evasive utopia summarized under the pillars of sufficiency; communality und conviviality; decommodification and economical thinking; governance & democratic understanding. Moving from theory to practice, the research outlines a constructive utopia, summarizing practical policy approaches that could be implemented within Austria's legal framework. This approach should highlight the adaptability and compatibility of housing policies in the strive to a degrowth society within the given jurisdiction. Out of the constructive Utopia arises the conclusion of the theoretical findings and the impact on policy-making for the Viennese housing market. By looking at the theoretical research and a look at the status quo the final result of this research process is an overview on policies furthering the degrowth approach in housing and a selection of existing alternative forms of housing already established in Vienna which further the quest for degrowth.

## State of affairs in Vienna

In 2023, 50% of Viennese felt some burden from their housing costs, 34% felt a heavy burden.

On average, people in Vienna spend 26% of their income on their housing costs, 39% of people spend over 25% of their income on housing, 13% even over 40% of their income.



This figure shows the relationship between average living space per person and average household size. The districts coloured in beige are those where people live in dwellings with less than 35m<sup>2</sup> of living space per person in households with less than two people on average. The districts in light green are those where more than 2 people live in dwellings of less than 35m<sup>2</sup> living space per person. Coloured in orange are those districts where the households are no larger than 2 persons, while the persons in the household have on average more than 35 m<sup>2</sup> of living space. The two dark green districts are those where people have more than 35 m<sup>2</sup> of living space on average, while living in a household with more than two people. This figure illustrates the continued existence of unequal access to housing space. It demonstrates that there are significant variations in the distribution of living space combined with household size across different districts, with some areas experiencing a greater concentration of housing units than others.

## Evasive Utopia

In order to create a clearer vision of what a degrowth housing sector looks like, key aspects of degrowth housing have been summarized in an evasive utopia. To create this evasive housing utopia, the contents of the book *Housing for Degrowth - Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by Nelson and Schneider, have been compiled (Wächter, 2023; Nelson, 2019).

In order to create a clearer vision of what a degrowth housing sector looks like, key aspects of degrowth housing have been summarized in an evasive utopia. To create this evasive housing utopia, the contents of the book *Housing for Degrowth - Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by Nelson and Schneider, have been compiled. The book is divided into the seven main parts, which provide a good overview of the degrowth housing debate. The themes of the parts are Simple Living for All, Housing Justice, Housing Sufficiency, Reducing Demand, Ecological Housing and Planning, Whither Urbanisation? and Anti-capitalist Values and Relations. The key objectives of each part have been collected and categorized into overarching objectives, while remaining linked to the parts of the book

## Constructive Utopia

The proposal? Housing as a basic right! Real estate out of the market economy! A clear set of rules on not only the minimum living space that someone is entitled to, but also the maximum living space that society can afford. Strong social infrastructure, cultural offerings and public transport as the basis for maintaining quality of life and this in the hands of a democratized city administration. A move away from a hyper-individualized society back to a togetherness based on equality and solidarity. The elaboration of the catalogue of

measures can be found in the visualisations of the pillars Communality; Governance over Housing; Housing Sufficiency & Anticapitalist Action & Democratisation of Resources.

### communality:

Private and public spheres need to be rethought in terms of cohabitation, ownership and social interaction. It must be possible to live together in community and solidarity and enjoy the benefits of communal living. Solidarity is regarded as the highest imperative in order to eliminate conflicts or counteract their emergence.

### anticapitalist action & democratization of resources

We need a fair distribution of resources in our society. The quality of housing must not be dependent on individual income or the profit interests of others. It is not acceptable for a few individuals or companies to make a profit from the housing market. Instead, it must be ensured that all people have the right and access to adequate housing. Instead of a few individuals or companies being able to make a profit by trading housing as a commodity, all people must have a right to adequate housing. The basic needs of the individual and their inviolability must be protected and enshrined in law.

### governance over housing

As a sovereign administrative unit, Vienna needs strong structures in order to maintain a high quality of life and meet the demand for living space. Ecological and social sustainability cannot be played off against each other. Vienna's task is to provide administration and supervision to ensure a fair housing sector.

## housing sufficiency

The excessive consumption of land and the sealing of new areas in Vienna must be stopped. The unsealing of all areas that do not need to be permanently sealed in order to be used for ecologically and socially useful purposes (e.g. public green spaces, agricultural areas, infiltration areas, etc.) is necessary in order to meet the need for housing sufficiency.

### Alternative housing ideas

It is necessary that a diverse range of housing options are made available. In this utopian model, three main housing forms are available, each offering a different level of involvement in the organization of housing.

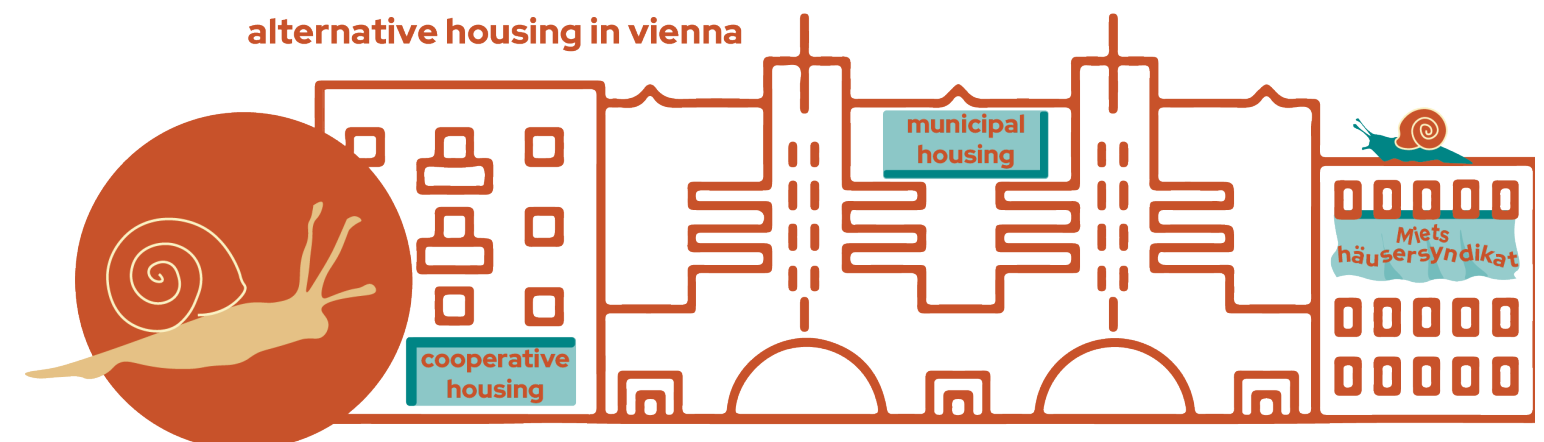
Those wishing to play an active role in decision-making processes and the practical and organizational aspects of housing may wish to consider joining a *Mietshäusersyndikat*, as outlined in chapter with good practice examples.

For those in Vienna who wish to participate in decision-making processes but do not wish to be involved in the practical and organizational aspects of housing, a cooperative housing form will be proposed.

Alternatively, individuals may opt to live in municipal housing, where apartments or flats are assigned by *Wiener Wohnen*.

## Conclusio

The theoretical works on this topic do not provide simple solutions, but rather lengthy processes and methods to develop a strategic approach. However, this is not intended to be discouraging, but rather to show how urgently a reconsideration is needed, even on a small scale, in order to break out of the growth maxim. Structural changes are needed in the legal framework, in socio-economic thinking and in the concept of private and public, so that spatial planning dedicated to the degrowth approach can take place on a large scale. This in turn also means that both spatial planning, public and private actors have not developed tools for measures that are conducive to the goals of degrowth housing. Historically, Vienna in particular has achieved successes through proactive control of urban planning, from which the city continues to benefit up until now. . These measures are intended to alleviate the symptoms of a profit-orientated housing market within the framework of the currently prevailing socio-economic structures and form the basis for combating the causes. There is no claim that this catalog of measures is complete, nor that it would achieve the expected goals, but rather that it should be an impetus to deal with the problems mentioned and to draw inspiration from existing theory and practice.







# Degrowth in Growing Austria

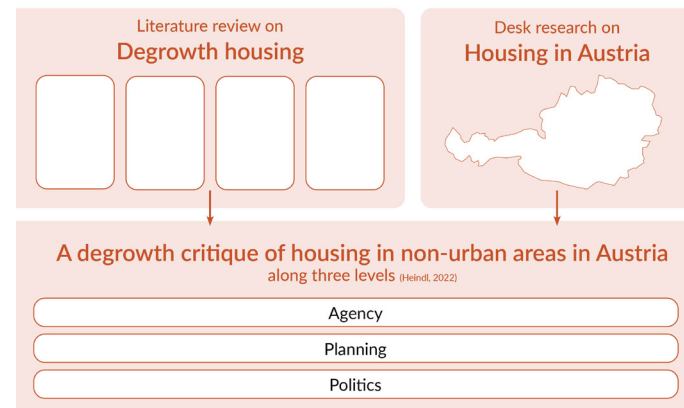
Alina Bärnthaler  
Nina Lobnig  
Florian Gehr



# Degrowth in

Housing plays a central role in the degrowth discourse, which seeks sustainable and equitable alternatives to the prevailing growth-oriented economic models. The discussion around degrowth and housing has long focused on micro-scale developments and urban degrowth initiatives. However, non-urban areas remain largely unexplored. These non-urban areas are often associated with a low level of centrality, economic and demographic stagnation or even shrinkage. They are often labelled as the hinterland or periphery of urban centres. Interestingly, these areas often experience above-average demographic growth and promising growth forecasts, especially when located near urban centres and well-connected through infrastructure. Particularly in the wake of rising land prices in urban centres, they are in high demand as both residential and commercial locations. Closely linked to the increasing demand for housing in these areas is the dream of owning a house with a garden. This seems more feasible here, at least for a part of the population, than in the urban areas.

This project brings the discourse on housing and degrowth to the non-urban growth context, specifically examining the question: How can housing and related lifestyles in non-urban growing areas in Austria be challenged from a degrowth perspective? Building upon the key pillars of housing and degrowth literature as a framework, and supported by empirical data, this project critically analyses both, the housing structures and the associated lifestyles from a degrowth perspective.



## Research Design

The research design for this project is founded on an extensive literature review on degrowth and housing. Based on this review, four main pillars of degrowth housing are identified: economic, ecological, social, and governance. Criticisms from the degrowth literature regarding current housing markets and policies are categorised under these pillars, allowing for a more structured analysis. The literature review is complemented with statistical data focused on housing in Austria, particularly in non-urban areas. This combination of theoretical insights and empirical data allows for an integrated approach to housing in non-urban areas in Austria from a degrowth perspective. The critique targets three levels of action, as identified by Heindl (2022): agency (individual households), politics, and planning, thus enabling a comprehensive examination of both, individual and structural perspectives. This research thereby provides a nuanced critique of housing in non-urban areas in Austria by integrating theoretical perspectives with empirical findings, and highlighting potential areas for reform in alignment with degrowth principles.

# Growing Austria

## Degrowth Housing

In the context of housing, degrowth addresses the environmental impact and social inequities perpetuated by growth-oriented housing policies. Historically, housing policy has been embedded within broader economic growth paradigms, significantly contributing to CO2 emissions through construction, use, and demolition (Tunstall, 2023). Despite the emphasis on growth, this approach has often failed to improve the living conditions of the most disadvantaged groups (Tunstall, 2023). Scholars concerned with degrowth and housing propose reducing per capita housing consumption and focusing on sufficiency—meeting basic human needs rather than luxury standards (Xue & Mete, 2021).

A critical aspect of degrowth housing is the redistribution of existing housing spaces rather than the construction of new ones, thereby reducing resource consumption and addressing issues of inequality and wellbeing (Tunstall, 2023). This approach includes innovative housing designs, governance models, and financial structures aimed at creating a more equitable and sustainable housing system (Nelson & Schneider, 2018). To achieve these goals, degrowth housing strategies must dismantle existing paradigms and incorporate radical democratic principles, emphasising housing justice for current and future generations (Heindl, 2022). Key objectives include reducing the ecological impacts of housing, guaranteeing the human right to a decent home, and decommodifying housing

to mitigate speculation and inequality (Ribbons, 2023).

In short, degrowth housing envisions a transformative shift in how housing is built, managed, and lived in, aiming for a balance between environmental sustainability and social equity.

## Housing in Austria

Understanding Austria's settlement development history is crucial to grasp the current and long prevailing housing trends. Post-World War II prosperity led to widespread car ownership and a preference for detached single-family homes, fostering suburban growth (Bundeskanzleramt, 2017). Single-family homes also served as a major lever to promote the economy by stimulating the construction activity and individual consumption and were therefore promoted politically (Steinbrunner et al, 2023). Despite (planning) efforts to counteract urban sprawl, these historical patterns persist up to this day.

The way Austrians live today, reflects these historical trends. On average, half of Austria's population resides in detached houses, with the rate of home and house ownership increasing as the size of the municipality decreases. Housing preferences and living spaces differ by household type and size, with couples and multigenerational households more likely to own their homes. However, less than one third of the single-family houses in Austria today are occupied by the traditional nuclear family, composed of a couple and at least one child. More than half of the single-family houses in Austria are only occupied by a maxi-



mum of two people (Statistik Austria, 2024).

## A Degrowth Critique of Housing in Non-Urban Areas

Current challenges and crises such as the climate crisis, high land consumption, rising rental prices, increasing social inequalities and population growth will significantly influence not only regional and non-urban housing markets but also how we can live in the future. From a degrowth perspective, growth-oriented paradigms in our economic and social systems can be critiqued, advocating for sustainable living practices within the given ecological limits and planetary boundaries. Housing, as a fundamental human need and significant resource consumer, is central to this discussion.

The trend of high land consumption for new urban development projects or single-family homes has not yet declined. Land use consumption in Austria, Germany and many other (European) countries seemingly keeps increasing in many regions despite demographic stagnation and shrinkage processes in (mostly) rural areas. In Germany for example the field of housing accounts for the biggest part of land consumption, just under half of the total newly used areas. Despite this high number of land used for housing, many cities face (affordable) housing shortages and crises. The discrepancy between the land consumption and the availability of housing lies in the fact that most of the land is being used to build single-family homes, the most space consuming form of housing (Lage & Leuser 2019: 366). Non-urban areas in Austria, particularly those experiencing demographic growth, provide a relevant context

for exploring these issues and are crucial in the degrowth narrative. While Austria's cities will continue to grow, significant demographic growth is expected to increase and continue in non-urban areas. Historically, the expansion of these areas has been politically driven, often resulting in substantial resource consumption through the long lasting and widespread preference for home ownership, especially detached single-family houses.

Living in a single-family home remains the prevailing ideal of the good life, even though it is no longer economically feasible for many. This dream has historically been politically promoted; housing promotion and economic development have been closely intertwined in the past and continue to be so today, as illustrated by current policies like the construction package („Bau- und Wohnpaket“). The single-family home is no longer predominantly inhabited by the traditional nuclear family but increasingly by one- or two-person households. This space- and resource-intensive form of housing offers potential for redistribution from social (counteracting loneliness), ecological (resource conservation through sufficiency), and economic (rising housing prices) perspectives. Addressing those issues requires reimagining housing narratives and promoting alternatives that align with degrowth principles. This aligns with calls in the degrowth literature for new narratives (Schneider, 2019) and the „decolonisation of the imaginary“ (Latouche, 2015 as cited by Ribbons, 2023), and the use of scenario-planning to challenge growth ideologies (Xue, 2021).

Degrowing the housing sector is a complex political task that demands substantial political as well as societal will for change. It involves questioning and restructuring financial

incentives and subsidies that perpetuate the current housing paradigm. Current planning and zoning practices are deeply embedded in the growth narrative, serving as tools for economic value creation and land commodification. This has numerous negative consequences, such as the progressive sealing of land and the promotion of social inequality, which ultimately raises questions of justice. Addressing these issues of justice from a degrowth perspective involves promoting the democratisation of land and housing, making the decommodification of these basic goods inevitable.

In conclusion, addressing housing issues through a degrowth lens reveals the deep interconnections between societal values, political agendas, and environmental sustainability. Non-urban areas, with their distinct housing dynamics and growth patterns, are central to this critique. Challenging prevailing narratives and promoting systemic changes in planning, policy, and individual practices, is fundamental to degrowing housing in alignment with degrowth principles. Transformation requires a multi-level approach, combining top-down policies and bottom-up initiatives. Clear regulatory frameworks, a political will to change the status quo and comprehensive planning reforms are essential to conserve resources and respect planetary boundaries, while local and household-level actions are necessary to reshape narratives and living practices.

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# Degrowth and Shrinkage

The role of today's shrinking areas in a possible degrowth future in Europe

Jakob Fechner | Ka Lok Lam | Rabah Merahbaoui





In recent decades, cities across Europe have grappled with complex processes of deindustrialization, economic globalization, and demographic shifts. While growth has historically been the driving force for urban development, a new reality is emerging—one characterized by urban degrowth. This transformation challenges conventional planning paradigms and calls for a re-evaluation of our understanding of urban potential. Urban degrowth refers to deliberate efforts to shrink certain aspects of cities—both economically and demographically—in response to sustainability concerns and resource limitations. Rather than perpetuating the relentless pursuit of growth, we must explore alternative trajectories that prioritize resilience, equity, and ecological balance. Historically, urban planners adhered to the notion of perpetual growth, often referred to as “the urban growth machine” (Florentin, 2018). However, degrowth forces us to reconsider this paradigm. Instead of assuming constant expansion, we must explore strategies that enhance urban resilience while avoiding exacerbation of socio-spatial inequalities.

## Research Goals and Methodology

The main research question asks what role shrinking areas might play in a potential degrowth future in Europe. To address this, the study posed several sub-questions, including the differences between shrinkage and degrowth, the characteristics of shrinking areas, and the strategies needed to ensure quality of life in these regions.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis. This included a literature review, case studies of European cities experiencing shrinkage, and a cluster analysis of German districts. The case studies provided real-world examples of

how shrinking cities are managing decline, while the cluster analysis helped identify patterns in how these areas are adapting.

## Understanding Degrowth and Shrinkage

Degrowth is a concept that challenges the conventional wisdom of perpetual economic growth, arguing that endless expansion is unsustainable on a planet with finite resources. It calls for a deliberate downsizing of economies, focusing on reducing consumption and production to achieve a more sustainable and equitable society. The movement promotes a redefinition of prosperity, one that values environmental health, social equity, and quality of life over material wealth.

(Urban) Shrinkage, on the other hand, refers to the phenomenon where regions experience a prolonged decline in population and economic activity. This often results in abandoned infrastructure, reduced public services, and social challenges such as increased unemployment and poverty. While these areas are typically seen as problematic, our research argues that they offer unique opportunities for implementing degrowth strategies. By reimagining these regions, we can create spaces that prioritize ecological sustainability and social well-being.

## Case Studies: Lessons from European Cities

The research examines several case studies from across Europe (Fig. 1), illustrating how different cities and regions have responded to the challenges of shrinkage. These case studies offer valuable insights into the successes and failures of various strategies and highlight the importance of adaptability and innovation in planning for shrinkage and degrowth.

### COIMBRA (PORTUGAL)

Coimbra, a historic city with a rich cultural heritage, has faced significant population decline as younger residents migrate to larger cities in search of better opportunities. The city’s response has centered on leveraging its academic and cultural assets to boost local tourism and create new economic opportunities. The University of Coimbra, a prominent institution, plays a crucial role in this strategy, attracting both students and tourists. The city has focused on developing niche tourism, including academic conferences and cultural events, to sustain its economy. However, while these efforts have provided some relief, they have not fully addressed the structural issues causing the decline, such as the out-migration of the younger population and a lack of diverse economic opportunities.

### HEERLEN (NETHERLANDS)

Heerlen, a former coal-mining town, faced severe economic decline following the closure of its mines in the 1970s. The city’s response has been heavily focused on community-driven initiatives and social innovation. Key to this approach is fostering local entrepreneurship and creating spaces that encourage com-

munity engagement, such as the „IksMooi“ project, which supports local artists and craft-people. By repurposing former industrial sites into cultural hubs, Heerlen has been able to stabilize its local economy and improve residents’ quality of life. This case highlights the importance of community involvement and the potential of grassroots initiatives in revitalizing shrinking areas.

### KOTKA-HAMINA REGION (FINLAND)

The Kotka-Hamina region, which has suffered from the decline of traditional industries like paper manufacturing and shipping, has adopted a strategy of economic diversification. This region has focused on developing renewable energy and sustainable industries, positioning itself as a leader in the bioeconomy. Investments in bioenergy plants and other green technologies have created new jobs and contributed to the region’s economic resilience. Additionally, the region has implemented education and training programs to equip the local workforce with the skills necessary for the green economy, ensuring long-term sustainability and adaptability in the face of industrial decline.

### HALLE AN DER SAALE (GERMANY)

Halle, Germany, implemented a comprehensive urban restructuring policy in response to significant population loss following reunification. The city planned deliberately for shrinkage, with a vision to downsize by up to 200,000 people. This approach involved the demolition of unrequired housing and infrastructure, and the closure of social infrastructures. Supported by federal programs like “Urban Restructuring East,” Halle’s strategy allowed for a more controlled management of decline. This case underscores the importance of state-supported urban restructuring programs and the need for integrated social and economic policies in urban planning.

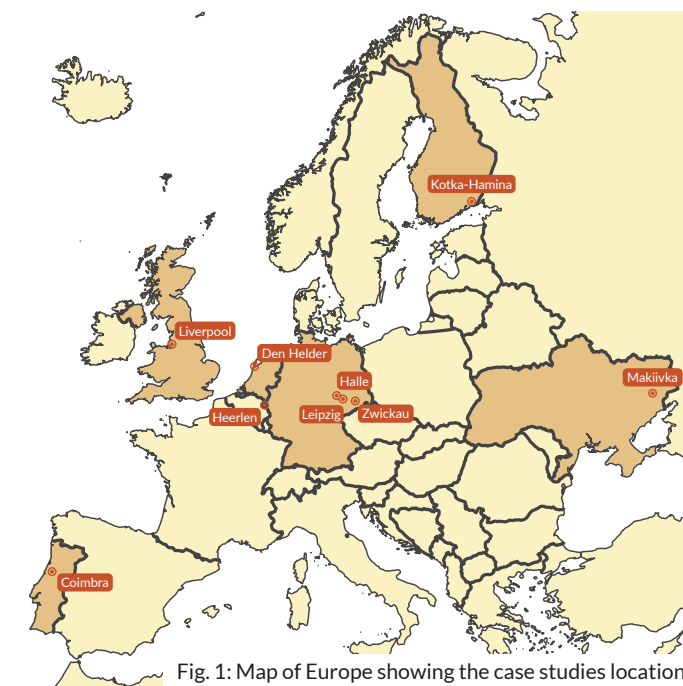


Fig. 1: Map of Europe showing the case studies locations

Cluster Analysis: Insights from German Districts

A significant portion of the research is devoted to a cluster analysis of German districts, which categorizes regions based on their characteristics in different indicators, which cover all relevant dimensions of life quality (Fig. 2). This analysis reveals distinct patterns within shrinking areas, identifying common challenges and opportunities across different clusters (Fig. 3).

URBAN VS. RURAL DYNAMICS

The analysis distinguishes between urban and rural shrinking areas, noting that urban regions tend to face more acute challenges due to higher infrastructure costs and greater social disparities. However, urban areas also have more resources and institutional capacity to implement innovative solutions.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

The research highlights the importance of geographical context, showing that regions in Eastern Germany, for example, face different challenges than those in the West. Eastern regions, which have experienced more severe population declines since reunification, may require more intensive interventions to

stabilize their economies and communities.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The cluster analysis suggests that policymakers need to adopt a flexible, context-sensitive approach to managing shrinkage. Strategies that work in one region may not be effective in another, and it is crucial to involve local communities in the planning process to ensure that solutions are both effective and equitable.

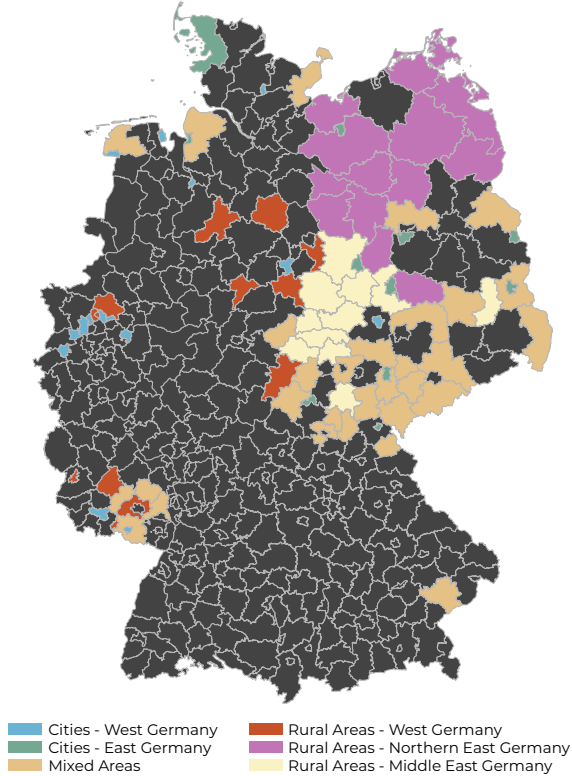


Fig. 3: Map indicating the clusters of shrinking areas in Germany

		Median values of the Quality of Life indicators										Number of districts	in East Germany total (in percent)
		Unemployment [%]	Green Spaces [m²/inhabitant]	Childcare [%]	Life Expectancy [years]	Rent [index value]	Public Transport [% 5mins to next station]	Education [% without students school degree]	Local Supply [minutes to next supply]	Crime [crimes per 100k inhab. and year]	Voter Turnout [%]		
Cluster	1 Cities - West Germany	10,0	606	81,6	79,0	75,3	99,3	7,9	3,6	9211	68,8	15	1 (6,67 %)
	2 Cities - East Germany	7,6	2364	95,8	79,5	70,6	95,8	9,1	6,6	12280	70,6	11	9 (81,82 %)
	3 Mixed Areas	4,8	7899	94,0	80,0	70,8	81,0	8,1	6,2	5152	76,0	30	19 (63,33 %)
	4 Rural Areas - West Germany	6,0	5326	87,8	79,8	75,3	91,6	6,3	5,3	6501	73,6	12	1 (8,33 %)
	5 Rural Areas - Northern East Germany	7,4	19650	95,1	79,4	66,9	71,9	9,7	8,6	6350	70,0	13	12 (92,31 %)
	6 Rural Areas - Middle East Germany	6,7	9431	97,0	79,2	66,0	87,8	9,8	6,4	6007	69,8	11	11 (100 %)
Minimum Germany		1,7	51	71,0	77,4	57,5	24,4	1,1	2,3	2114	63,4		
Mean Germany		4,9	5035	91,1	80,6	100,0	87,5	6,4	5,2	5875	76,3		
Maximum Germany		14,1	26162	105,2	83,4	203,5	100,0	14,0	15,1	25536	85,5		

Fig. 2: Clusters and median values of the QoL indicators

Fig. 2: Clusters and median values of the QoL indicators

Discussion: Pathways to a Degrowth Future

The research highlights several factors crucial for the transition towards degrowth in shrinking areas. By embracing the principles of degrowth, these regions can turn their challenges into opportunities, creating more sustainable, equitable, and resilient communities. The analysis suggests that these regions, by necessity, have already begun to decouple economic activity from well-being, as they have been forced to find ways to maintain quality of life despite economic decline. This makes them ideal laboratories for experimenting with degrowth principles. The document calls for a rethinking of urban and regional development policies, urging policymakers to recognize the value of shrinking areas and to support them in their efforts to build a better future.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION AND SETTLEMENT STRUCTURE

The research indicates that geographical differences play a significant role in the degrowth potential of urban versus rural areas. Urban areas often benefit from better mobility options, while rural areas possess ecological advantages due to larger green spaces. However, common challenges across these areas include civic engagement, labor market improvements, and healthcare provision. Despite these challenges, all shrinking areas manage to provide adequate affordable housing.

STATE FUNDING AND POLICY SUPPORT

The success of Halle in managing urban shrinkage contrasts sharply with Makiivka's struggles, underscoring the importance of state support. Halle's implementation of a comprehensive urban restructuring policy, supported by federal programs like „Urban Restructuring East,“ facilitated a controlled management of decline and the implementation of strategies

aligned with degrowth principles. In contrast, the absence of such support in Makiivka led to the adoption of austerity measures that worsened social challenges.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN INITIATIVES

The cases of Schurenbergerpark and Stadstuin in Parkstad Limburg illustrate the power of community-led projects in promoting degrowth principles. These initiatives transformed vacant spaces into vibrant community hubs, fostering social cohesion and environmental sustainability. The research suggests that such bottom-up approaches can be effective catalysts for degrowth, especially when supported by local authorities.

FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTIVE PLANNING

Leipzig's transition from managing shrinkage to innovative revitalization highlights the importance of adaptable urban planning. The city's ability to shift strategies and integrate nature-based solutions demonstrates how shrinking cities can serve as experimental grounds for degrowth practices.

INTEGRATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES

The research points to Leipzig and Liverpool's emphasis on green infrastructure and nature-based solutions as key components of urban regeneration strategies aligned with degrowth principles. These approaches not only address the challenges of shrinkage but also contribute to improved quality of life and environmental sustainability.

REGIONAL COOPERATION

The Kotka-Hamina case emphasizes the significance of regional cooperation in managing shrinkage, even if the strategy does not fully align with degrowth principles. The collaborative approach among municipalities offers valuable lessons for coordinated efforts in transitioning to degrowth.





# Circular Economy in Buiksloterham - a first attempt at Degrowth?

Marlene Gerhalter  
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Isabel Espinoza Tratter



# Circular Economy

This project analyses Circular Economy and how it could support a Degrowth agenda by examining the development of Buiksloterham, a neighbourhood in Amsterdam (NL). Through this analysis, new instruments can be proposed to steer this area towards a Post-Growth future.

While Circular Economy and Degrowth have similar goals, their principles differ significantly. The common ground between them lies in resource management, focusing on reducing resource extraction and partially on reducing waste production. The main difference is the lack of social and political perspective in Circular Economy. Therefore, while Circular Economy supports some Degrowth objectives through sustainability and resource efficiency, it does not fully address the social and economic transformations required by Degrowth.

Buiksloterham, a highly polluted former industrial area, started to get redeveloped in 2003. After a slow, bottom-up beginning, the development became more organized. In 2014, key stakeholders published a Manifesto

to which detailed how Buiksloterham would attempt to implement Circular Economy concepts in its new development.

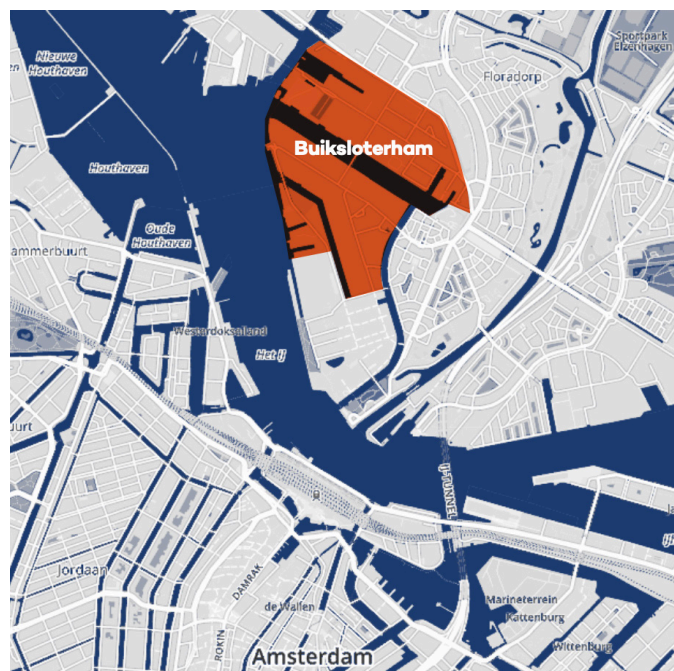
Based on the relevant literature, the goals set by the stakeholders as well as the evaluation of four experts, the area was used as case study.

This paper identifies four fields of action, how the Circular Economy action plan can be further transformed to approach a Post-Growth future: Circular Economy practices, Mixed Use of land, planning regulations and the divergent approaches of Circular Economy and Degrowth.

Buiksloterham does not claim to be a Degrowth development but can be adapted to achieve Degrowth principles. Examples are: Resource management that is enforced and supported by regulations and laws for wider implementation; New zoning tools that improve mixed use and dynamic land use that are further developed to provide room for experimentation and sustainable development; Reducing the pace of development and adopting smaller, incremental steps to prioritise use value over exchange value, prohibit speculation, and limit access to large corporations.

Significant challenges in the path towards a Post-Growth future are ensuring universal housing through decommodification and reducing underused and individual spaces.

Redesigning Buiksloterham to align more closely with a Post-Growth future is possible but requires political will and a global shift in economic, social, and political systems.



## Theory & Analysis

Both concepts have goals regarding environmental protection, and follow different principles to manage resources better. Degrowth, however, also has many principles regarding wider societal transformation.

The one area that clashes directly is the area of profit: For most Circular Economy thinkers, circular companies should be profitable, and the economy should continue to grow. This is antithetical to the Degrowth principle of a reduction of the reliance on ever increasing profit. It should be noted, that some researchers prioritise some principles over others, and while the focus on profit is present in most Circular Economy publications, there are some that conceptualise the reduction of environmental harm as more important than profit. Since Circular Economy is mainly an idea for a different economy, it does not include the social or political perspectives of Degrowth. Both share the principles of reduced resource extraction and reduced waste production, but Degrowth also includes a reduction of consumption, while the Degrowth literature either does not mention the consumption level, or assumes it can stay the same or even increase further due to the improved recycling possibilities.



Buiksloterham, created in 1886 as an industrial area, began transitioning into a mixed residential-working zone in the 1980s. Although a 2003 master plan for mixed-use development was never approved due to high costs, the area has been designated for gradual, organic transformation, allowing both small and large investments. To support flexible urban development, the municipality introduced a „rules-of-the-game“ map, addressing limitations of top-down approaches and post-2008 financial challenges.

Due to its vicinity to the city centre, Buiksloterham had great potential for mixed-use development. The vision of an experimental urban development is based on the expectation of a rapid increase of new housing developments, a rapid increase in mobility, in energy demand, large amounts of surface water and rainfall, and a high percentage of polluted grounds (15%).

Buiksloterham explicitly distanced itself from the public-led development model already established in the city. Circular self-building proposals led the Amsterdam municipality to adapt frameworks and make space for innovative ways of developing land, such as the adoption of self-building procedures and the use of circular procurement rules in the area.

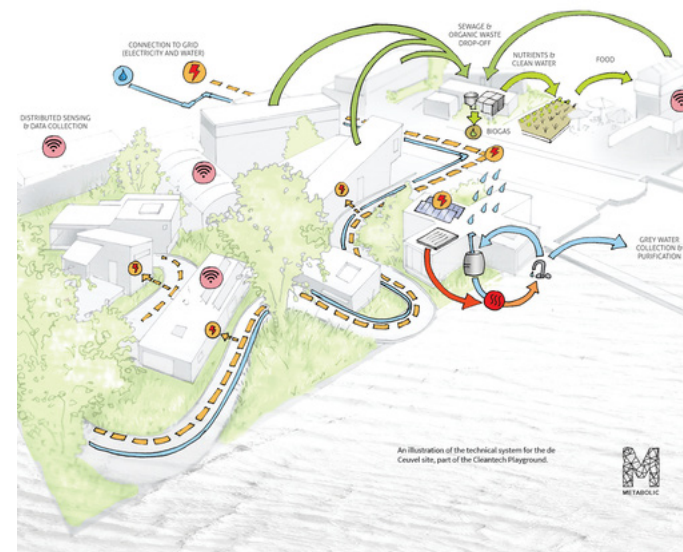
Rather than a typical strict zoning and development plan, the approach for Buiksloterham includes a set of „game rules“ for what they wish to develop as long as they follow general guidelines. In this process, pieces of the area are gradually re-developed by actors of varying sizes - from housing corporations to private single-home projects.



## Evaluation

### 1. Circular Economy Practices

At the heart of the evaluation is the implementation of Circular Economy practices, which could serve as the foundation for Buiksloterham's Degrowth development. This approach focuses on reducing, reusing, and recycling resources to create a closed-loop system where waste is minimized and materials are continuously reused. A key innovation is the use of material passports, which are detailed records of all materials used in construction projects. These passports document the origin, composition, and potential future uses of materials, facilitating their recycling and reuse when buildings are renovated or deconstructed. This practice significantly reduces waste, conserves natural resources, and lowers the environmental footprint of construction activities. Energy efficiency and sustainable water management practices, including rainwater harvesting, greywater recycling, and advanced sewage treatment, further contribute to reducing the ecological footprint. Collectively, these efforts reflect a strong commitment to the principles of the Circular Economy and lay the groundwork for a Post-Growth urban environment.



### 2. Mixed-Use Development

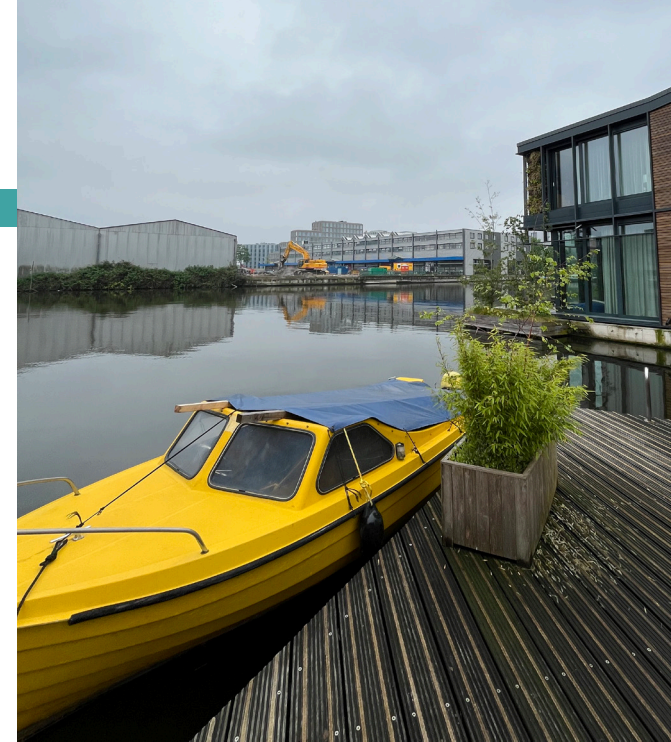
The concept of mixed-use development is a pivotal strategy in promoting both Circular Economy practices and supporting a Degrowth agenda in Buiksloterham. By integrating residential, commercial, and recreational spaces within a single area, this approach enhances land and resource efficiency, reduces the need for extensive transportation, and fosters vibrant, self-sustaining communities.

This model aligns with Degrowth principles by encouraging local economies, minimizing resource consumption, and enhancing social cohesion. It promotes more compact, resource-efficient living arrangements, challenging the traditional growth-oriented urban planning model that often leads to urban sprawl and increased resource use. By balancing private, collective, and public spaces, mixed-use development supports the Degrowth emphasis on quality of life, social well-being, and environmental sustainability over mere economic growth.

However, the success of mixed-use development in advancing Degrowth goals depends on its implementation. It is crucial to avoid the commodification of space, where market-driven forces could erode the social and environmental benefits of such developments. Effective policies are needed to regulate land use, encourage affordable housing, and support community-oriented initiatives, ensuring that mixed-use development truly contributes to a more equitable and sustainable urban future.

### 3. Planning Regulations and Experimental Approaches

Buiksloterham's development has been shaped by innovative planning regulations and experimental approaches, enabled by its designation as a "Living Lab." This status, supported by the Dutch "Crisis and Recovery



Act," allowed the neighborhood to test new planning practices and technologies, which might not fit within conventional regulations.

A notable outcome is the Circular Building Standard, targeting a 30% reduction in energy demand, incentivized by tax breaks. This shows how flexible regulations can drive sustainable practices. The area also embraced "slow development," focusing on careful, deliberate growth rather than rapid, profit-driven expansion.

However, challenges emerged, including the lack of a master plan and high costs of sustainable practices like green roofs, which limited broader adoption. Additionally, rising property values have threatened the original goal of maintaining a diverse, inclusive community, a key aspect of Degrowth principles. These issues underscore the difficulty of balancing innovation with practical, scalable urban solutions.

### 4. Divergence Between Circular Economy and Degrowth

While both Circular Economy and Degrowth aim to reduce environmental impact, they differ in philosophy and objectives. Circular Economy focuses on creating a closed-loop system where resources are reused and recycled, seeking to decouple economic growth from resource use

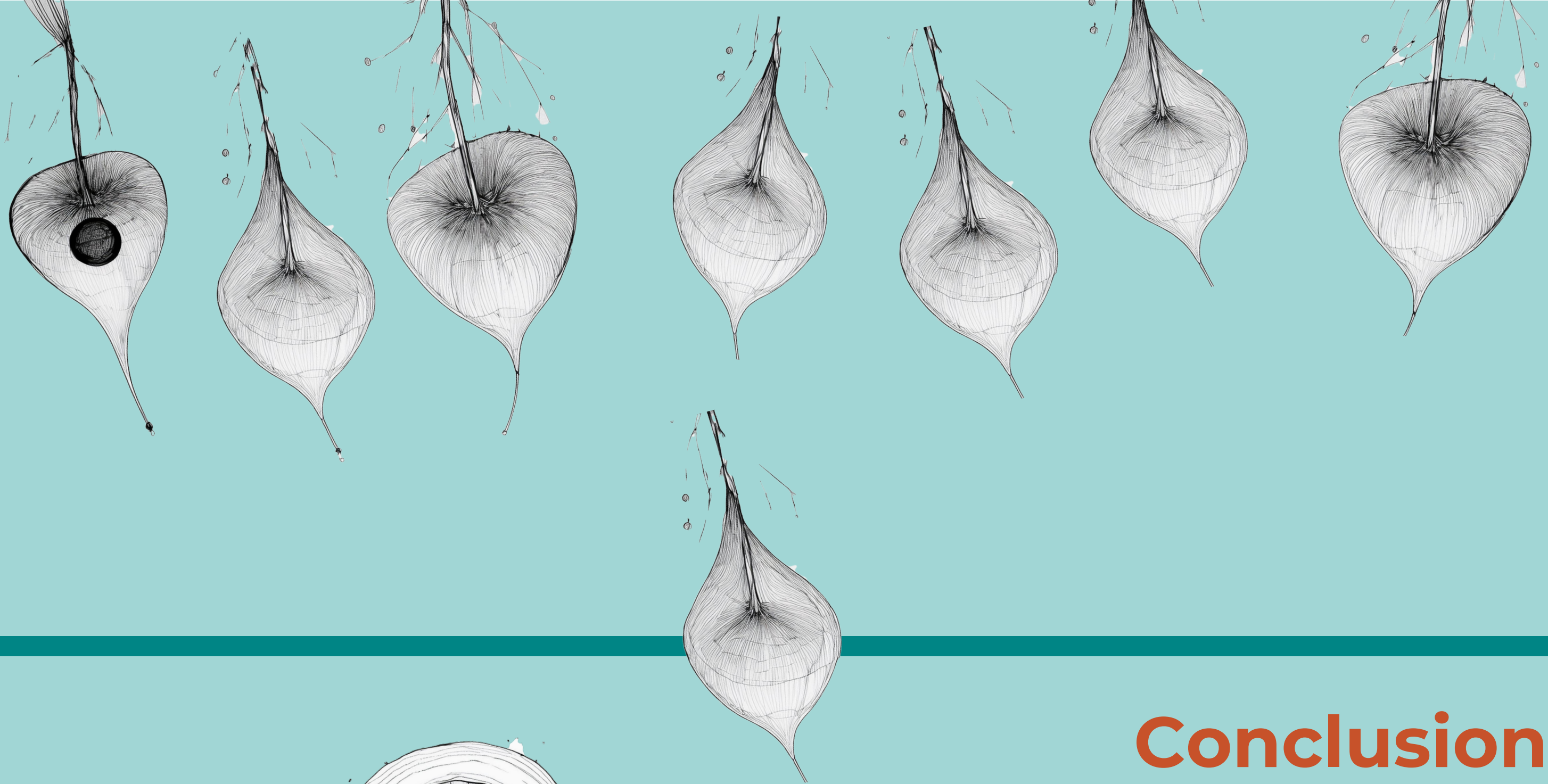
and aligning with a "green growth" agenda that relies on innovation and efficiency.

Degrowth, however, challenges the growth paradigm by advocating for reduced production and consumption, prioritizing social and environmental well-being over economic expansion. It emphasizes sufficiency, equity, and redefining what constitutes a good life, rather than optimizing existing systems.

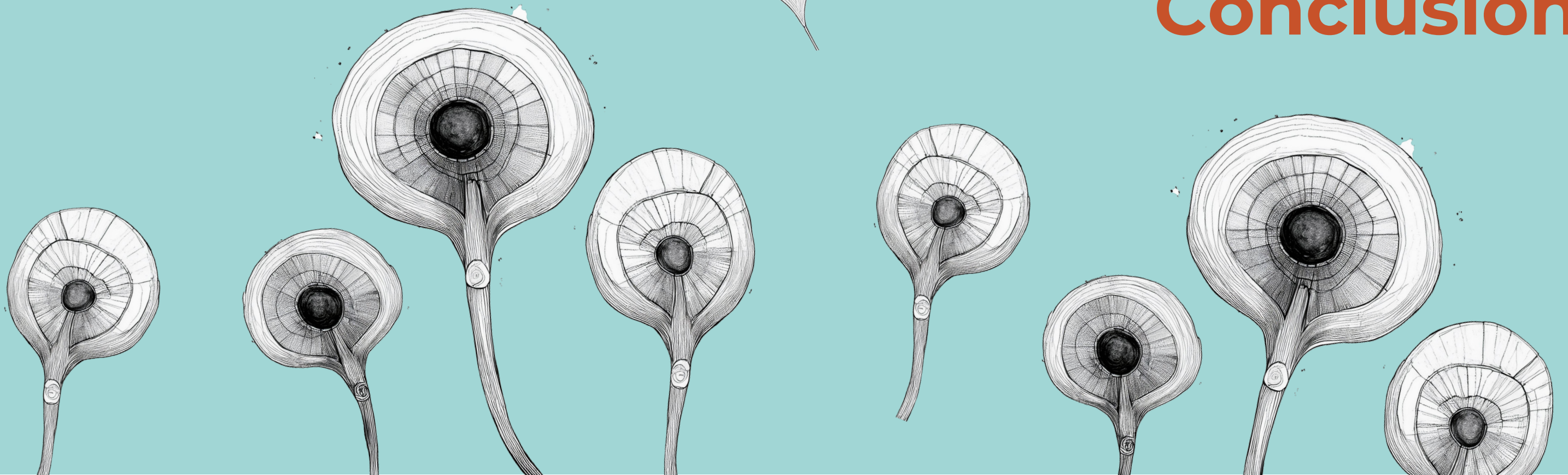
The key divergence lies in their approach to economic activity. Circular Economy promotes sustainable practices but often within a market-driven context, aiming to maintain or grow economic output. This can perpetuate growth dynamics that Degrowth critiques, as Circular Economy does not necessarily address systemic issues like overconsumption and resource inequality. Without deeper changes in social values and economic structures, Circular Economy may fall short of achieving the transformation Degrowth seeks.







# Conclusion





# Conclusion



The concept of degrowth in spatial planning represents a demanding and far-reaching challenge that goes beyond the formulation of specific recommendations for action. This requires a social rethinking that integrates both individual actions and system-critical perspectives. The concept of degrowth aims to question the prevailing maxim of growth and to establish an 'unlearning' of this way of thinking as a central component of change. This implies that not only the fundamentals of economic activity, but also the norms and values of society as such must be subjected to critical reflection. In particular, the lack of willingness to become aware of one's own privileges and to accept restrictions in lifestyle illustrates the deep-rooted challenges associated with real change. A key aspect of the degrowth approach is the demand for social justice and a fairer distribution of resources. This is in direct contrast to the frequently prevailing, growth-orientated urban planning strategies, which tend to consolidate the status quo rather than fundamentally question it. It becomes clear that degrowth is not just an alternative planning method, but requires a comprehensive change in social values and goals. The aim is not just to plan more sustainable cities, but to fundamentally redefine the very definition of prosperity and progress.

However, the research literature on degrowth in spatial planning makes it clear that the transfer of this theory to a planning level is associated with considerable difficulties. The application of the theory in practice is

hampered by different scientific approaches and contradictory recommendations. Furthermore, the phenomenon of greenwashing of sustainability terms leads to further confusion and ambiguity in terminology. The inflationary use of terms such as 'sustainability' and 'green growth' without sufficient reflection makes it difficult to develop clear and coherent guidelines for degrowth-orientated urban planning.

Another key aspect is that the complexity and holistic nature of the degrowth approach makes it almost impossible to consider individual topics in isolation. A fundamental rethinking that transcends sectoral and disciplinary boundaries is an indispensable prerequisite for the implementation of the degrowth approach. Instead of merely treating symptoms, degrowth targets the causes of the problem, which requires a fundamental change in current planning practices and social structures. Overall, it is clear that the implementation of degrowth in spatial planning is accompanied by complex challenges that require a profound transformation of planning practices and social structures. This requires fundamental changes and a willingness to question existing privileges and habits. Degrowth is not so much a concrete instruction for action as an invitation to critically reflect on and transform the foundations of our society and its development. It is important to bear in mind that there are no simple solutions, but that the changes must be implemented holistically and at all levels.



# Glossary

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# Glossary

## Growth Paradigm

The growth paradigm refers to the prevailing belief system where economic growth, as the continuous increase in the production and consumption, is not only regarded as desirable and necessary but also inherently boundless. It assumes that economic growth is the mere solution to a variety of societal and economic challenges, that economic growth can be considered equivalent to the progress, development or well-being of a country and that growth is unlimited. The growth paradigm is upheld by societal, political and academic narratives, theories and statistical norms (Schmelzer 2015: 263) and functions as the primary organizing principle of societies and economies (Xue & Kębłowski 2022). The claim that economic activity is adequately measured through the GDP forms the basis of the growth paradigm (Schmelzer 2015: 263ff).

## Green Growth

Green-growth approaches are based on the strategy of decoupling economic growth from its environmental impact, often by seeking increases in efficiency and decrease in resource-use. In green growth approaches economic growth is taken as a necessary condition for development and technological innovations are emphasised, upholding the win-win narrative, although there is no theoretical nor empirical evidence for its feasibility (Haberl et al 2020; Hickel 2021; Krähmer 2022; Xue & Kębłowski 2022;).

## Postgrowth

Postgrowth critically challenges the centrality of economic growth as a measurement for (economic and societal) progress. Postgrowth approaches critique the growth paradigm and aim at decoupling economic activity and resource use (Durrant et al. 2023:

289), but tend to search for alternatives with a stronger focus on the achievability within already existing structures (Durrant et al. 2023: 289). In comparison to degrowth approaches, growth is not generally rejected (Schulz et al. 2020: 18).

## Degrowth

Degrowth tries to envision an alternative form of the 'good life', mainly referring to a reduction of labour and materialism and increased free time. The goals of degrowth approaches are an increased social justice which should redistribute wealth on a local level, as well as a reduction of processes of unequal ecological exchange on a global level. In order to achieve the set goals, principles of sufficiency (instead of efficiency) and conviviality (over individualism) are adopted (Krähmer 2022: 317). Further, degrowth approaches aim at challenging the ideology of growth, including a major downsizing change in capitalist consumption and production in order to achieve environmental sustainability, well-being as well as social justice. The achievement of this goal includes a series of ecological, social, economic and political transformations which come along with a structural change in everyday life, society and politics (Xue 2022: 397). Degrowth critically challenges the centrality of economic growth as a measurement for (economic and societal) progress.

## Efficiency

Efficiency is a concept that aims at achieving maximum output with minimal input, thereby minimising resource-use e.g. in the form of time, energy, or materials. Efficiency-driven approaches are a dominant response to the ecological crisis, but often lead to a so-called "rebound-effect", where progress in efficiency is compensated by an increase in f.e. usage or equipment (von Winterfeld 2007: 48)

## Sufficiency

Sufficiency is not targeted towards a change in production, but in consumption and therefore behaviour (von Winterfeld 2007: 48). As such, sufficiency approaches emphasise that the environmental crisis cannot be tackled by technical solutions alone, but that minimum – in the form of 'enough' to meet basic needs – and maximum levels – in the form of 'enough' to stay within planetary boundaries' of consumption are needed (Spengler 2016).

## Planetary Boundaries

Planetary Boundaries are a conceptual framework that defines "a safe operating space for humanity based on the intrinsic biophysical processes that regulate the stability of the Earth system" (Steffen et al. 2015: 1). Based on different earth-system processes, limits are defined to avoid increasing and serious impacts. To stay within planetary boundaries, but still ensure "a good life for all", basic needs have to be met at a sustainable level of resource use (O'Neill et al. 2018).

## Degrowth planning

The dominant concepts, models and theories in spatial planning are founded upon the growth paradigm and follow a "political ideal of neoliberalism, growth and competitiveness and function[s] as more of a hindrance than blessing to radical societal transformation" (Xue 2022: 405). Quantitative growth in the form of population, investments, turnovers or revenues is regarded as a success and a main driver of development. Environmental impact is addressed and aimed to be reduced, but the fundamental premise of growth itself is not questioned (Schulz et al. 2020: 18). Growth is seen as both, mentally and institutionally hard to overcome (Durrant 2023: 288).

In this context, Xue (2022) calls for degrowth planning by undermining the growth ideology, framing new substantive values of urban and regional development and encouraging utopian thinking to envision alternative future development (Xue 2022). In more practical terms, Durrant emphasises planner's responsibility in working on decoupling "planning policy and practice from the reliance on growth and ever-continuing new urban development to achieve public goals" (2023: 290).



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