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## New roles in collective, growth-independent spatial organisation

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# POST-GROWTH GEOGRAPHIES

Spatial Relations of Diverse  
and Alternative Economies



[transcript] Social and Cultural Geography

## **New roles in collective, growth-independent spatial organisation**

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*Christian Lamker, Viola Schulze Dieckhoff*

In the twenty-first century, urban and spatial planning still stands at the fundamental interface between state power, private capital and public interest (Stein 2019: 12). Planners hold a key position for organising the spatial conditions of our society. Responsible spatial development requires all planners to take roles that reflect the great diversity and complexity of society. Collective responsibility must be converted into new ways of thinking and acting by courageously leading processes of collective spatial and institutional design. However, economic growth cannot solve the urgent challenges of spatial transformation encapsulated by keywords like ‘sustainability’, ‘climate change mitigation’, ‘climate change adaptation’ and ‘social justice’. Neither can these problems be successfully dealt with as part of a growth-based agenda, for instance through the accelerated designation of building land or technological solutions.

Movements like Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion have greatly increased public awareness of long-term catastrophic impacts. Nonetheless, findings concerning the loss of biodiversity, climate change and the negative effects of a focus on growth do not in themselves provide policy options or a clear transformation strategy. The following sections begin by clarifying the significance of the collective organisation of space and responsible planning, situating planners’ responsibility within this. The focus then moves to the question: Which roles can planners use to lead a complex sustainable transformation (again)? This chapter adopts a perspective from organisational and system theory to lay the groundwork for a new ‘turn to action’ (Lamker/Levin-Keitel 2019: 112) and identifies which roles may be promising for growth-independent planning.

## Collective organisation of space

In the twenty-first century, there is no absolute shortage of material wealth, housing or resources for people who live in Germany, in Europe and in most other industrialised countries. Nonetheless, familiar ways of thinking and modes of action have been unable to achieve or safeguard a satisfactory distribution of resources within ecological limits. Growth imperatives create socially specific scarcity and continue to be deeply rooted in social, economic and planning institutions, affecting every single individual (Rosa 2016; Savini 2019: 74–76; Schmelzer/Vetter 2019: 42–68; Stein 2019). Correspondingly, urban and spatial planning develops ways in which growth and space can be linked (Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und Reaktorsicherheit 2007; Galland 2012; Rydin 2013; Schulz 2018).

Spatial organisation has always been a matter of concern for all human beings. Our image of urban and spatial planning began to shift as early as the 1970s towards people with their knowledge, interests and opinions. Communication and participation are now established elements of all spatial planning processes. Today's debates on post-growth and transformation particularly emphasise that the organisation and, especially, the fundamental redefinition of space are tasks that everyone can actively pursue (e. g. Schneidewind 2018). Planning is the process by which we continuously organise the design of space over time (van Assche/Buinen/Duineveld 2017: 223; Stein 2019: 13). Terms like 'spatial entrepreneurs', 'change agents' and 'prosumers of space' focus on the fact that each individual acts in space and can deliberately direct this action to further a (socio-ecological) transformation.

In this way, agents of spatial change gain access to diverse and comprehensive resources for engaged action. Planners are relieved of the burden of having to conceive and implement all spatial changes. On the other hand, they acquire the burden of more actively leading transformative processes and their spatial dimensions in complex networks. Following this line of thought, this also means that organising the limited space requires more attention to be paid to commonalities, which can act as a focus and guide for action. Since at least the end of the 1990s, the discussion has focused intensively on improving communication within planning processes and developing instruments that enable broad participation on all levels. The basic approach of urban and spatial planning has changed to favour coordinating, integrating and facilitating activities (Innes/Booher 1999: 11; Lamker 2016:

222). The methodological repertoire has become correspondingly diverse and increasingly elaborate. Managing uncertainty has replaced the search for fixed certainties (Abbott 2005). At least since the Nobel Prize for Economics was awarded to Elinor Ostrom in 2012, spatial planning has increasingly supplemented state and market-based solutions with a reliance on the ability of people to organise themselves for sustainable resource management. At the same time, community control is challenging in itself and a shift to community decision-making processes will not be a sufficient solution alone.

Today we stand at a difficult turning point. On the one hand, participation is anchored at all spatial levels. On the other hand, we face increasing social and spatial differences as well as limits to participation and economic growth (e. g. Hagelüken 2017; Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung 2017). Communicative processes therefore occur in settings where there are absolute limits to development that consensus cannot overcome (e. g. limited building land) or should not overcome (e. g. the destruction of habitats and biodiversity). Every single decision can lead to a proportion of these resources being irrevocably lost. We see the cumulative effects of individual choices – even if many of them are quite well-balanced decisions in themselves.

The collective organisation of space primarily involves finding a just balance between different people in one space and between people in different spaces – right up to an intergenerational and global level. Thinking about post-growth draws particular attention to ecological and planetary boundaries and the interconnectedness of our actions and their effects in global processes (as in Brand/Wissen 2017; Raworth 2018; for planning, the relational approach of planetary urbanisation by Brenner 2014 is comparable). The uncomfortable truth is that without rapid and clear decisions, things often do not work. Complexity and uncertainty are core elements of planning action and cannot be fully or permanently eliminated (Abbott 2005: 238; Lamker 2016: 3–11). Urban and spatial planning are becoming increasingly politicised, analogous to the post-growth discourse (Schmelzer/Vetter 2019: 226). For the collective organisation of space, planners need a basis which they can use to make decisions despite persistent uncertainty, and they require soft as well as hard instruments. There are many decisional situations in which economic growth is incompatible with ecological limits and available resources, particularly if a long-term perspective is taken or the decision at hand is linked to other decisions. This begs the question: What are just decisions under these conditions and how can we imagine just spatial development?

## Responsibility of planners

This raises important questions about the responsibility of planners, a responsibility that extends beyond a single delimited space, a short period of time and the people who are alive today. Institutional, collective and individual responsibility are all involved, and the essential rules governing our lives together and our individual courses of actions must thus be adapted. Global change and local action are no longer contradictory. Rio 1992 and many local Agenda-21 processes have installed ‘think global, act local’ as a new quality of joint action in an unequal world characterised by widely different points of departure. Acknowledging joint responsibility therefore also means including the consequences of actions on individuals and communities that are unknown to the decision-makers (see Gunder/Hillier 2007). In urban research, Brenner (2014) calls for consideration of the negative consequences of urbanisation processes to include the most remote areas on Earth. He uses the term ‘planetary urbanization’ to refer to the networks of global material flows. Finally, the time horizon of today’s decisions extends inter-generationally into foreseeable and potential future generations.

It would be extremely easy to address the responsibility of planners in the narrow context of the planning system: responsible planning within the established system of public urban and spatial planning involves fulfilling rights and duties imposed by formal or informal institutions (similarly here see Needham/Buitelaar/Hartmann 2018: 12; also see Gunder/Hillier 2007: 61). Planners must carry out the tasks and abide by the policy guidelines. The spatial reach of responsibility ends at the boundaries of the administrative jurisdiction or at the boundaries set by mandate. Metaphorically speaking, planners are only an unimportant cog in a machine that fits seamlessly into higher-level processes. A perspective of this sort may be appropriate when working with statutory planning instruments. Defining responsibility so narrowly, however, leaves no room for important post-growth impulses. Change must then come from those who delegate power and responsibility to planners, for instance via political decisions.

Today, social movements like Fridays for Future demand more creativity and more immediate action, especially from established institutions. The call for action is directed not only towards politicians but also explicitly towards all public institutions. There must be situations in which responsibility involves direct action and reacting rapidly to urgent problems. Ever

fewer problems stop at administrative boundaries and ever fewer challenges can be tackled within defined jurisdictions.

This discussion extends the concept of responsibility to include the micro- and meso-levels: even the smallest element and/or the smallest movement can change a large system (as also argued by Ekardt 2017; Stein 2019). A small agent may not necessarily be aware of all the effects, but it is very well aware of its own condition and options. This means that the possible ways of changing the system of 'planning' can indeed be conceived within the system of 'planning'. Politicians remain the final level of decision making for urban planning. However, most planning instruments are so complex that it is difficult for politicians to fully understand them, not to mention change them. Planners themselves are thus those who best know their own practice and who can identify and provide immediate starting points for change. In planning situations characterised by undecidability (Gunder/Hillier 2007: 78–82), strength lies in taking responsibility for collective decision-making capacity. Gunder and Hillier (2007: 79–84) emphasise that responsible decisions include the risk of making mistakes. They suggest that planners are responsible for acting as individuals and taking on responsibility that is different to following rules and more than behaving dutifully. Thought of in this way, responsibility is endless, extending across space to the global effects of our actions, across time to potential later generations and across matter to the animate and inanimate environment. This aspect, for example, is highlighted in critiques of a Western, imperial mode of living (Brand/Wissen 2017). Nonetheless, Gunder and Hillier (2007) reduce the burden of responsibility by directing their appeal equally to all planners and by ruling out the possibility of always targeting the correct action in complex contexts.

## **Role images**

At the interface with transformation research, spatial planning is beginning to be reconceptualised, providing integrated, descriptive and explanatory approaches to organise and manage space without growth impulses (Schneidewind 2018; Schulz 2018; Wittmayer et al. 2017: 49–50). Many of these approaches underline that there are possibilities for change, but that courage is required to take the first steps and to encourage others to do the same (Lamker/Schulze Dieckhoff 2019: 8). Debates on planning theory increasingly

discuss the fact that planners can accompany, manage or lead, but can never achieve a complete overview – i. e. complete certainty (e. g. Abbott 2005; Lamker 2016). Identifying and assuming individual responsibility requires opportunities to think beyond what is known and to expand the boundaries of possible action – also expanding individual understandings of planners' roles. Tangible roles help planners to increase their own reflexive capacity and to capture new behavioural patterns in comprehensible mental images. They encapsulate the basic attitude of planners, which is increasingly shifting towards actively accompanying transformation processes in pursuit of the abstract goal of greater sustainability (Lamker/Levin-Keitel 2019: 109).

The basis for the understanding of roles employed here is found in organisational and system theory. Roles summarise expectations and thus provide stability in complex systems (Lamker 2016: 93–97). Acting under uncertainty is viewed as normality (Abbott 2005), involving a search for agency despite complex interactions and undecidabilities. Organisational research has little difficulty in recognising action as being fundamentally incomplete and temporary (Schreyögg/Geiger 2015: 13). Clarity about one's own possible roles and the possible roles of others serves to provide temporary stability through coherent behavioural patterns, which are expected to be reciprocal (Lamker 2016: 94). It is fundamentally impossible to completely record, describe or reliably control other systems. Today, a transformation of planners' roles is occurring just as planners who have adopted appropriate roles are also supporting spatial transformation (Wittmayer et al. 2017: 53). Role-reflexivity is especially important in concrete situations where it can offer support and stability in uncertainty (Lamker 2019: 204).

Roles are used here as a tool to further the collective understanding, reflection, support and organisation of transformation in the context of irresolvable uncertainties (Lamker 2019: 201). They serve to reduce complexity within the system of 'planning', i. e. to structure it in comprehensible and manageable elements. As complex behavioural patterns, roles can be applied and adapted, even for roleplay and improvisation in different contexts (also see Innes/Booher 1999: 12; Wittmayer et al. 2017: 50). Instead of fixed actions, planners should have a flexible toolbox of roles with which they can test spatial action, right down to basic assumptions concerning the potentials for change in post-growth approaches. Today's great pace of change means that changing the training of future planners is just as inadequate as relying on



the slow diffusion of new ideas. The new roles that are necessary must also be filled by people who want to plan and change in the here and now.

Decoupling strict assignments of roles and people creates a bridge between today's reality and possible futures. The decoupling does not force planners to question their own identity. Rather it provides them with an opportunity to better understand their own role in interaction with others and to temporarily 'slip' into other roles in order to improve planning action and increase collective reflexivity and agency with other actors (see Innes/Booher 1999; Lamker 2019). In the following, roles are used to help transfer important behavioural patterns from the post-growth debate to urban and spatial planning. With their focus on agency, they introduce enriching new patterns of behaviour and promote the responsible use of the new paths thus created.

## Post-growth impulses

On the one hand, the post-growth discourse looks at institutional norms and structures that often follow an unquestioned growth logic (e. g. Rydin 2013; Stein 2019). On the other hand, it also looks at the possible ways in which individuals can effect change (e. g. Ekardt 2017; Welzer 2013). The interaction of the macro- and micro-levels of decision making and of global and local processes calls for a response by all of us. Investigations and discussion about post-growth are still relatively new and research gaps remain (Schmelzer/Vetter 2019: 232–235). These include the global ecological question of post-growth in relation to social justice and the relationship between post-growth, geopolitics and security policies. However, in the search for arenas of responsibility and transformative roles, urban and spatial planning can draw not only on its own initial post-growth impulses but also on fundamental critiques of existing social and economic models from neighbouring disciplines.

With the work of Piketty (2016), a new basis for understanding the development and meaning of growth has recently been developed in economics, and concludes that growth is leading to extreme national and global inequalities. Growth is not normal. In human history, it rather represents an exceptional situation in the second half of the twentieth century. In addition to analytical approaches, there are alternative economic models such as the

post-growth economy (Paech 2012; Jackson 2017), donut economics (Raworth 2018), the common good economy (Felber 2018) and the degrowth movement (Latouche 2010; Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie e.V. / DFG-Kolleg Postwachstumsgesellschaften 2017; Kallis 2018). In response to planetary boundaries and the need to improve public welfare, such approaches call for immediate change to our economic practices and lifestyles (for example, with an economic focus in Felber 2018). However, the spatial dimension is still under-represented (Schmid 2019: 9).

In sociology, critical approaches describe the ‘racing standstill’ of a society that is in constant acceleration but still fails to achieve a good life (Rosa 2016; Rosa/Henning 2018). However, great change is often also the result of small adaptations in our own behaviour and actions. There are thus also hopeful messages to be found in sociology, focusing on the agency of everyone (Ekardt 2017). Psychology explores the question of why the urge for growth is so deeply anchored in our thought patterns (Fromm 2009; Welzer 2013; Hunecke 2013), even though material possessions only lead to short-term moments of happiness and never to a state of lasting satisfaction. Erich Fromm (2009: 274) accordingly criticises the ‘triad of unlimited production, absolute freedom and unrestricted happiness’ (translated from German). However, current findings in brain research are encouraging for individuals as well as for cities and regions and suggest that there are possibilities for change, learning and development until the end of life (Hüther 2013; 2018).

There are also links to political activism working within other economic and social models. In 2011, the German Advisory Council on Global Change (*Wissenschaftliche Beirat der Bundesregierung, WBGU*) called for a great transformation (WBGU 2011). In 2013, the Enquête Commission ‘Growth, Prosperity, Quality of Life’ (*‘Wachstum, Wohlstand, Lebensqualität’*) also discussed the search for alternatives in its final report (Deutscher Bundestag 2013). In 2014, the first degrowth conference took place in Germany and has since been held annually in other European cities. In 2018, the European Post-Growth Conference, initiated in Brussels by ten MEPs, discussed future-proof policy and a sustainable combination of the environment, human rights and a viable economy.

Finally, in 2018, the Fridays for Future movement was born, becoming a major political force in 2019, right up to the European elections. For the first time, young people around the world are collectively calling on politicians and society to take decisive action and change direction in the face of the

climate crisis and planetary boundaries. Since the end of the 2010s, this civil-society ‘moral revolution’ or ‘art of the future’ (*Zukunftskunst*) (Schneidewind 2018: 476–479) has triggered reflection in many professions about individual political responsibility and possibilities and may be a starting point for political-institutional, technological and economic change. Nevertheless, in Germany it has not led to fundamental policy changes.

There is an increasing amount of work in urban and rural planning that is critical of the deeply rooted (economic) growth orientation of the profession (Janssen-Jansen et al. 2012; Rydin 2013; Hahne 2017; Schulz 2018; Savini 2019; Stein 2019). The growth paradigm pervades planning instruments, institutions and norms and prevents planning from focusing on the common good. A critical view from a post-growth perspective can be valuable here: first, it helps to identify this growth focus on various levels; second, it provides incentives, arguments and visions for a post-growth culture; and third, it offers motivation to productively use the critical pluralism of opinion. In Germany, the Academy for Spatial Research and Planning (*Akademie für Raumforschung und Landesplanung*, ARL) sees potential for post-growth to develop into a ‘paradigm in the economy, society and planning’ (*Akademie für Raumforschung und Landesplanung* 2017: 4, translated from German). In 2019, the Association of German Architects (*Bund Deutscher Architekten*, BDA) heralded the end of growth as necessary for survival, elaborating on this in ten postulates (*Bund Deutscher Architekten* 2019).

On the level of neighbourhoods, urban districts, towns and cities, several examples of alternative practices and criteria have the potential to lead to new ways of thinking and modes of living. On the regional, federal-state, national and global levels, the debates largely remain niche topics (very markedly in Denmark, Galland 2012). Indeed, the post-growth discussion has been split into, on the one hand, concrete and often radical demands directed towards established institutions and, on the other hand, a focus on self-organised projects and niches (Schmelzer/Vetter 2019: 217). Throughout, calls are made for new (positive) social visions which can break down the supremacy of a growth orientation, or even the ‘growth fetish’ in economy, society and urban and spatial planning.

## Roles in an active transformation

The post-growth debate does not lead to a single role suitable for planners in public administrations or in private planning agencies. This seems particularly undesirable considering demands for diversity, pluralism and critical debate in large parts of the field. A set of roles can help daily planning practice to become more reflexive and active in face of the challenges and limits that the post-growth discourse identifies. Bringing together social, cultural and ecological issues in a broad discourse (as in Schmelzer/Vetter 2019: 15) provides a good basis for an integrative planning perspective on space. It is therefore especially helpful to identify impulses that receive little attention in the classical definitions of urban and spatial planning.

The six propositions of post-growth planning proposed by Lamker and Schulze Dieckhoff (2019) show the need for new roles from a post-growth perspective. New roles are intended to act as a bridge to bold action that sees current developments as being changeable, right down to their fundamentals. It is essential to use various types of communication including playful approaches for taking people with their personal and emotional dimensions seriously in open processes (Innes/Booher 1999: 19; similarly also Schneidewind 2018). Roles must provide a robust basis for communication, an immediate link to transformative action, and anchors that can be used in shared responsibility by every individual planning actor. Although social change has been occurring in many initiatives and micro-practices since the 1990s, spatial planning seems increasingly challenged by these approaches. Demands for rapid construction and the rapid development of land come up against the clear limits to growth and the real-world housing situation, mobility opportunities and quality of life. Debates about services of general interest, equivalent living conditions and the social divide are accelerating at all spatial levels and require a new perspective (Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung 2017; Hagelüken 2017; Terfrüchte 2019). Is it impossible to effect large-scale and even systemic changes through collective decision-making?

Urban commons, cooperative kinds of urban development, civic neighbourhood concepts and spatial associations are already changing neighbourhoods and urban districts (Schneidewind 2018: 301–475). Although these approaches can be described using planning vocabulary, they focus on direct action, on collective forms of organisation and on the concrete improvement

of the spatial environment. In addition, a new generational conflict is emerging. On the one hand, degree programmes, conferences and initiatives reveal a great interest in urban and spatial planning among young people from many backgrounds. On the other hand, there are problems with the representation of younger generations in democratic bodies. In the public debate, awareness and appreciation of demands for change – made visible, for example, by the Fridays for Future movement – are met with uncertainty or even rejected by established planning actors in research and practice. The long-term goals are well accepted, as seen, for example, in the transfer of the Sustainable Development Goals to all policy levels (Bundesregierung 2018). However, it is difficult to take the necessary courageous steps and to create a breakthrough with innovative solutions and new institutionalisations (Schneidewind 2018: 30). Part of the post-growth discourse fundamentally questions the way in which our modern society is organised, while other strands of the discourse actively direct their appeal to existing institutions (like, for instance, Fridays for Future). Post-growth calls for the stronger politicisation of social and thus also spatial issues (Schmelzer/Vetter 2019: 226).

In the context of a broader ‘turn to action’ in spatial and planning sciences (Lamker/Levin-Keitel 2019: 112), roles should be developed that provide inspiration and motivation for change. The established roles as a facilitator and coordinator of spatial processes have not so far opened up the necessary opportunities for a broader and more political process of change. They seem too passive and conservative to introduce and motivate a new perspective. Integrating post-growth into urban and spatial planning requires action-based roles that can inspire a positive vision of a growth-independent world (Lamker/Schulze Dieckhoff 2019: 8). As a discipline, urban and spatial planning is, however, characterised by the ability to use changing roles to repeatedly establish connections between people and spatial development and to envisage alternative futures (Lamker 2016: 323).

An open process is important to connect the integrative and long-term perspective with bold and immediate action. Planners should trust themselves (and be given the necessary scope by others) to develop ideas and even radical alternatives, offering them for public discussion. As inspirers, motivators and leaders, it is possible to help develop a link between concrete proposals within established institutions and the hope connected with self-organised forces in civil society, thus supporting a dual (or shared) transformation strategy. It should not be forgotten that the long tradition of

urban and spatial planning in Germany and Central Europe has produced many valuable ideas and instruments that can also be used for changed goals and new success criteria.

## Outlook

The greatest challenge is to collectively organise spatial development and at the same time to release it from its growth orientation. With their overview of modes of action and interrelations in space, planners can help by questioning apparently unquestioned assumptions. They can consider the long-term effects of individual decisions in the context of the diverse impacts of our uses of space. And, with the help of a broadened repertoire of roles, they can take an active and leading part in developing growth-independent spatial change. They should not enter into a cycle of avoiding critical discussion, but actively take responsibility within their own field, translating this responsibility into collective action with other stakeholders. The post-growth debate underscores that structural social changes are necessary if dependence on growth is to be overcome (Schmelzer/Vetter 2019: 26). It is not a question of whether the conditions or individual actions have to change first. Both are intricately linked and can only be fundamentally transformed if different groups of players simultaneously act together in new understandings of their roles (as in the transformation model in Schneidewind 2018: 477; also see Kristof 2017: 169–171).

Leading processes of sustainable transformation also means that planners must engage responsibly and actively. Combining post-growth with urban and spatial planning involves focusing more closely on shared and bold engagement. Ecological boundaries and social movements especially demand fast and dynamic action. In the future, planners should also adopt the roles of inspirers and motivators. An important step in this context is to combine existing approaches, to enter into creative discourse and to jointly embark on even those steps that initially appear almost impossible.

Spatial organisation is a collective matter where planners can take a key position precisely because of the level of complexity and dynamism. They thereby become leaders in developing the spatial conditions for a growth-independent society. At the same time, suitable social and political conditions must be created for collective action to have a lasting effect. This can provide

fertile ground for the emergence, growth and activation of new roles in a growth-independent post-growth planning.

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