

# **The Potential of Post-Growth Planning: Re-Tooling the Planning Profession for Moving Beyond Growth**

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## **Introduction**

There has recently been a renewal of the debates that question the compatibility of the pursuit of growth with meaningful action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and unsustainable resource consumption. These debates have variously been labelled 'degrowth' or 'post-growth'. In this paper we explore the implications of these debates for the practices of planning. We focus on how the instruments and tools within planning systems may be adapted in quite radical ways for a post-growth future. While planning covers a wide range of policy domains, we concentrate our examples on two core tasks of planning for housing and infrastructure. We use these to bring out the ways that planners could address the urgent need to think and act beyond the growth agenda.

## **What is the current relationship of planning to growth?**

Planning is here seen as concerned with change in the material built and natural environment and with how processes of spatial change (not just urban development and urbanisation) are organised. In setting the focus of the paper, we distinguish the structural constraints on planning, the broader planning system, and the instruments and tools available to planners. We focus on the instruments and tools and their use within planning systems, leaving issues of reform at the structural level to a broader debate on post-growth societies (Rosa & Henning, 2018; Savini et al., 2022), and post-growth economies (Lange et al., 2021; Dixson-Decleve et al., 2022). We acknowledge that this leaves to one side – for now – the relationship between levels of economic activity in lower and higher-income countries, a relationship that may require countries in the Global North to reduce their biophysical footprint by 40 to 50 percent (Hickel, 2021). We focus here on what planners are able to do in current contexts but

argue that this can be as relevant to action through planning within the Global South as the Global North.

Since the industrialisation of the 19th century and the foundations of the discipline, planning instruments and tools have been developed to cope with, to organise, and even to foster growth. While the roots of planning in European and Anglo-American contexts circle around public health, living conditions, and infrastructure associated with urban growth, in colonial contexts, planning was integrally involved in planning for economic growth through exploitation of colonised places and peoples. Its recent evolution has seen economic growth move to a core position globally (Barry 2020; Galland, 2012; Owens & Cowell, 2002; Rydin, 2013; Savini 2021; Xue, 2022). The impetus for debating the potential of post-growth planning is the recognition that planning has bound itself into a pro-growth agenda that is mentally and institutionally hard to overcome (Janssen-Jansen et al., 2012; Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, 2022; Næss et al., 2019). Instruments and tools now seek to facilitate new urban development and economic growth as a means of meeting a variety of other policy goals through direct benefits from developments like the provision of infrastructure or indirect benefits like an increasing tax base (Rydin, 2013). Success in planning outcomes is usually expressed in monetary terms (as with increases in the GDP), despite attempts to capture a broader notion of value, say through environmental or social valuations and impact assessment tools.

GDP may be a flawed measure, but it does contain within it an indication of the ways that economic activity supports livelihoods and wellbeing, as expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals. But the only available experience of reductions in economic growth has been in recessions and their inequitable consequences. We would challenge the idea that a critique of growth implies a forced recession. We argue it allows scope for different forms of urban development and different types of economic activities, possibly even a greater scope for types of low impact activity than under current circumstances. In contrast to an *unplanned* recession, a *planned* restructuring of economic activity – through a focus on environmental and spatial change – would require the use, re-purposing, or adaptation of many of the instruments and tools planners currently have at their disposal.

It is particularly worrying to see how the pursuit of sustainability has been subsumed to the pro-growth agenda. Since the emergence of sustainability within the discipline, instruments and tools have been adapted to this new goal (Owens & Cowell, 2002) and planning language has incorporated terms like climate change, energy transition, and resilience. As a discipline, planning has embraced eco-modernism, preferring to see itself as a champion of more ecologically aware forms of development such as eco-cities, carbon-neutral developments, and infrastructures for sustainable transport and for generating and transmitting renewable energies. As a result, it is almost always possible to label the pursuit of more development as sustainable (Krähmer, 2021), even where it seems clearly to be following a neo-liberal agenda (Gunder, 2020). This has been achieved by a focus on assessing and trading-off environmental, social, and economical dimensions rather than considering more fundamental conflicts including over resource use (Campbell, 1996). Promoting sustainable urban development through new development and meeting other policy goals using planning gain has become the acceptable face of green-growth/pro-growth planning.

### What is the post-growth perspective?

The term post-growth has been interpreted in diverse ways alongside and often interchangeably with degrowth. Whilst both concepts share a central empirical argument, we take degrowth debates to be more deeply nested in economics, more fundamentally oriented towards structural and theoretical issues, as well as giving voice to North-South global debates and the differing development pathways that the structural inequality between the two implies (Liegey & Nelson, 2020). Next to this, we see the post-growth perspective as an interdisciplinary and pragmatic search for radical alternatives focusing on what is achievable within existing structures (Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, 2022). A post-growth perspective is thus applicable to an examination of the instruments and tools available to planners as of today, even while its critique is much more fundamental; it strives to transform planning itself through changed practices.

The core critique of growth, that post-growth and degrowth positions share, hinges on the question of decoupling. Decoupling means the disruption of the relationship of economic activity to resource use. Historically, economic growth has gone alongside increasing resource use and increasing emissions, for example of greenhouse gases, even allowing for periodic improvements in resource-efficiency. The need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is widely understood and agreed; less widely appreciated is the need to reduce resource consumption in tandem. This is due to several factors from the energy and carbon embedded within resources and their extraction, to the pollution caused by waste resources and the reduced capacity of the environment to absorb emissions due to land use changes.

The policy response has been to try and sever the link between economic activity, energy use and resource consumption in order to continue economic growth (Vadén et al., 2020). Such decoupling can be either *relative*, in the sense that an increase in economic activity is matched by a smaller increase in energy and resource use through efficiency measures, or *absolute* in that increased economic activity results in energy and resource use plateauing or even declining. Most commentators on the multiple climate and environmental crises we face argue that absolute decoupling is required. However, there is little evidence that absolute decoupling is occurring or even possible in a pro-growth world (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Jackson, 2009; Parrique et al., 2019; Vadén et al., 2020). This is due to a combination of factors including; rebound effects based on the Jevon's Paradox where efficiency in the use of a resource fails to result in corresponding reductions in its consumption (Jevons, 1865); technological changes that either fail to target areas of high resource consumption or shifts the problem elsewhere (say, to different resources); an overestimation of the potential of recycling and the circular economy more generally; and an underestimation of the resource and energy impacts of a shift towards a service economy and of associated spatial shifts in resource and energy consumption globally (Parrique et al., 2019).

Of more relevance here, is that there has been little discussion of the implications of these debates for the practices and, more precisely, the instruments and tools of planning. There is now, though, an increasing number of planning authors beginning to use and incorporate post-growth ideas (Barry, 2020; Cattaneo et al., 2022; Krähmer, 2020; Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, 2019; Savini, 2021; Savini et al., 2022; Xue, 2015). There is wider acknowledgement that planners at the local and regional scale have a key role to play in tackling climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022). In some cities, even action for relative

decoupling can be identified (Parrique et al., 2019). Yet, cities that promote themselves as beacons of a sustainable transition may not appear as exemplary when the consumption emissions from the lifestyles in these cities are considered (Krähmer, 2020). Likewise, resource constraints raise questions of the extent to which core planning functions like the organisation of space for housing and infrastructures can continue at the same level (Ermgassen et al., 2022; Xue, 2015). The production of infrastructures today is also deeply enmeshed in arguments that it increases productivity and growth (Kirkpatrick & Smith, 2011; Naess, 2006). We, therefore, look for new ways of using planning instruments and tools to address the post-growth agenda in a meaningful way.

### **What would post-growth planning look like?**

The aim of post-growth planning is to delink planning policy and practice from the reliance on growth and ever-continuing new urban development to achieve public goals. We then need a form of planning that encourages resource-efficiency and that sets the built environment context for reduced rates of growth elsewhere in the economy, outside of the development sector. Furthermore, we need a form of planning that fits with a reduced pace of development so that the relative and eventually absolute decoupling can make an impact. When envisioning this new form of planning, we need to remain aware that economic activity is one pre-requisite for adequate livelihoods and quality of life and that planning systems need to support sufficient economic activity for these purposes. This also draws attention to how the sufficiency of economic activity varies across space and the role that planning systems should play in redressing the balance between insufficiencies and excesses of such activity within overall absolute ecological constraints.

We draw attention to the local and regional level where most of the instruments and tools are used and where often final decisions are taken, though many of these also stretch to the national level or beyond. We focus on the specific contribution made through regulating new urban development and considering the spatial distribution of such development alongside existing socio-economic activities. The range of instruments and tools we consider include: plan-making at different scales, regulation, taxation and incentives, the role of information and assessments, the use of public land ownership, and direct development. We exclude land value capture because of the intrinsic risks that this instrument carries of buying into the apparent need to create more monetised development value, often in higher price locations, in order to generate a financial surplus for redistributing to meet other goals. This would be inherently pro-growth. We need an alternative to the widespread adoption of land value capture as currently conceived as the predominant planning instrument. We also need to make more space within planning systems for encouraging and (literally) finding space for low value and non-commercial activities, such as those involved in community care and reproduction and in the social economy.

Considering housing, post-growth planning would emphatically steer away from the idea (for which there is no foundation) that problems of affordability and access in the housing market can be solved by encouraging more market-led housebuilding, particularly in higher price areas. Thus, a first step would be to diversify housing tenures and use spatial allocations for new housing to protect land for public, social and community housebuilding (Savini & Bossuyt, 2022; Xue, 2015). In many localities, local plans already allocate sites for self-build and community-built housing. This could be expanded and even ambitious targets for the share

of such housing set. Similarly, public and social housing provided by local authorities and municipal housing companies or housing associations could be allocated to suitable land and a share of the development ceiling. This would be preferable to linking such housing provision to a set share of market-led housing.

However, to fit within post-growth tenets, planning systems would still need to follow two further pathways. First, there needs to be a strong emphasis on regulating new development for the highest levels of resource-efficiency including ideas of greater circularity within the development process and ensuring designs and construction methods to enable long-term efficiency in use. This is a path that many planning systems are already following and that many developers are also engaging with, so this should not be difficult to pursue more intensively in practice. That said, effective regulation along these lines requires new informational tools or, at least, better use of existing tools. Life Cycle Analysis and carbon accounting should become standard for all development proposals to enable post-growth regulation. Furthermore, there should be close attention to cumulative impacts across a locality, a region, and a nation so that, again, performance on individual developments does not aggregate to boundary-busting total numbers. More contentious might be the suggestion that there should be both minimum and maximum space standards to prevent excessive use of buildings.

However, to avoid the Jevons paradox effect, the second pathway – which is challenging – is to slow down rates of development and to redistribute that development. This implies recognising the need for absolute limits to urban development and setting ceilings, not only floors or targets for regions and local areas, preferably framed by a national ceiling: or even transnational ceiling where structures for setting one exist. This is likely to involve diverting development activity from high price and high demand areas to lower price but high need areas. Post-growth planning implies a move away from identifying one or more localities as a national or regional growth engine but rather having more distributed development and using planning powers, including comprehensive plans, to enact that. It suggests a shift away from growth nodes in polycentric regional plans that envisage growth in a core city over-flowing to other areas and stimulating further development there. It further rejects the idea of localities competing with each other for new development and economic activity, a route which leads to over-supply of development.

In this context, we have to reflect upon the question of shrinking towns, cities, and regions. Post-growth planning would see scope for actively planning for a lack of development in an area or even some shrinkage. Debates on plans at different scales should encompass the range of options from shrinkage through no/low growth to limited additional development, rather than assuming pro-growth planning in all areas. Post-growth planning could thus embrace the potential within shrinking areas to act as a testbed for new ideas but would not see demographic shrinkage as a sign of success, nor would it see economic shrinkage (of GDP) as necessarily a sign of reaching a post-growth future. Shrinking areas could be locations to develop post-growth visions, but there is no justification to defer responsibility solely on them (Walling et al., 2021). It could be argued that the most intensively growing areas are rather in an advantageous position to be frontrunners, becoming part of wider regional post-growth visions.

This form of spatial planning should also embrace courageous consideration of the existing stock. Instruments can require greater reuse of the existing built stock to provide additional housing, subject to rigorous analysis of the resource and carbon implications of such refurbishment and redevelopment. Ideally, fiscal mechanisms would be used to disincentivise excessive use of space and to encourage some redistribution of how existing space is used by households and companies. As examples, the development of second homes and housing intended primarily for the short-term letting market should be restricted in favour of more resource-effective ways to cater for guests and tourists.

Regarding infrastructures, it needs to be recognised that they play a vital role in determining the environmental impact of many activities within society, especially mobility, energy use, water use and their respective emissions. Simultaneously, building and maintaining infrastructures requires intensive engagement with increasing resource efficiency and minimising waste generation. This means that there may be strong post-growth arguments for replacing infrastructure to enable new, more resource-efficient patterns to develop. At the same time there are also compelling arguments for sticking with and working within the limits of existing infrastructural networks rather than expanding them indefinitely. They represent considerable sunk resources as well as financial and political capital and decisions about when to renew, adapt or leave infrastructures will inevitably be delicately balanced and context specific.

New knowledge of embedded carbon, cumulative impacts and the demands generated by new infrastructure should go alongside better understanding of alternative options. Critical interrogation of the 'do nothing' scenarios that often frame the justification for new infrastructures will be vital. Post-growth planning implies that, alongside planning infrastructure which will enable *inter alia* lower-carbon mobility and energy use, there needs to be active planning for replacement and even shrinkage in existing infrastructure – such as moving from independent car mobility to active travel modes. Thus, if there is to be investment in renewable energy infrastructure, this need to be coordinated with phasing out carbon-based infrastructure. If cycling and walking networks are to be expanded, then the space they will occupy should be at the expense of some roads and car-based spaces. And if there is to be investment in rail systems, particularly for long distance travel, then this should be coordinated with reduction in capacity for air travel.

We recognise that this transformation goes beyond instruments and tools alone. It does involve a new vision for planning. For now, we are looking for hacks that permit change from within planning towards post-growth alternatives. By identifying more concrete ways forward, our aim is a view of post-growth planning that is achievable and that enables the delivery of housing, employment, infrastructures, and key services that meet needs rather than market-led growth *per se* and does so in a way that is environmentally sustainable. But a major hindrance is the grip that pro-growth thinking has on the imagination of planners, to the extent that any alternative seems inconceivable (Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, 2022). We contend that planning practice has its *raison d'être* in influencing or steering future spatial and environmental changes, and we posit that there is a good potential to adjust established instruments and tools, in a clear understanding of the potential conflicts with property and

economic interests. In this sense, new planning visions for post-growth would need to be bold and radical in their assumptions and directions. At the same time, they would need to be clearly capable of implementation, opening windows for further (systemic) change.

The far-reaching concerns of post-growth planning lead to questions about the need for supportive structural frameworks, particularly at the national scale. Planning policy and practice has a high profile at the local, city, or sub-regional scale where it can engage with local communities, develop options based on detailed local knowledge of an area and where the social and material specificities of that area can be taken on board. Many planners have accrued an impressive body of skills at the community and neighbourhood scale which can leverage the capacities of local civil society to take a core role in spatial development (Horlings et al., 2021). Removing the pressures of acceding to market-led growth may enable such capacities to grow and give planners more scope to broaden the range of their planning activities. However, this is most likely to be successful if nested within a supportive policy framework at regional, national scales, and ideally even international scales. Such a framework is needed if key resources – such as control over finance and land – are to be devolved to local or urban planning. Even with greater leveraging of civil society, these resources will be needed, for example, to meet housing needs through public, social or community-based residential schemes. With such frameworks in place, then planners will be empowered to use their capacities and skills to deliver post-growth futures more effectively.

### **Positioning and normalising post-growth planning**

Moving towards a future in which post-growth planning becomes normalised involves discussing the political responsibility of planners, as professionals, researchers, and educators to take such a post-growth agenda forward. Planners in democratic societies are rarely in a position to impose spatial visions on their own, nor should they be seen to do so. Yet, they should not sit back and wait for others to outline the implications for their own practice. The deepest implication of post-growth is that it can connect a wider transformation agenda outside of planning to a transformation within planning. The use of existing instruments and tools and the development of new ones can and should best be part of debates in both academia and practice.

There is much within the literature on and around post-growth debates that sees it as the task of planners (professionals, educators, researchers) to advocate a new agenda. As academics we have a responsibility to present future practitioners with the evidence that, in many circumstances, development predicated upon economic growth is incompatible with action to address the environmental crisis. While we accept that academia (and to a lesser extent professional bodies) remain important loci for debates on alternative forms of planning, we do question the burden this places on individual planners. Not only are such planners usually employees with all the restrictions this implies, but many work within local government and are also subject to the direction of elected politicians. In this context, how far are planners able legitimately to promote a new agenda for planning?

Rather than positioning the post-growth planner as an overtly political actor seeking to direct planning debates based on values, we would point to the expertise that planners have access to. This expertise enables planners to set out – with varying degrees of certainty – the likely future implications of different planning visions, including scales and modes of urban

development, and patterns of service and infrastructure delivery. Our knowledge about the resource-base and the impact of planning actions across all scales has never been better than today. Rather than focussing on promoting market-led urban development with oft-cursory environmental impact assessment or sustainability appraisal, planners should highlight much more strongly the consequences in environmental and social terms of those patterns, looking to the medium-long term as well as the more immediate political or policy timescale. This would include the consequences of the kinds of trade-off and compensation that are a common response to identifying environmental and social harms arising from a development proposal. It becomes the responsibility of planners to help develop and articulate realistic spatial visions that reflect the reality that growth *is* a problem.

This means it behoves planners to speak to the infeasible nature of many plans that pre-suppose growth, rather than buying into standard so-called ‘best-practices’ regarding sustainable construction, green growth, infrastructure modernisation, and inward developments. Just as it is inconsistent with professional ethics to put forward a plan that has little chance of being implemented, so too is it unethical to advise action that it is known will lead to disastrous consequences. Planners should consider part of their role to voice uncomfortable truths and to avoid the easier path or discourse of growth-dependence. In such situations rather than automatically engage with private sector stakeholders planners may be able to turn towards support of local communities to explore innovative grassroots ways of meeting local needs. They can then take such momentum and upscale it into instruments and tools at local, regional, and national levels. This would involve a re-tooling away from (new) urban design and growth management towards community building and skills development, with a freshly defined positioning of instruments and tools. Planners would move towards a role where they are supportive holders of shared leadership rather than neutral managers, process designers, or ‘master planners’.

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