

## Urban Experiments for Socio-Ecological Transformation: The Smart City and Degrowth Spaces

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There is mounting scientific evidence that the environment is in a state of emergency and that making fundamental changes to how humans relate to it is more urgent than ever. Yet, precisely at a time when decisive action is imperative, confidence in established tools for action is crumbling. The sustainability paradigm – the hegemonic eco-political frame for almost 30 years – is increasingly perceived as having failed to deliver major socio-ecological change. Political institutions and civil society – traditionally perceived as key drivers of change – seem unable to generate and maintain the required political momentum. This leaves contemporary societies with a formidable dilemma which might give reasonable cause for disillusionment about the very possibility of breaking with “sustained unsustainability” (Blühdorn). In recent years, however, new confidence in socio-ecological transformation has emerged at a scale one might consider to be of secondary importance to tackling global crises: the city.

Especially two innovative urban experiments for socio-ecological transformation have become prominent: the smart city and degrowth spaces, such as repair cafés, sharing platforms, urban agriculture, food co-ops and co-housing projects. The smart city seeks to re-instill confidence in techno-scientific innovation and Green growth. It considers urban everyday life as a promising “living laboratory” in which techno-scientific and policy innovations are co-developed and tested with local stakeholders. Degrowth spaces, in contrast, suggest breaking with growth-related norms, values, and lifestyles in favor of sufficiency-, community-, and solidarity-driven ways of consuming, producing, and living. But beyond their significant differences, there is also a common denominator: Both trust in *local* (rather than national and transnational) intervention and in *experimental* (rather than end-of-the-pipe) solutions.

While the smart city and degrowth spaces are typically regarded as competing responses to the socio-ecological dilemma, this research project is inspired by the commonalities and studies them conjointly. Its goal is to provide an empirically and theoretically grounded account of the emergence, the hopes attached to, the transformative potentials of the *trend towards localism and experimentalism* in current responses to the global socio-ecological crisis. Yet, one of the project’s preliminary suspicions is that localism and experimentalism may be *strategies of coping with*, rather than of *transforming*, unsustainable relations to the environment. Methodologically, we draw on multimodal discourse analysis of flagship smart city and degrowth experiments in Vienna as well as a critical engagement with contemporary debates on post-sustainability, environmental (urban) governance, and socio-political and economic developments. Given the continued worsening of the socio-ecological crises *despite* an abundance of proposed solution, this project takes a step back from promising, quick solutions to delivering a better understanding of current socio-political conditions for transformative change.