Special Issue: Trends in the landscapes of post-growth societies: The potential of degrowth

The Landscape Politics of Enough

足りるを知るランドスケープポリティクス

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On a hot July evening in 2016, in Bologna, Italy, I sipped beers with friends at a picnic table in the plaza of what had once been a 19th century convent. In the 20th century the buildings and plaza had held military offices and barracks. After the Cold War ended in the 1990s, the space was abandoned for more than twenty years. But, when we were there in the summer of 2016, the old barracks were the not-quite-legal home of a youth squatter community called Làbas. Làbas had occupied the space in the fall of 2012, cleaned up two decades' worth of debris and renovated the empty buildings, covering many walls inside and out with mural art. They established a library, opened an office and rooms to provide assistance to the homeless, built an organic pizzeria and beer brewery, and established a regular Wednesday market where the owners of small local farms, dairies, and wineries came to sell their wares.

My friends and I had gathered for this Wednesday market. The crowd numbered in the hundreds. People were shopping for vegetables, breads, herbs, cheeses, and yogurt to take home. Most, like us, bought cheap snacks and drinks to enjoy at the long tables. When the space at the tables filled up, many simply sat in small circles on the ground. A jazz band played, and a group of elementary- and pre-school-aged girls danced exuberantly before it while their parents stood nearby talking. The crowd was generally quite young; the median age was probably 25 or 26. But as on other market nights I had attended, I saw several middle-aged groups like mine and some older people as well, especially women, who seemed to be well into their 60s and 70s. The playing children, the long, crowded tables, and conversations at the merchants' booths encouraged a bit of sociable exchange among members of different groups. The kinds of products available and the very simple method of serving them meant that, with the exception of disposable beer cups, there was relatively little trash generated by the crowd. Well-labeled recycling bins collected what waste remained.

In interviews, the young founders of the Lábas community told me they relished the opportunity the space provided for them to put into practice their ideas for community, from justice for the economically marginalized to ethical commerce in their pizzeria and brewery. The Wednesday, "0 kilometer," (or local) farmers' market merchants spoke passionately about the necessity of such spaces for sustaining environmentally sound agriculture. Many said they came simply because it was a cheap and relaxing place to meet friends. As one middle-aged woman from the surrounding neighborhood explained to me, Làbas' renovated military base had become a rare gathering place for people of all types. One night I attended a presentation by a Làbas artist in residence; on another I listened to a distinguished panel of NGO leaders talk about the refugee crisis at borders of the European Union.

A little more than a year later, on a damp November night in a Tokyo suburb, I warmed up over a dinner around a different long table. This time I was the guest of an old friend, well into her 70s, who had brought me to Shōkeikan (笑恵館), her new hangout in the neighborhood where she had lived for more than 30 years. Shōkeikan is a sort of improvised community center on a property containing what had been a sizeable single-family home and a second building with a handful of 1970s, 1dk apartments. The current owner of the property, a woman in her late 60s, inherited the house and apartments from her parents. She decided to renovate some of the interior spaces, add a large deck that dominates the garden area, and open the house to the public much of most days as a means of leaving her own legacy, though she has no children. She now lives in a private room on the second floor of the large house, but most of the rest of the house is dominated by Shōkeikan public spaces (Shōkeikan 2013).

At that mid-November dinner, I shared a lively evening with 10 other people, men and women ranging in age from the mid-30s to the mid-80s. We each paid 500-yen for a simple but generous meal and multiple glasses of tea and beer. Among others, the group included a middle-aged architect who had helped with renovations to the buildings and a healthcare worker in his 30s who lives in one of the Shōkeikan apartments and is trying to develop methods for bringing comedy into patient treatment. A middle-aged, single businesswoman explained that she had been coming to the dinners from another area of Tokyo, nearly an hour away on public transit, ever since the death of her own parents had made her realize that she needed to find a community that would be supportive as she aged. A woman in her 80s gave me a modern-looking, transparent teabag containing beautifully arranged bits of leaves and flowers, a sample from her new business producing herbal teas.

As is perhaps unsurprising in the much tighter spaces of Tokyo, Shōkeikan doesn't have room for gatherings of hundreds like that I attended at Bologna's Làbas. Nonetheless, the center is multifaceted in a similar way. A young man operates a bakery in the small commercial kitchen installed in the renovated first floor of the old house. The center also has a craft shop, an elder day care program, a play space for mothers and small children, and a large garden deck where the public is always welcome to make itself comfortable. For an entry fee of 500 yen, frequenters of Shōkeikan can join its kōryū or "social exchange" club that hosts low-cost dinners and educational events that range from ukulele to fitness lessons. Shōkeikan members can also rent apartments or event or workspace for their own projects. They can even arrange to use Shōkeikan as an address for their organizations or businesses. On a different night, I attended a gathering of college students and pensioners who were sharing slides and stories from a recent trip to Cuba. We argued about U.S. foreign policy and laughed about cultural differences while munching South American food.

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Today, we confront human-created global warming that the 2018 United Nations Climate Report describes as having potentially catastrophic effects on our existence by 2040 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2018). The scientists that produced the U.N. report claim that that it is technically possible to make the necessary changes in how we inhabit our planet to avoid a disastrous increase in average global temperature in the next two decades, but they express great doubt about whether we will be capable of the political commitments necessary (Davenport 2018). An emerging body of scholarly work focused on "degrowth," or the conscious decoupling of society's wellbeing from environmentally-costly postwar models of constant economic growth, is aimed at helping us find a means of turning toward this necessary new politics (D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2015). We know it is especially important for high polluting wealthy countries to change.

Over the last decade, I've been trying to contribute to our understanding of degrowth politics by hunting out ideas for how democratic communities can shrink with grace in Japan and Italy. Both nations were postwar success stories in which rapid economic expansion undergirded a move from fascism to democratic politics. Now, their populations are in decline and rapidly aging, and their economies have been largely stagnant from more than two decades (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica; 総務省統計局). Italy and Japan are forced to play the role of international frontrunners in confronting the question of whether democratic community can flourish in conditions of degrowth. In Tokyo and Bologna, cities that thrived in the high-growth era, I have conducted more than 18 months of participant-observer research and interviews seeking to understand how urban stakeholders including public officials and architects, advocates for the homeless, youth activists, neighborhood association leaders, and real estate developers imagine adapting to new constraints.

The daily news in these circumstances is frequently depressing. Under the pressures of the shift from industrial to service economies and the reshaping of work that would seem inevitable in an era of shrinkage, inequality has increased. Youth struggle to match the affluence their parents enjoyed before them (Mania 2012; 三浦 2013). Abandoned spaces and buildings pile up in once vibrant communities even as affordable housing crises deepen (Virgilio 2012; Yazawa 2014; 東京都 2015). The public officials I interviewed lament the lack of funding and legal instruments with which to respond to what they describe as expanding social isolation. Yet in the Bologna and Tokyo spaces I described above, I saw models of community that were anything but depressing.

Shōkeikan and Làbas addressed a variety of the problems confronting communities that must shrink. They brought vitality back to real estate that seemed to have outlived its usefulness. They gave underemployed youth a place to experiment with new, environmentally-sound businesses. They provided an affordable housing solution for individuals struggling to get settled. The communities engaged self-consciously in educational programming ranging from yoga classes and children's art projects to presentations on global issues and local political concerns. In areas where green space is hard to find and going out on the town is often expensive, both spaces offered free outdoor seating where lonely people of all ages might find community. More broadly, they offered opportunities for socialization to a politics that pursues degrowth because they demonstrated in a rich variety of ways that living simply with the repurposed leftovers of a different, "wealthier" era is not just an admirable choice but also a self-sustaining, even pleasurable thing to do.

Làbas and Shōkeikan are not unique. In both Tokyo and Bologna, I could point to a number of others that share important characteristics with them, as well as smaller endeavors exhibiting a similar interest in making new physical, social, economic and, sometimes, political spaces in the landscape remains of a growth-dependent culture. These are not the kinds of spaces that are central in key urban planning initiatives, not the new, high-tech industrial complex that Bologna is pursuing, not the international triumph of Tokyo's second Olympics (Comune di Bologna 2009; 野村総合研究所 2014). Làbas and Shōkeikan are not the images of future community that are regularly featured in the shiny graphics of architectural newsletters. They are tiny relative to the scope of things that seem to need doing in both cities.

Public administrators' responses to these initiatives have demonstrated just how insignificant they are considered to be. The friend who took me to Shōkeikan, long a grassroots environmental activist in her ward, grumbled that it was a constant, mostly unsuccessful struggle to win the attention or resources of the local officials for the sort of project the center represented. She talked about how she and other neighbors had organized their own grassroots surveys of elderly residents' abandoned properties, but administrators did not offer much of a response. In an effort to support struggling young families and improve relations across generations, she had converted part of her own home into space for a monthly "children's cafeteria," where children get free meals and their parents eat for 300 yen each. When the event outgrew her home, she and a crew of volunteers managed to borrow space in a ward-owned property. But now they've outgrown that facility, and even though they are surrounded by abandoned properties, there is no place for them to expand. As the officials I interviewed in a neighboring ward explained to me, Japanese local governments have few legal means of addressing increasing numbers of empty residences.

If benign neglect frustrates citizens' initiatives in Tokyo, real hostility from some levels of the government threatens Italian community experiments like Làbas. In 2017, a year after the evening at Làbas I recounted above, police violently evicted the group from the site. The city of Bologna, strapped for cash to pursue its comprehensive urban renewal plans, had agreed to sell the property to a private developer who would build apartments and a hotel. Well-supported resistance from Làbas leaders, including a nonviolent parade of 20,000 residents, convinced the city government to allow Làbas access to a different space ("Bologna, Sgombero Làbas" 2017). By summer 2018, the group was again holding Wednesday evening markets, but the pizzeria and brewery were forbidden on city-regulated property. I saw fewer and less diverse groups of citizens lingering for conversation on market evenings.

In both cities, I was shocked by the gap between the kinds of civic engagement local leaders said they wished they could get from their fellow citizens and the disregard and hostility demonstrated for projects like Shōkeikan and Làbas. In Bologna in 2013 a member of the city's urban planning staff told me that it was time for the citizens to understand that the era of ever-increasing affluence is over, to realize that they must take greater responsibility for their destiny, that they must construct communities of self-help. In 2014, a man who had been one of the leading public architects of Bologna's postwar high-growth period told me that, despite the fact that officials documented tens of thousands in housing insecurity, it is time for Italy to stop building homes. Enough built space to house the entire population exists already; the problem is distribution. That same summer, a real estate market analyst I interviewed labeled Bologna's greatest problem an absence of political will to use abandoned public spaces to address the modest needs of middle and lower-income residents.

In 2010 in Tokyo, a member of the staff in one of the city's western wards told me that citizens must find new, cheap ways to support each other as residents age and the possibilities of isolation increase. In 2014, another public official told me that his ward was plagued by both a persistent increase in abandoned homes and long lists of underserved residents who qualified for subsidized housing. That same summer a Tokyo architect concerned with how Japan might find a means of both responding to environmental limits and bringing in a generation of youth sidelined by the stale economy told me he though the greatest challenge was building a political consensus that would support policy creativity.

Handmade communities like Shōkeikan and Làbas represent creative, cheap responses to some of the problems that worry urban planners; yet, even when they aren't overtly hostile to such projects, planners do not give them a central place in their imaginations. As degrowth demonstration communities, Làbas and Shōkeikan are small and vulnerable and doubtless plagued with the inefficiencies of idiosyncratic human relationships. But they deserve attention precisely because in their smallness they represent an aesthetics of what is known in Japanese as seihin, a predisposition toward the beauty of less than that even the smartest, most environmentally-conscious new projects cannot equal. Moreover, in their vulnerability, communities like Làbas and Shōkeikan depend for their survival entirely on the cultivation of a political consensus committed to their seihin aesthetic. If they cannot make people happy with their material constraints, small, handmade communities will collapse. Because they do not have the luxury of overlooking what Matsushita Keiichi once described as the participatory "civil minimum" of democratic politics such communities are likely to pursue the kind of political transformation that the U.N. Climate Report insists is essential for our future (松下圭一 1971).

One autumn in the early 1990s when I was a young student in Tokyo on a Fulbright Scholarship, my mother, a horticulturalist, came from the U.S. to visit, and I took her to Kyoto to see the famous rock garden of Ryōanji. I loved the garden, but I remember especially fondly crouching by the tsukubai on the opposite side of the hōjō, peering at the characters around the basin's kuchi-shaped opening. "Tada, taru, shiru," or, "just, enough, to know," I managed to puzzle out, not quite in the conventional order. I misread the "ware" (self) character as "satori," enlightenment. Thus, I mistakenly translated the characters into English as "to recognize enoughness is to be enlightened."

I think an important part of planning for degrowth might be a bit like my imperfect understanding of the message on the Ryōanji tsukubai. We know that countless, tiny individual choices produce the outcomes that are consuming our planet and threatening gross injustices in our communities. Nonetheless, looking at the global nature of the contemporary climate crisis, we are tempted to think that our responses must be enormous in design. We persistently lean toward grandiose plans for remaking the spaces we inhabit. Certainly, some kinds of engagements with our contemporary crisis—public transport networks or renewable power generation, for example—will require large-scale projects. But what if we also put more effort into opening abandoned spaces (both physical and legal) where citizens must and are permitted to make do with what remains? The success of such an approach would depend entirely upon the capacity of local communities to craft shared political attachments to the aesthetic of less than. But isn't political change of this sort exactly what we must have if we are to survive the challenges before us? It is time to put a much greater public value on small, vulnerable, unglamorous spaces of sufficiency that are already to be found in the world around us. We need a landscape politics of enough.

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