



What Got Us Here, Won't Get Us There

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Design for Sustainability and Degrowth: In search of a perspective from the Global South

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Abstract: This article attempts to give Design for Sustainability a perspective from the Global South, taking into account indigenous views and questioning the idea of development as a means to achieve a better life quality. Since in the Global South, progress has always been linked to mining and deforestation, sustainable design should have a post-developmental perspective, as in the proposal of *Buen Vivir*, an indigenous idea of living well in harmony with nature. This also means changing our point of view on objects and their importance, and learning from indigenous peoples such as the Yanomami, who have always seen objects more as a way of strengthening social ties than as a good to be kept. The article reviews thoughts on sustainable design from the last decades and then considers what the indigenous views have to contribute to the debate, also taking a look at indigenous objects made from natural materials.

Keywords: Design for Sustainability, Buen Vivir, Global South

1. Introduction

In the quest for a sustainable Design, there is an effort to reduce environmental impact by using ever less resources – less materials, less energy, and produce less waste.

The question to be debated is: how can we actually create a Design that in the long term progressively uses less? We have long found out about the rebound effect in Ecodesign – that happens when one product saves material inputs, but the production keeps growing – and in the long term, more materials end up being used. Though efficient technologies have a positive impact, as Léna (2012) says, historically, the use of more technology has led to the use of more resources, and not the opposite.

Therefore, many authors that search sustainable solutions for Design have been arguing – we don't need more efficient objects – objects that demand less energy and less materials.

We must rethink the importance of objects in society.

In the Global South, in countries such as Brazil, Design has been seen as a means to achieve modernity and development. New material goods would bring well being to people, and development and growth were unquestionable values.

As after the multiplication of new products, we get deeper into economical, social and environmental crisis, it's time for Design to rethink our relationship with industrial goods. The way out cannot be through enabling the production of ever more objects.

The specific objective of this article is to investigate a concept of Design that would help us overcome the need for growth. The modern concept of Design as a professional field is born in the Industrial Revolution, as Industrial Design – when the design of the object is separated from its production – as opposed to what happens in handicraft, when the two activities are connected. The design of the object – with its measures, aesthetics and function – are the designer's task. Along the 20th Century, we saw the creation of Design Schools all over the world – for students to learn how to design a good object. But in the last decades of the 20th Century, the limitation of a good design to an object has been progressively questioned. Increasingly more designers think that the most important things to design aren't objects themselves but experiences, ways to connect people, systems involving production and consumption or ways to demand less objects and natural resources.

Many authors, such as Manzini (2015), highlight the importance of strengthening community ties and sharing, enhancing local economies and ties to nature and land. Thus, design is no longer focused on creating objects, but on ways of using creativity and skill to enhance social innovation that is already on its way.

In Brazil, as in all of Americas, we must have in mind that there are people that have been living in the land for centuries, with a sustainable use of nature and a community based life – using few objects, most of them being biodegradable. As indigenous leader Ailton Krenak says, “How have the original people of Brazil dealt with the colonization that wanted to end their world? Which strategies did these people use to cross this nightmare and arrive at the 21st century still kicking, vindicating and out of tune with the glad ones?” (Krenak, 2019, translated by the author).

In the Andean nations, the idea of *Buen Vivir* has existed since pre-hispanic times – an indigenous notion of living well in community with nature. With the never ending mining and striving for growth that came with the European occupation, *Buen Vivir* represents an alternative to development, extraction and growth.

Bringing this decolonial view to Design in the Global South is essential to build our own project of sustainable Design. In our context, a sustainable design should be a decolonial design.

The main aim of this article is to analyze the paths of Design for sustainability starting from the Global South, specifically South America and its original people, in order to think what could be a Design for degrowth, sustainability and decolonization.

As a methodology, this article is based on bibliographical research, using mainly references on Design for sustainability and indigenous questioning of development.

2. Design and Paths for Degrowth

Back in the 1970s, the voice on the limits of growth came up from many directions – ecologists such as Howard Odum warned about the dependence on fossil fuels and how they were the motor for the economy's progressive growth in the last two centuries. Odum sought to prove there could not be a clean path to continuous growth. Based on such ecological theories, we saw the emergence of the

Permaculture movement – an attempt to build low energy human settlements that could work with nature, mimicking its flows and cycles. (Holmgren, 2009)

The economist E. F. Schumacher, with his classic book ‘Small is beautiful’ (1973) told us about the importance of downsizing production and working on a local scale.

Victor Papanek (1978) warned about how dangerous the design profession could be, creating stuff that ends up trashing the world.

And Ivan Illich was presenting a whole new proposal of society – the convivial society. He believed we shouldn’t be going after more growth, more industrial goods. He created the term conviviality to designate an alternative to industrial society.

Illich defended that we should recreate society as to value more communitary solutions, personal creativity and that people should care more for each other and expect less solutions coming from institutions.

These ideas continue to echo nowadays and the notion that designers have environmental responsibility is still growing. The need of growth was being questioned by these authors and is something that is inherently questioned in debates on sustainable design nowadays.

And could technological innovation help to create alternatives to growth? As Perez et al. (2019) explain, technological innovation, though important, will not lead to a scenario of less resource consumption. It is important to go beyond the idea of efficiency and embrace sufficiency. There must be deep social and structural changes. Efficiency might mean, for example, producing plastic bottles for mineral water made out of less plastic. Such lightweight plastic bottles often are sold as ecological, since they use less plastic and are recyclable. Sufficiency, on the other hand would be creating systemic solutions in order not to need plastic bottles altogether, such as public fountains and drinkable channeled water.

Thackara (2015) gives the example of the Scandinavian furnishing company that has been working hard on rigorous sustainability standards. But they never questioned growth, justifying this by saying growth will finance more sustainable improvements. Thackara points out that even if they use more recycled materials and certified wood, if they are to double their production, the impact will still be bigger than today. Because any sustainable goal that doesn’t set limits to production growth won’t be enough (*Ibid*).

Manzini (2015) says there is a ‘limitless world’ that does not acknowledge the planet’s limits. At the same time, there is another world that recognizes these limits and seeks ways to thrive without the need to grow. Manzini believes these two conflicting realities will coexist for a long time, but a deep societal change might be on its way.

There are today different people all over the world giving their contributions to alternatives to growth, working on a small scale, locally, such as urban farmers, seed bankers, sustainable builders, textile upcyclers, computer recyclers, among many others. These are bottom-up solutions– they are independent of big institutions and are driven by the collaboration among people.

Manzini (*ibid*) uses the term social innovation to refer to collective solutions that contribute to sustainability and he believes that these solutions create great changes in society and are extremely important in sustainable design, because they allow people to satisfy their needs without needing more products. As examples of social innovation, he says they could be new forms of local production and trade, connecting producers and consumers directly, new forms of collective services and collaborations in a neighborhood, such as community gardens or community workplaces. The

author talks about ‘design for social innovation’ as “everything that expert design can do to activate, sustain, and orient processes of social change toward sustainability.” (Manzini, 2015, p. 63)

Manzini considers that in order to achieve sustainability, design must go beyond making a green product or production process – we should design sustainable social innovations. Social innovation helps to build the path to a bigger systemic change in society. Designers can help with their creativity to bring about, with participatory design, places for coworking and workshops or collective experiences.

Also convinced that a sustainable design must go beyond green products, Aguinaldo dos Santos says the most advanced step in sustainable design should lead to a sufficient consumption, in which each person would consume only the necessary (Santos, 2013).

But consuming only the necessary is something a great part of society already does, by lack of choice. While in affluent countries, most of these movements towards sustainability are driven by a conscious choice, in the Global South, they are driven by necessity. Poor people in the world already face challenges of doing most out of few means, using local resources, counting on local communities and repairing objects.

Designers have much to learn in such realities, that are realities in which people have not completely become consumers, but still produce much of what they need, using natural or reused materials and working in a collective way.

There are many movements creating sustainable solutions, and they are not competing for a market, but are creating collaborative local solutions, and alternative, social economies. There are groups like Transition Towns, Shareable, Peer to Peer, Degrowth or Buen Vivir (Thackara, 2015).

These movements bring an alternative to growth. And economic growth has been fueled by immense inequalities in the world and transfer of energy and natural materials from Global South to North. As we face global limits to growth, these imbalances must be fixed (Odum, 2007). If in the Global North, degrowth and less consumption are being discussed, in the South, there are proposals for post-extractivism and alternatives to development. In the Global South, our task in creating a sustainable design is different from the one in the North, because most people don’t consume much, but there are many solutions in our culture to be enhanced.

The idea of development not only implies growth, with growing extraction and destruction of nature, but it also swipes out native cultural diversity and knowledge. As Alberto Acosta puts it:

“The result of development has been a tremendous loss of diversity. The planetary simplification of architecture, of clothing and of daily life objects is visible; the parallel loss of diverse languages, customs and gestures is less visible though; and the homogenization of wishes and dreams occurs deeply in the subconscious of societies.” (Acosta, 2016, p. 81, translated by the author)

Alternatives to development have their roots in what we already have, coming from the outskirts of our lands – indigenous cultures, popular knowledge of reusing and fixing stuff, popular knowledge of materials and nature, traditional and innovative ways of sharing and collaborative economies.

3. Paths for a Decolonial Design

As an alternative to the Western idea of development, the idea of *Buen Vivir* is born in the indigenous cultures of the Andes. Originally *Sumak Kawsay*, in the Quechua language, *Buen Vivir* sees the importance of community with all living beings. Not only among human beings, but with all nature – and nature, or *Pacha Mama*, is seen as having its own rights. Collaboration in community is

also a very important aspect – it doesn't make sense to be doing well in life if your neighbor is in a bad situation. And the idea of progress – to work hard in order to be better off later, doesn't make sense – life is to be enjoyed now. (Acosta, 2016)

This indigenous worldview has a deep criticism of extractivism, mining and activities that regard nature as a resource to be explored. As the indigenous activist Davi Kopenawa, from the Brazilian Amazon, says:

“You do not know how to do anything with the forest. You only know how to cut down and burn its trees, to dig holes in its floor and soil its watercourses. Yet it does not belong to you and none of you created it!” (Kopenawa & Albert, p. 315)

With the arrival of colonization and the ideas of progress and development, we see a tendency of loss of cultural diversity and knowledge – with the arrival of modern gadgets, there is a tendency to lose cultural knowledge of how to use local nature and create from it. But *Buen Vivir* is pluricultural and, as much as its indigenous origins, it doesn't deny technology and what other cultures can bring. But traditional kinds of production shouldn't be devalued.

Talking about decolonizing design, Elizabeth Tunstall says:

“One should seek to eliminate false distinctions between art, craft and design in order to better recognize all culturally important forms and making as a way in which people make value systems tangible to themselves and others.” (Tunstall, 2013, p. 243)

The understanding and survival of this way of creating from nature, of working collectively and of dealing with objects is a key for the creation of a decolonial and sustainable design.

Davi Kopenawa explains the awe with which he observes the white people's love for Merchandise. For him, as a Yanomami indian, such love makes no sense, since we humans are mortals and it is no good to have objects that last longer than us:

“Man made things, especially those of the white people, can last far beyond our existence. They do not decompose like our body's flesh. Humans get sick, age, and easily pass away. The metal of machetes, axes, and knives rusts and gets covered in termite filth, but does not disappear anytime soon. It is so. Merchandise does not die. This is why we do not accumulate it in our lifetime and we do not refuse it to those who ask for it. (...) We do not want to die greedily clutching them in our hands. So we never keep them for very long.” (Kopenawa & Albert, 2013, p. 329)

Kopenawa's words tell us about something that goes much beyond sustainable design or sufficient consumption. He talks about a whole different relation human beings can have with objects. Products are not to be kept, but to be used and passed on. Keeping an object for oneself and not sharing it with those who would like to use it is not well seen. Objects are for collective use, not for personal accumulation. Human connections are far more important than objects.

We see designers have much to learn from local indigenous traditions about the creation of collective solutions and about the value that is given to objects. And, besides the way objects are regarded, we can give a more concrete example of sustainable objects that development tends to wipe out. Indigenous and *ribeirinho* communities in Brazil traditionally sleep in hammocks. Hammocks are a sustainable solution that can be made out of local materials. As these communities were forced to be displaced from the margins of Xingu River, they were put in houses with nowhere to tie their hammocks (Torturra, 2019). While many communities are led to abandon their hammocks as development comes, designers are working on creating sustainable mattresses and testing new materials. But probably the people who were sleeping in hammocks made out of local

natural fibers will use cheap mattresses made of polyurethane foam. Both mattresses will benefit economic growth, but both are further from sustainability than the traditional hammock.

A great example of how much we still have to explore native tradition is the use of bamboo. Hidalgo-López (2003) explains that before the arrival of the Europeans, the Americas had a culture of bamboo use as big as the Asian one. Bamboo is native to most of the tropical world and wherever there was native bamboo, there was a thriving bamboo culture and. In the Americas the most developed bamboo cultures were in Guatemala, Central America, Colombia and Ecuador. According to Hidalgo-López (*ibid*), there used to be great cities made of bamboo in Central America, with all kinds of bamboo utensils. They were destroyed by the European conquerors, as 90% of the indigenous population were exterminated. "Since then bamboo has only been used by the surviving natives and their descendants and later on by the poor people and campesinos in the construction of their dwellings." (*Ibid*, p. 369)

Much of the indigenous knowledge on bamboo has been lost, but the bamboo culture is slowly being rebuilt, with much yet to explore. Bamboo is a lightweight, resistant and sustainable material that has long been devalued, being used only in poor people's houses.

Bamboo is only one example of a material that has been used for millennia by indigenous cultures and much of the knowledge around it has been lost.

The use of basketry and weaving with straw in Brazil has also been drastically reduced in the last decades. It has gone from present in daily utensils to being used basically for decorative purposes. As the anthropologist Bertha Ribeiro says, the indigenous populations in Brazil were a 'straw civilization' (1987), making not only housing from straw, also but hammocks, sieves, fans, bags, among other objects. A renewable material that is harvested while not destroying the forest. And these objects from straw tend to be substituted by others made of petrochemicals or metals, which have an environmental damaging extraction. We present below some examples of objects made of straw and other natural materials that are used in daily utensils by indigenous people in São Gabriel da Cachoeira, Amazonas (figures 1 to 4).



Figure 1. Urban indigenous woman uses a straw plate as a utensil in São Gabriel da Cachoeira, AM. Source: author's file.



Figure 2. Man weaving a straw basket out of arumã straw in São Gabriel da Cachoeira, AM. Source: author's file.



Figure 3. Women using arumã baskets as daily utensils in São Gabriel da Cachoeira, AM. Source: author's file.



Figure 4. Traditional vegetable bowl with stick structure. The bowl is used to hold Xibé, that is shared by indigenous peoples from São Gabriel da Cachoeira, AM. Source: author's file.

Eliane Brum (2021) talks about how people from the forest, who know how to provide for their needs harvesting from nature become poor people with the advance of development, and the loss of their way of life in nature. And they become consumers of objects made of plastic.

Finally, it is important for designers to listen to the knowledge of those who have been protecting the forests for centuries:

“What white people call ‘nature’s protection’ is actually us, the forest people, those who have lived here under the cover of its trees since the beginning of time. Yet gold prospectors’ and cattle ranchers’ thought is that of evil beings. They never stop calling us ignorant and useless, but the contrary to what they believe, we probably lack less knowledge than they do” (Kopenawa & Albert, 2013, p. 398)

We must remember that we, designers are not different from the gold prospectors or cattle ranchers when we use materials without having in mind where it came from and all the relations that material has with the land and its people.

4. Final Remarks

In general, therefore, it seems that there are many different elements in indigenous ways of creating and seeing objects that can inspire sustainable design.

As explained, in the field of sustainable Design, many authors point out the need to overcome the growth in production – but the paths to overcome growth are still being discussed, with solutions like strengthening social ties, sharing and seeking minimalism.

Buen Vivir suggests an alternative to development and it shows the possibility of a design that isn’t growth oriented. From *Buen Vivir*, we could work on Latin American concepts that already embody the paths sought by concepts such as social innovation, conviviality and sharing economy.

From Kopenawa’s words, we understand the indigenous people have a completely different approach to objects, that are seen more as a way of strengthening human relationships than as goods to be kept. In his perspective, objects shouldn’t be made to last long, but to rot, going back to nature.

And materials such as bamboo and natural fibers, that are biodegradable have been used by natives for millennia, and though much knowledge has been lost, there is still much to be explored.

By observing utensils made from natural materials, we ask why the decline of such utensils come along with development and why such development is seen as positive for society. We believe there is a path for sustainable design that values objects and materials from the forest.

This would be a fruitful area for further work, since much of the literature on sustainable design, is based on a Western consumer society standpoint. And in order to move to a sustainable society, we must learn from sustainable practices we already have and that have not yet been taken over by consumer society.

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