Designing a beautifully poor public: postgrowth community in Italy and Japan

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Abstract

This paper examines images of desirable postgrowth communities pursued by activist architects in Bologna and Tokyo. Their visions are differently shaped by the distinct architectural and cultural environments in their respective cities. Nonetheless, they share an anti-growth, "beautifully poor" aesthetic that seems to challenge the dominant political values of liberal nations in the post-World War II era, redefining the democratic public in terms of spontaneity and conviviality. Conceptions of successful communities in rich countries have been shaped around the presumption that they must sustain citizens' material wellbeing by sustaining economic growth. But given the global environmental and social justice problems that have resulted from a single-minded focus on growth, we need new imaginaries of communities that can thrive without economic growth, especially in the global north. Decades of low to zero growth and demographic decline in Italy and Japan are forcing community stakeholders from elected officials to urban planners to confront the question of how to maintain good communities even where material affluence is irrevocably diminished.

Keywords: degrowth, public space, urban planning, architecture, political ecology

Résumé

Cet article analyse des images des communautés souhaitables de post-croissance poursuivies par des architectes militants à Bologne et à Tokyo. Leurs visions sont façonnées différemment par les environnements architecturaux et culturels distinctifs de leurs villes respectives. Néanmoins, ils partagent une esthétique anti-croissance, «joliment pauvre», qui semble remettre en question les valeurs politiques prédominantes des nations libérales de l'après-guerre, redéfinissant le public démocratique en termes de spontanéité et de convivialité. Les conceptions de communautés prospères dans les pays riches ont été façonnées autour de la présomption qu'elles doivent soutenir le bien-être matériel des citoyens en soutenant la croissance économique. Par contre, en tenant en compte des problèmes environnementaux mondiaux et des justices sociales qui résultent de la focalisation exclusive sur la croissance, nous avons besoin de nouveaux imaginaires de communautés qui peuvent prospérer sans croissance économique, surtout dans le nord global. Après de décennies de croissances faibles ou stagnantes, ainsi que du déclin démographique en Italie et au Japon, ceux-ci obligent les intervenants communautaires, les officiels élus, ainsi que les planificateurs urbains à s'interroger sur la façon de maintenir de bonnes communautés même là où l'abondance matérielle est irrévocablement amoindrie.

Mots-clés: décroissance, espace public, urbanisme, architecture, écologie politique

Resumen

Este artículo examina las imágenes de las comunidades post crecimiento deseables, procuradas por los arquitectos activistas en Bolonia y Tokio. Sus visiones están configuradas de manera diferente dado a los distintos entornos arquitectónicos y culturales de sus respectivas ciudades. No obstante, comparten una estética de anti-crecimiento, "bellamente pobre" que parece desafiar los valores políticos dominantes de las

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naciones liberales en la era posterior a la Segunda Guerra Mundial, así redefiniendo el público democrático en cuanto a espontaneidad y convivencia. Las concepciones de comunidades exitosas en los países ricos se han conformado en torno a la presunción de que deben sostener el bienestar material de los ciudadanos mediante el sostenimiento del crecimiento económico. Pero dados los problemas mundiales de justicia ambiental y social que han resultado de un enfoque centrado en el crecimiento, necesitamos nuevos imaginarios de comunidades que puedan prosperar sin crecimiento económico, especialmente en el norte global. En Italia y Japón, décadas de poco a cero crecimiento y descenso demográfico están forzando a las partes interesadas de la comunidad desde los funcionarios electos hasta los planificadores urbanos a confrontar la cuestión de cómo mantener buenas comunidades, incluso cuando la abundancia material se reduce irrevocablemente.

Palabras clave: decrecimiento, espacio público, planificación urbana, arquitectura, ecología política

1. Imagining a sweet decline

In the introduction to her book *Eco-Republic*, political philosopher Melissa Lane points out that even citizens and policymakers who accept scientific claims that the earth's climate is undergoing potentially devastating change are paralyzed when it comes to making effective choices about what action to take. Telling a story about how British Prime Minister Tony Blair balked when an aide suggested that he move toward banning incandescent light bulbs as a first step in response to environmental crisis, Lane declares that "Even so 'minor' a change as this often requires widespread public change of attitudes *before* there is much chance of its being politically imposed" (2012: 10-11). Lane argues we must accept that "[r]egulation which fails to engage with the habits, ideas, passions, and appetites of the people being regulated is unlikely to work very well." In fact, she says, conservation measures will only work well when we do not see them simply as a matter of "having to give up one's material comforts for reasons of an austere social goal" (p.11). Instead, if we are to make progress on the environment, we need an "imaginative transformation" in which "at least some 'material sacrifices' will no longer look [to us] like sacrifices at all" (p.12).

Lane is hardly the only theorist to direct us toward the need for transformative new political visions capable of encouraging communities to choose ways of living less costly to the environment and to the less powerful members of human society than is the status-quo. As Susan Paulson explains in the introduction to this Special Section, one response to the costs of growth-oriented societies is to advocate a sort of "growth agnosticism," proposing a refocusing of "policies and practices to support the well-being of human and other nature measured not in dollars, but in terms valued by each socioculture, which may include food sovereignty, good health, tradition, inclusion, knowledge, spiritual fulfillment, sexual satisfaction, or resilient ecosystems and communities" (Paulson 2017: 428). A growing body of scholars and activists in diverse fields, working across many different countries, has argued that we must, in fact, seek to find a means, especially in the wealthy, global north to build communities that aim further, toward *degrowth*. Sometimes the degrowth aim is manifested as environmentally conscious campaigns to stop the expansion of "highways, airports, high speed trains and other infrastructures," the development of "decentralized, small scale and participatory alternatives" such as "cycling…co-housing, agro-ecology, eco-villages…[or] solidarity economy[ies]" (Demaria *et al*. 2013: 201-202). Sometimes it is a scholarly "attempt to challenge…the growth-based roots of the social imaginary" (p. 209).

Much of this degrowth activism and scholarship argues that new imaginaries of community life are essential to an escape from what they describe as a post-political neoliberalism (Bonaiuti 2012; Brockelman 2003: 205 especially 530-531; Cattaneo *et al.* 2012: 521; Cunningham 2014: 16; Demaria *et al.* 2013: 192; Gelbke 2014: 170; Latouche 2014). "Neoliberalism" is a term that has been used to describe a set of public policies, a discursive formation, even an assemblage of possibilities that operate on culture as a sort of abstract machine (Gilbert 2013). But at its heart neoliberalism stands for the conviction shared across institutions, in much social science, and by countless economic and political actors that "self interest [is] the only motive force in human life and competition [is] the most efficient and socially beneficial way for that force to express itself" (p. 9). Neoliberalism refers to the tendency of governments to intervene in society in patterned ways defended as likely to harness this competitive force by pursuing: labor market deregulation, privatization of public assets, maximization of private corporate profits, and promotion of finance capital (pp. 11-12, 17). The term neoliberalism also points to widely accepted cultural norms suggesting that the remedy

for the precarity or outright marginalization that many groups experience in the context of neoliberal market policies is "self-help" as reproduced in popular fiction, television, music, even "foodie" culture (Gilbert 2013: 12).

In sum, degrowth activism and scholarship seek to highlight the necessity of imagining new ways of organizing community life that challenge the idea that human beings are fundamentally economic seekers of utility maximization, and the unceasing and environmentally destructive drive toward growth that comes with this conviction (Demaria *et al.* 2013: 197). Political philosopher Jane Bennett argues that we need a vastly different notion of community than that limited to agential human beings (Bennett 2010: 101-103). Instead, she says, we must learn to see a form of agency in the various forms of matter around us. The political community is rightly conceived of as a kind of ecology, Bennett proffers, where humans are not the only source of action and where mastery of our surroundings to advance our interests is not the only, perhaps not even an appropriate political goal (pp. 116-122).

Below, in an examination of how two activist architects, one in Bologna, Italy, and one in Tokyo, Japan, imagine desirable future urban communities, I report on what I think of as a tentative first step toward a desirable degrowth political ecology, a "sweet decline." [2] Other studies of degrowth activism have traced efforts to build political communities that choose to live in ways that are more just or that have less impact on natural resources such as clean air (see, for example, the study of how Davis, California developed a pro-bicycle culture: Weil 2013). The Bologna and Tokyo architects offer us a distinct perspective, however, in the sense that they are speaking from societies where the lengthy absence of meaningful economic growth means that a postgrowth future (whether desirable or disastrous) is already seen as the most likely outcome. They assume, therefore, that any vision of the future they might offer must wrestle with degrowth; the questions they raise are not really about how to convince the public that degrowth is the proper aim. Instead, they are precisely the concerns I referenced above, that Lane raises about the political imaginary; they are questions about how to make living with less more attractive.

My architect interlocutors are concerned primarily with urban residential neighborhoods, and in these roles do not push their rethinking of political community quite as far as Bennett who even includes worms and power grids in her expanded notion of agency. Nonetheless, because as architects they are persistently concerned with what built space might or might not contribute to community, they do think beyond human agency (individual and collective) in ways that political theorists often fail to do. Working in vastly different architectural *milieux*, they offer distinct critiques of the sources and problems of contemporary urban community life, but they also share a belief that desirable communities of the future must be crafted as alternatives to current neoliberal expectations of social, economic and political organization that are dominant in both their countries as well as in many others across the globe. As I will detail in my account of the future communities they propose to me, I think these architects' imaginaries do not completely succeed in escaping the neoliberal value system they decry, but, even in the problematic limits of their visions, we may find ideas for moving toward a post-sacrifice degrowth future.

2. The nature of the project

I have chosen cities in Italy and Japan as fieldwork sites because these countries are today directly facing certain limits of the neoliberal growth imperative, to an extent many other rich countries have yet to experience. Both Italy and Japan are countries that rose "miraculously" from defeat and poverty at the end of World War II to become intensely industrialized, consumption-oriented cultures by the 1980s. In both nations, political leaders maintained their power by promising and delivering ever-higher degrees of material wellbeing, relatively well distributed. Central to both countries' consumption-driven political pact was the growth of the middle-class owner-occupied housing market, supported by policies akin, in many ways, to those adopted by the United States during the Great Depression (Indovina 2012; Iommi 2009; Virgilio 2012; Waswo 2002; Yamamoto 2014).

At the same time, in both Italy and Japan, the costs in intimate life spheres of maintaining oneself and one's family in a neoliberal economy (gendered in complicated ways) led to drastic decline in fertility rates

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[2] With apologies to singer Beth Orton, whose song, <u>Sweetest decline</u> captures some of the spirit I'm seeking.

and very rapid aging (for discussion of this phenomenon see Donati 2010; Rosenbluth 2007). In Japan, the population is declining. In Italy, as well, the population is now in decline (http://stats.oecd.org; http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat). Moreover, since the 1990s, both Italy and Japan have endured more than twenty years of nearly stagnant economic growth, political paralysis and corruption at the national level leading to widespread cynicism among citizens. Of course, both nations face growing concerns about environmental pollution and limits on natural resources, highlighted in traumas such as the 3.11 nuclear disaster in Japan, and in smaller but nonetheless headline-level problems such as the air pollution surrounding the steelworks in Taranto or the threat to historic Venice posed by rising sea levels. These circumstances have encouraged widespread debate in many sectors of both societies about how community life might be restructured for an era in which continued growth in material wellbeing won't be the basis of the social contract (Kingston 2004; Stille 2006). As several articles in this Section document, groups and individuals around the world are experimenting with new forms of community consonant with the idea of degrowth (Bergulund 2017; Cox Hall 2017; Lockyer 2017), but the economic circumstance of Italy and Japan push such initiatives much further into mainstream discourse.

Japan and Italy are important cases in any study of degrowth because they are similarly on the forefront of social, economic and political dilemmas that many other countries are likely to face in the future. They are also useful comparative cases because they must deal with these problems in culturally and physically distinct spaces. In fact, in terms of the revisioning of urban community life, the difference in built environments is quite marked. As an architect involved in urban planning politics in Bologna since the 1950s put it to me in an interview, "Italians build homes intended to last 1,000 years." Japan, however, has a scrap-and-build rate[3] many times that of a typical European country (Barlow and Ozaki 2005; Ronald 2011). Moreover, because Japan has worked hard to control immigration, vacant housing and the isolation of the elderly in suburban neighborhoods are currently major policy concerns. By contrast, supplying housing to immigrant newcomers is one of the greatest stressors on social welfare services in many Italian communities (Guerzoni 2010; Iommi 2011; Soble 2015; Virgilio 2012; Yazawa 2014).

I began fieldwork for this project in Tokyo during the summer of 2010, returning in 2014 to conduct further observations and interviews. I conducted extended fieldwork in Bologna from October 2012-August 2013, and again in 2014 and 2015. Below I present the postgrowth community analyses offered to me by 'Ricci', a Bolognese architect in his early 30s involved in a series of small neighborhood projects focused on repurposing common spaces in newly diversified neighborhoods in the historic center, and 'Tahata', a Tokyo architect in his 40s widely known for writing, design and real estate entrepreneurship challenging Japan's scrap-and-build culture.[4] I chose Ricci and Tahata from more than sixty urban residential community stakeholders I interviewed in Bologna and Tokyo including elected officials, urban planners in the public and private sector, real estate developers, community development activists working with the elderly (in Tokyo) and immigrants (in Bologna), housing policymakers and advocates for the homeless, young people involved in anarchic community experiments and new forms of entrepreneurship, as well as other architects.

Among my informants, Tahata and Ricci are particularly useful for the exercise of conceiving and evaluating alternatives to the neoliberal urbanity in which they work. Both are actively engaged with individual, 'ordinary' citizens seeking satisfactory housing as well as with policymakers trying to solve larger social problems that also involve the design of residential architecture. The two architects are also formally committed to designing urban communities that use fewer resources but offer better quality of life to their inhabitants. Their visions overlap in many ways that I label "beautifully poor", using a English translation of a Japanese aesthetic term, *seihin*. Because Tahata and Ricci are architects, their beautifully poor visions of desirable future community are, unsurprisingly, if not solely, aesthetic claims - arguments that a desirable communal space (figuratively speaking) is most likely in a public space (literally speaking) that is shaped by the proper aesthetic values. For this reason, too, I want to look specifically at their future community imaginaries. Following Jacques Rancière, I see the "aesthetic moment" as a moment of rupture in a preexisting social order, as a means of "constructing another as if" by which alternate arrangements of

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[3] The "scrap-and-build rate" is the rate at which older buildings are replaced by new construction.

[4] Pseudonyms.

political power might be considered (Rancière 2009: 8). By tracing the elements of these architects' self-consciously constructed aesthetics of desirable postgrowth communities, I hope to fashion a lens from which to see with greater clarity the shared "as ifs" latent in community stakeholders' varied interventions within social, political and economic structures that seem otherwise unbudgeable.

3. The lessons of post-disaster community: Japanese architect Tahata

By the summer of 2014, after years of combing the architecture sections of Tokyo's bookstores, I had inadvertently built a small stack of Tahata's books, celebrating quirky spaces in "vernacular Tokyo," offering ideas for redesigning city spaces to encourage lively street life or showing how to reclaim aging concrete-block apartment buildings, using their plain architecture as a canvas for their inhabitants' self-expression.[5] In a practice that is a bit unusual in Japan, I sent a "sudden" email to his office. (In Japanese one apologizes for the "suddenness" of contact initiated when sending a letter to a person to whom one has not been introduced.) I asked if I might meet him to talk about *datsuseichō*, or degrowth. When we sat down a few days later, I expected to hear about encouraging renovation, or building with longer-lasting materials, or with energy-efficient technologies. And, in part, I did.

Tahata began by explaining the organization of his design and real estate projects as a response to the excess of residential building in a country with an aging and declining population. He pointed to the way in which building codes, especially those designed to promote earthquake safety, had contributed to the scrap-and-build culture of the housing market. He explained that understanding how certain legal instruments were driving a wasteful practice of overbuilding led him to thinking about the importance of changing contemporary political arrangements around the building industry. But, political change, he thought, wouldn't be possible without some sort of new social consensus, and so, he explained, he began to think about how urban design choices might facilitate richer human interactions and spaces for constructing new socialities.

> I thought, what should I do to push-start this values change…What can I do from this position as someone who works on city planning? If the society changed just a little bit…if the space for that could be realized, I thought, if we could show how to set up that space, that would be good, wouldn't it?

Tahata had decided he would write one book about this thought. He was teaching the topic, too, at a public university in rural, northeastern Japan, watching how little-by-little the tax base of aging regional cities there was declining while the population was concentrating in Japan's biggest cities. And then the 2011 Tohoku earthquake happened. "When the earthquake happened, it was as if those conditions that had seemed so far off were suddenly sped up," Tahata explained. "It was as if I sort of saw a little bit of the future."

Whole shopping districts were suddenly washed away; populations here and there were isolated. There was devastation all around, but despite that, Tahata said, he saw a new hope. Like many architects and urban planners, Tahata volunteered to go to the disaster region to help plan for recovery. Tahata was struck by the energy of younger generation "creators" who took up the challenge to help rebuild in devastated communities.

> There's one image I really remember. In one of the disaster areas called Ishinomaki, the place where the tsunami had been the worst and at that point [about three months after the disaster], well, there were lots of buildings just wrecked. But, well, the people were, well there isn't another choice, really, but they were surprisingly cheerful!

> …at night, in a kind of park, still kind of surrounded by wreckage and leaning buildings, a group was showing a film. And the kids were outside watching *My Neighbor Totoro*. They'd

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[5] The term "vernacular Tokyo" I draw from the title of a book, *Tokyo Vernacular*, written by historian Jordan Sand about the sorts of urbanism practiced by Tahata (2013). I don't cite Tahata's works to protect his actual identity.

lined up tables outside, and I kind of squeezed in. The adults were all drinking beer and talking and when we would get loud, the kids would get mad saying, "We can't hear! Quiet down!" …And I thought, really this scene (*fūkei*, a word that might also mean "landscape" or even "cityscape") ought to also be in the big city parks. But in a city park, with all the regulations, you probably can't do it. It would be a pain, you know.

But when all at once the laws and the regulations and the frameworks are suddenly blown apart—in that disaster area—really it's raw, that raw humanity in relationships. It's sort of like looking at an origin point.

Tahata explained that with the impression of that strangely cheerful evening among the wreckage strong in his mind, he began to think more radically about Japan and urban planning. He learned that Japan can supply only four percent of the energy it consumes and less than 40 percent of its own food. Japan is dependent on the outside world. But, he said, even beyond that, he saw dependency as a problem all the way down to the individual household. Houses in which household life could not be sustained without electricity suddenly seemed to be a design problem. The fact that regional cities were dependent on Tokyo and on "big capital" that ruled there also bothered him.

In fact, Tahata explained, in order to "knit together" a new social consensus that could drive a politics of true sustainability, first there must be more independence at the local community and individual levels. He said that, in part, this "independence" required the cultivation of some economic wherewithal not vulnerable to the movements of "big capital" in Tokyo or abroad. But he wondered if architects like him might contribute toward that aim by designing *fūkei* (landscapes or cityscapes) that encouraged citizens' independence of spirit, thus fueling the development of other kinds of independence. In some sense, it seemed that Tahata meant that each home, each locality must pursue its own distinctive expression in built space. For example, he pointed to how a design sense brought to suburbs and regional cities by "big capital" had brought boring uniformity to shopping and housing districts.

In another sense, Tahata seemed to see this independence in a deliberate choice of something *less*. Accordingly, he did not describe a community's move toward economic or design independence in terms of a public project as we might traditionally think of one—a new industry, a new public square. In fact, he criticized many of the existing public structures apparently developed with local economic vitality as a goal. Tahata said the problem of the current situation could be seen in the "excess buildings, excess public meeting halls, excess parks, excess libraries, and excess town halls, all of which until now [have] been put up with and maintained with taxes and haven't been at all independent." Why haven't they been independent? As Tahata explained, they have been "mechanically managed." Citizens haven't confronted these spaces directly in front of them and tried to manage them on their own. In becoming more conscious of these places and in trying to change them, formerly passive citizens could develop a true sense of publicness, and then they could begin to move toward the local independence that would allow a reknitting of the social values consensus, Tahata said.

Thus, after being confronted with the image of cheerfulness amid disaster, rather than thinking about big rebuilding projects employing modern technologies with the latest means of securing inhabitants against risk, Tahata decided it was better to put aside "difficult things" and suggest fun spaces that would give people the "aha sense" that he felt amongst those gathered together in a makeshift park in the remains of swept-away Ishinomaki. That feeling of independence, of making something together with what little is there is what is needed "if something somehow comes undone, if there's a collapse, if there's a flood," Tahata said.

I spent the better part of two hours talking with Tahata and a young assistant in an almost Shaker-style coffee shop on the first floor of his offices, in a renovated but architecturally non-descript, two-story building on a side street that edged toward the care-worn end of the Ginza, a major commercial center of Tokyo, itself now slightly off the cutting edge as other nearby areas have been dramatically rebuilt in the last scrap-and-build decade. I recorded an hour and fifteen minutes of our conversation and came home with another stack of his design idea books. We talked about a huge range of ways of living and of finding space to reorganize sociality and social values. But throughout Tahata held to a theme of the beauty in what I might call "less-

ness" offered in contrast to the world of dependency on "big capital" and what he described as the uniform and boring aesthetic that comes with it.

Along with design services, his firm now runs an online real estate service that matches clients with rental and purchase properties that are used (pre-owned housing in Japan is akin to a pre-owned car or boat in the U.S., constantly declining in value),[6] and organizes listings in categories such as "retro-feeling," "renovations ok," "high ceilings," and "near water or green space." The site also offers DIY information, reports on efforts to get building codes relaxed in order to promote more home renovation, and stories about creative individuals such as muralists. Tahata says the real estate project started as a simple adventure of posting examples of alternative approaches to judging housing on a website, to try to get viewers to see what might be "cool" or "beautiful" in residences otherwise quirky or out-of-date. So many site viewers asked about renting the featured properties that members of his firm undertook to make the site into an actual listings service.

Then, because "near green space" was such a popular category among the real estate listings, Tahata began to think about the relationship between big cities, like Tokyo, and small, regional cities. Now he is trying to think of ways in which working and living might be reconsidered so that people could have periodic stays in the "action" of the city but then be able to return to cheaper, more comfortable and more beautiful lives in the countryside. At the same time, he said he imagines that cities like Tokyo will become greener, even as the population in the city center grows.[7] People want green on their rooftops, on their buildings, Tahata said, and his assistant clarified, "they want to grow vegetables." In Tahata's vision, re-imagining older, unfashionable spaces as aesthetically pleasing is just a first part of a broader reorganizing of life values away from the political economy in which citizens are dependent subjects and their surroundings are wasteful and tasteless givens. Instead, he works to teach his fellow citizens to see the "fun" and "hope" in cultivating otherwise undistinguished spaces (literally and figuratively) with their own hands.

4. The preservation of people before buildings: Italian architect Ricci

I hunted out Bolognese activist architect Ricci because several of the people who worked in urban planning for the Bologna city government told me he was someone I should talk to if I was looking to better understand how citizens might participate in building their communities' futures. Ricci had come to know architects and planning officials in the government because he had applied for and won funding for a small project to "requalify" (a literal translation of "*riqualificazione*", the Italian word used where in English we often say "revitalize") his neighborhood street. He had organized a street committee and, with their help, produced a series of events and some physical improvements in what was otherwise a very shabby street in the historic center, at the edge of the university district.

With neighbors that included South Asian immigrants, young single people and generations-old Bolognese families, Ricci had led a cleanup of a mostly medieval portico-lined street that was plagued with graffiti and the detritus left behind by the heterogeneous combination of partying students, homeless people and drug addicts generally found passing to and fro around the edges of the university zone. Walking down the street on any given night, it was not unusual to see someone sleeping on a doorstep or to step in dog feces left in the middle of the portico-covered, historic sidewalk. Aside from cleaning up the mess, Ricci's new committee built a shared picnic table in a little extra space provided by a wider part of the street that might otherwise have been used for awkward parking. They put out potted plants, held a street festival and dined together. In the process of pulling the committee together, Ricci had become quite well known. A video was made about the street's reinvigorated social life, and Ricci became one of the leading figures in an informal network of street-level community revitalization activists like him in other similar "periphery-within-the-center" sorts of streets, one of which was even written up in the *New York Times* (Pianigiani 2015).

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[6] Leonard Schoppa explains this phenomenon and describes how the declining value of used housing reduces mobility in Japan (2012).

[7] In fact, despite the overall population decline in Japan, population in the central districts of Tokyo is growing again in recent years following several postwar decades during which the population center had shifted toward northwestern suburbs (Tajima 2014).

Ricci said that, until recently, Bologna, to which he had moved as a child from another region of Italy, had been like a "*grande paese,*" or something like a big country village, with a warm, familiar atmosphere and a local government attentive to the people, even to the lowest-level households. But, Ricci declared, Bologna is now also an economically important part of Italy, and thus the quality of life is subject to large forces beyond the city. In recent years, Ricci claimed, the city had become a metropolitan region dominated by wealthy tourism and "large scale commerce" - a term Ricci employed in the way Tahata spoke of "big capital." The priorities of the municipal government in Bologna had changed.

When I asked Ricci to offer an example of the sort of changes he had observed he said that the city had done away with benches and fountains "because a certain aesthetic has been privileged, a 'clean city' without bums." In fact, the city planning staff confirmed to me that, as a matter of policy, the city had decided not to build more fountains because people would sleep around them. But they also lamented the fact that one of the most common complaints they heard from citizens was about the absence of benches and fountains. As Ricci pointed out, the piazzas of the city, the spaces that were supposed to be truly the heart of public life, had become places where sitting is not allowed unless one buys an expensive drink at one of the cafes on the piazza edge. Moreover, as Ricci explained, an "anti-camping" ordinance established by the city and security measures around the church of the city's patron saint were used to keep people from simply sitting on the stones of Piazza Maggiore or the broad steps of the church. An elderly person or a pregnant woman or someone else without great stamina would thus be forced to pay to consume in order to stay in these so-called public spaces for any length of time. "In some ways, the use of public spaces is prohibited to the weak", Ricci said. "This is unconstitutional and can be called undemocratic."

Ricci expressed much frustration with what he claimed was Bologna's urban planners' strategy to privilege large commercial interests serving a wealthier, outsider clientele by "cleaning" ordinary people from spaces where they had every right to be visible. Ricci further argued that recent historic preservation and urban revitalization projects were driven by aesthetic commitments associated with the commercial interests.

> In the past, the principle streets like Santo Stefano and Strada Maggiore were the streets of the nobility [but] a type of more *populare* ("popular" in a classic sense, "working class") city developed on the secondary streets. But today they are repaving and renewing [also] the secondary streets, rendering them into streets of *rappresentanza* ("representation", as we might encounter the term in critical theory)," Ricci explained.

[The secondary streets] have been taken away as places for popular life and existence." "[Urban planners] haven't worked at supporting or reinforcing the existing qualities [of working class neighborhoods]. They've changed the qualities," Ricci continued. "In the historic center requalification has been a project of museumification, homogenization, a shopping mall, a city of exposition," Ricci complained.[8] We might wonder if Ricci, known for his "requalification" work on his own "popular" street might not be catching himself in a contradiction. For Ricci, however, a fundamental line could be drawn between revitalization projects directed from on high with an aesthetic aimed to serve outsider commercial interests and wealthy tourists and efforts like Ricci's pursued by local residents. As he explained it to me, these from-on-high aesthetic projects of *rappresentanza* were directly opposed to the ordinary lives of ordinary people. They were a "way of closing off the city that has been more of the people…of [shutting down] the spontaneity of the inhabitants."

Like Tahata, Ricci argued that a new political consensus was needed to back the kinds of public policy that would make it possible for residential communities in Bologna to remain vibrant in the future. Ricci claimed real democratic community could only happen when ordinary people could make it with their own hands. Real community, he said, was a matter of daily-life moments of spontaneity and *convivialità* (conviviality), a notion of the building of social ties through frequent, light-heartened, even accidental,

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[8] Michael Herzfeld has traced how such historic "preservation" projects have ousted working class residents from their neighborhoods in Rome in order to produce cleaned-up historic districts for tourism (2006, 2009).

interactions among people of varying classes, generations and backgrounds. His emphasis on "conviviality" resonates with the "conviviality" notion that scholars of degrowth have pursued as a potential solution to what they see as the depoliticizing effects of a neoliberal focus on economic drive and competition (Deriu 2014).

According to Ricci, conviviality in community comes about when residents are empowered to make places their own, "to make them more similar to themselves." They have to be able to "dress" spaces up, or at least to put out a vase of flowers or use a portico as a common space for socializing, for "inhabiting." Porticoes are an element of many arguments about urban revitalization and space management in Bologna, both among design professionals and regular citizens. Porticoes form the most distinctive architectural element of the city; in the historic center alone, there are 40 kilometers of porticoes. Ricci contrasted the inhabiting done by ordinary people with the aesthetic of *"rappresentanza"* borrowed from a "museumified" notion that had infected urban planning. He explained:

> If we look at the streets of the nobility from 500 years ago until today, we don't find bicycles under the porticoes there. But in the secondary streets we had laundry hanging because this was life in its daily mode. This was life that *si rappresenta* (represents itself), the life of the people, not for the sake of '*rappresentanza*', (of presenting a symbolic, attractive front) but as involuntary representation that…says something about the people who live there.

He said that the choice of an aesthetic of *rappresentanza* that served big commercial interests and tourists was a form of "mere publicity" that had endangered residents' opportunities for spontaneous encounter, for finding ways of organizing social relationships on their own, for developing networks of self-help. He observed the erosion of a kind of "ecology" in which a wealthy resident might depend on his relationship with a store clerk, in which they co-existed in a complimentary fashion has been eroded.

Ricci complained that the city spent millions of euro pursuing the aesthetic of *rappresentanza* where the branch stores of big national or international brands needed to have a constant flow of outside consumers in order to pay high rents. The constant flux of outside consumers also occupied the space that might be used for real conviviality. The large commercial enterprises drove out the small stores and service providers that had once occupied the secondary streets among the residents. Fundamentally, Ricci said, the center of the city was ever more a place of tourism while the peripheral areas were ever more peripheral. To sustain real community, the city of Bologna would have to find a way to support the *populare* life endangered by business interests from outside the city. Otherwise, the "city becomes a city of consumption." Although he spoke of citizen spontaneity as the greatest loss when city spaces were given over to large commercial interests, Ricci still argued that the city government should be engaged proactively in helping local restaurants, local stores, and local relationships. Otherwise, he said, local community life would struggle to sustain itself in the face of the consumption culture fostered by big, outsider enterprises. In fact, he explained that his own project was just such an attempt to use local government aid to sustain the project of a small neighborhood peripheral to the city's commercial center.

Ricci said that a range of problems could be alleviated—from the kinds of exclusions from which the poor suffered to the socialization of children—if local communities were given opportunities for conviviality and spontaneous action because then citizens could form networks with which to help each other. He pointed to the value of street festivals as means of bringing people together. People love to sing and dance, Ricci said, but even that form of sociality is controlled outside the hands of ordinary people when, to simply play music for a street dance, the organizers are required to pay huge permission fees to copyright holders. Ricci claimed that Bologna suffered in a number of different ways under a notion of urban management that privileged the growth of profits for powerful economic actors over the daily life of ordinary people.

He pointed to the street outside the café bar in which we talked, a street off of Piazza Maggiore called "Drapperie" or "Drapers' Street" after the business of the artisans who once dominated its shop spaces. "In the end they [political and municipal officials] are conserving the old, the historic, only in a physical sense", Ricci said. "Nothing else is being conserved. This is the very thing that is happening in the street where we are now, in via Drapperie, where soon will open…a supermarket of the Co-op." "Co-op" is the local

shorthand for Cooperativa Adriatica, once truly a cooperative enterprise but now the largest distributor of groceries and a range of other services in that part of Italy and financed by private capital (Arcidiacono 2015). Ricci was not mistaken. A year later, the "drapers'" street and others near it had been hugely transformed. The medieval facades remained, but the small bars and grocers had been largely replaced by a much bigger, modern bar run by an outside corporation. The working class, middle-aged men who had noisily surrounded us during the interview there could not be seen. Nearby was a new, two-story indoor "market" managed by the "Co-op" and full of tourists speaking English and German and queuing for "local" delicacies at prices my Bolognese friends said they could not afford to pay.

5. Ricci and Tahata's democratic aesthetics of less than, and its contradictions

Both Ricci and Tahata argue that, in order to live well in a future where significant economic growth is highly unlikely, their communities need to build a new relationship between citizens and the spaces they inhabit, what we might call a **new political ecology**. These "beautifully poor" political aesthetics are constrained in some ways. First, they are, themselves, laced with elements of neoliberal narrative and logic. For example, Tahata and Ricci are quick to see excessive government regulation as the major barrier to citizens' direct engagement in community life and to trust citizens' ground-level capacity for self-help to address vulnerabilities that may be the result of much greater structures. The particular examples of detrimental government intervention the architects proffer—e.g., building codes that, under the guise of safety, promote a scrap-and-build culture or copyright protections that make music too costly for most small-scale street festivals—meet their definition of government regulations that play into the hands of "big capital" at a cost to ordinary people's efforts to shape their communities.

Yet, the claim that regulation, per se, is costly for community life sounds much like neoliberal claims to social problem solving based on the conviction that the entrepreneurial spirit of private actors in so-called "free" markets works better than intervention and redistribution on behalf of disadvantaged demographics. This is difficult to distinguish from the pro-growth logic that underpins urban revitalization projects aiming to make new spaces for the big commercial interests both architects find problematic. Of course, the neoliberal ideal of freed-up markets is also belied by a practice of regulative government action that supports particular commercial interests, as Ricci and Tahata point out when they direct our attention to urban management that constrains ordinary citizens' uses of public space in the name of "cleaning up" an area to foster the activities of national or multinational retailers. Nonetheless, the architects tend to argue for a world that is less regulated, more than for regulation that would premium a different set of interests. In that sense, I see both of them as having bought into some liberal notions of how social good is brought about.

The aesthetic of a beautifully poor democracy, with its emphasis on the value of older spaces and forms of community may also, unfortunately, tend to work against the claims of disempowered newcomers to communities. Both Ricci and Tahata expressed concern about inequalities and exclusions in their societies. Tahata spoke at some length about the economic disadvantages of youth, many of whom confront precarity in work and living situations. He shook his head over the growing problem of isolation among the elderly and mulled over housing arrangements that might help. Ricci, too, considered the ways in which the "cleaned-up" aesthetic of the historically-preserved architecture in Bologna's center banished demographic groups such as the disabled or homeless to peripheral places. Much of his ardent defense of the *populare* life of secondary streets can be read as a class critique launched in a period in which austerity politics are contributing to expanding inequality.

However, neither Ricci nor Tahata articulated how the notion of locally-grounded community belonging might help newcomers find a place in communal conviviality. Tahata mused that Japan's problem with isolated elderly was in some part dependent upon the fact that Japan remains quite closed to immigration. But he also expressed doubts that Japan *could* successfully bring in immigrants, and a number of his comments about what might or might not work for constructing a new values consensus were explicitly tied to claims he made about who the Japanese as a people are. In fact, most of Tahata's explicit comments on outsiders were negative references to the representatives of "big capital" building aesthetically boring communities and subjecting citizens to a life of dependency. Ricci pointed out that public spaces that left little room for anything other than paying consumption could not perform the integrative functions needed in

a community, where as he, himself, noted "every 10 years something like 60 or 50 percent of the population turns over." But for Ricci, like for Tahata, "outsiders" were most often villains. Ricci's connection of the community of the future to the side-street community of 500 years ago provides a justification for the aesthetic value of working class ways of living. Yet, in a city with an ever-growing immigrant population, claims to space based on historical usage are not sufficient to ground many marginalized residents' rights to transform public space with the *si rappresenta* of *their* ordinary lives. Imaginaries of the future that hearken back to a "truer" past might actually work against the integration of immigrants on any terms at all.

Tahata and Ricci do not escape the concept systems they critique, as they try to imagine the desirable communities of a sweet decline. Yet, their visions are rich, and they meet Melissa Lane's criterion for a postgrowth imaginary in which the sacrifice of some material wellbeing seems compensated for in other joys. Moreover, the limits of their beautifully poor publics are instructive. We might think of ways to work through them without having to abandon the notion of an attractive and empowering "less-than" life. Neither Tahata nor Ricci speak of comprehensive political programs to realize what they seek, but they are both engaged in efforts to change the political commitments around them. Perhaps the dream of beautiful poverty could come to have some power.

The relationship between architecture and history is radically different in Tokyo and Bologna, but both architects seek a means of promoting the value and reuse of existing, prosaic built space that, in their estimation, is undervalued in a world shaped by growth-oriented, neoliberal policies and big, globally competitive commercial interests. In Tokyo, where the culture of scrap-and-build has placed such a huge premium on new buildings, Tahata advocates returning to aging architecture and celebrating a kind of preservation practice that will provide opportunities for reworking sociality and the fundamental political consensus about the kind of life that government should help citizens pursue. In the impromptu park and beer garden set up in Ishinomaki's post-disaster landscape, or examples in Tahata's books and on the real estate website that show bland postwar apartment architecture as a perfect palette for original interior design projects, Tahata sees happiness and independence for communities that reject the unending pursuit of material growth. In Bologna, where national and local leaders' commitments to preserve structures with hundreds of years of history is a major determinant of the management of public space and the urban aesthetic, Ricci speaks out against what he sees as a preservation of "mere buildings" that is corrosive of community life and argues for resistance against efforts to purge secondary spaces of the quotidian elements of working class life—laundry hanging from a window, bicycles parked under a portico, little benches and tables or small flower pots placed outside a door—"renovation" projects that cost little and, as he sees it, promote sociality by demonstrating ordinary life.

Both architects take a position against "design" in any grand sense. Both Ricci and Tahata lament governmental regulations that privilege "big capital" and an aesthetic of order and "cleanliness" that obstruct citizens of modest means from taking the built space of their communities into their own hands. Both speak of scenes—Tahata's amidst the wreckage of 3.11 and Ricci's in an imagined past of the Bologna's side streets—where the visibility of the raw life of citizens who are *not* affluent is the central, desirable achievement in community space. Both men imagine that a kind of conviviality will be a desirable replacement for consumer culture, that people would rather sing and dance in the streets or grow things on their rooftops than buy more stuff. Behind their descriptions of the failures of contemporary urban life both men thus critique economic inequality. Here, I have not had the space to fully investigate it, but both Tahata and Ricci also talked about new ways of striking the balance between work and daily life and expressed interest in innovations in the sharing economy from various sorts of co-housing to citizens' labor exchange banks.

We might think of Ricci's and Tahata's anti-design aesthetics as an attempt to envision how to help citizens break with neoliberal notions of the individual as motivated by economic utility. In Rancière's terminology, Ricci and Tahata are trying to imagine the built environment that would make possible a new political "as if", a new communal experience that could change relationships and values, making attainable a more sustainable way of living, in both an ecological and, importantly, a social-psychological sense. In very different urban landscapes, Tahata and Ricci alike seek space, part figurative, part literal, that encourages citizens to work together to reuse what is already built around them, coming together in ways that are small

and temporary: an outdoor movie at a disaster site, an agreement to set up a shared picnic table on a side street. Yet viewed against an urban management aesthetic that privileges commercial interests with the aim of pursuing economic growth, the smallness and temporaneity of these uses is precisely what makes them significant. They are political acts containing the possibility of a more energetic and rewarding citizenship that could develop in places where a prosaic and well-worn landscape—a beautifully poor public space—is appreciated for its liberating power.

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