

Sustainability: a catalogue of ideas received

The term is often used as a collective conscience-cleansing tool for the coming climate catastrophe. Perhaps an exercise in deconstructing the most common clichés would be necessary.

Cristina Goberna Pesudo

Many things have not yet been named, and many others have been lost in the name. One of these is the notion of sustainability.

Sustainability, by definition, is the prevention of the depletion of natural resources necessary for ecological balance. However, it is a term often used as a collective conscience-cleansing term for the looming climate catastrophe. This makes it the recipient of innumerable clichés, which only take us further from the urgency of its original meaning. While reactionary political sectors appropriate terms historically used by left-wing movements, such as "freedom", the market acts similarly, reducing concepts to superficial aesthetics and ending up as consumer appeals. Perhaps an exercise in deconstructing the clichés surrounding sustainability would be necessary as a plea for its recovery.

Let these brief notes serve as a small, unfinished catalogue of what sustainability is not.

Planting vegetation is not the best way to be sustainable; sometimes, it is more effective to do almost nothing. The extraction of natural resources through mining is perhaps the activity that has the greatest impact on environmental degradation. Rotterdam-based Spanish artist Lara Almarcegui buys the mining rights to explore the natural soil deposits in various parts of the world to prevent their exploitation. These sites are delimited by a circular or square surface, which, when sectioned, reach the centre of the earth, forming gigantic cones or inverted



OFFSETTED. JAMES EWING / CORTESÍA DE ARTHUR ROSS ARCHITECTURE GALLERY, GSAPP, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

pyramids with a side or base diameter of about 800 metres. An example of this work was Volcán de Agras. Mining Rights, an art project showing 40 tonnes of pozzolanic lava - the kind that is extracted to make cement - as well as the temporary contract with the geological exploration rights with which Almarcegui prevents this Valencian volcano from being exploited for the duration of the contract. In this way, she raises questions about nature, architecture, and the instrumentalisation of the earth's surface while executing legal forms resistant to exploitation.

Sustainability is not an aesthetic notion, but it would be "rough" if it were.

Madrid-based architecture office Elii (Uriel Fogué, Eva Gil and Carlos Palacios) is investigating how to improve the sustainability of architecture by drastically reducing the number of layers of materials in their projects. The fewer layers of materials used, the less finished it will look, but the less ecological impact it will have. To do this, they use powerful thermal insulation that is left exposed; cross-laminated panels for the load-bearing walls of structures are exposed, imperfections in materials are not covered, installation circuits are left exposed, and the floor is finished by simply polishing the mortar and joints are made with screws so that the building can be dismantled without leaving a trace. For these architects, this idea comes from the notion of constructive detail as an ecological contract where the rights of others beyond humans are recognised. Under this non-anthropocentric lens, they manage the provenance of materials, their extractive processes, and the possibility of dismantling and reassembling the construction or the life of local flora and fauna in the buildings. "Sustainability is not an aesthetic notion," they say, "but aesthetics is a battleground of ecology."



"Volcán Agras. Derechos Mineros". Cortesía del IVAM

Sustainability should not be class-based but popular.

One of the recurring themes at the last Barcelona Biennial of Thought was the economic and political distinction between various concepts associated with the environment and technology. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe

It is assumed that the less privileged classes pollute more because they cannot afford, for example, electric cars, but the truth is that the less purchasing power, the less pollution.

pointed out that there has been a transition towards an authoritarian digital neoliberalism in the wake of the pandemic. The danger that "technological solutionism poses" lies not so much in the technology but in the fact that empowering individualism and control over them can end

political life. On the other hand, the scientist Antonio Turiel and the biologist Charo Morán explained how many proposals related to sustainability advocate highly technological environmentalism, not only polluting but also suitable only for the population with high purchasing power. It is assumed that the less privileged classes pollute more because they cannot afford, for example, electric cars, but the truth is that the less purchasing power, the less pollution. The class divide in access to sustainable practices is not accidental and should be replaced by popular sustainability. Sustainability for everyone, not just for those who can afford it, should apply to everything from food to architecture.

Sustainability is not synonymous with good intentions; in fact, it can be a bargaining chip for capital. Vegetation in cities increases the land value and intensifies gentrification processes and the expulsion of residents if a rent protection shield does

Trees absorb CO2 by filtering environmental pollution in cities, which poses a scheme in which they serve as an instrument of compensation for human destruction of the environment. In this case, the danger is that ecological degradation is accepted by not attacking its causes but is compensated for through the monetary value of the "work" of the trees, which become assets for real estate speculation.



OFFSETTED, Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery, GSAPP, Columbia University, New York. Fotógrafa: Cristina Goberna Pesudo

not accompany it. Yet, the controversy over urban greenery does not end there. In *Offsetted*, an exhibition and book published by Hatje Cantz, Cooking Sections, a London-based spatial practice led by Alon Schwabe (Israel) and Daniel Fernández Pascual (Spain), shows in extensive research how, in 2018, 678,183 trees in New York produced \$109,625,536.06 in annual "environmental services" for the city. These services are related to their biological functions, i.e. they absorb CO2 by filtering environmental pollution in cities, which poses a scheme in which they serve as an instrument of compensation for human destruction of the environment. In this case, the danger is that ecological degradation is accepted by not attacking its causes but is compensated for through the monetary value of the "work" of the trees, which become assets for real estate speculation. Cooking Sections proposes a series of legal strategies to support the right of trees to stop being compensatory elements and return to being simply trees.

Sustainability should not be an excuse for unlimited growth; we must stop building. In our imagination, more is always better, and degrowth is misunderstood as a path to poverty. However, nothing in nature grows infinitely, and climate change also means biodiversity loss. This fact, proven ad nauseam,

Today's economy is based on unlimited growth. [It has no place in a future based on the notion of degrowth. The denial of the depletion of natural resources becomes an impossible ideological battle with sometimes greenwashing overtones,... selling them based on a false sustainability and blurring their causes so that they are not identified.

continues to be denied by certain political sectors, notably financiers. The reason is simple. Today's economy is based on unlimited growth. There is no



"Volcán Agras. Derechos Mineros". Fotógrafo: Lara Almarcegui.

place for them in a future based on the notion of degrowth. The denial of the depletion of natural resources becomes an impossible ideological battle with sometimes greenwashing or green gaslighting overtones, in other words, how to do the usual polluting extractive business, selling them based on a false sustainability and blurring their causes so that they are not identified. A paradigmatic example illustrating a movement against growth in architecture is the work of urban architect and professor at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (EPFL), Charlotte Malter-Barthes, who, in her project and forthcoming book *A Moratorium on New Construction*, calls for a radical halt to building, confronting the discipline with its complicity in environmental degradation, social injustice and the question of how to use the materials we have before extracting anything else. After all, architecture is not just new construction but the shaping of spaces, their associated technologies, the programmes accompanying them, the city they build and the memory they preserve.

Sustainability should not be a lure for consumption but an invitation for conversation. In October

The economic system in which we find ourselves encourages the isolation of the individual, thus also the destruction of solidarity networks and political action.

2017, Naomi Klein took to the stage in Sydney to present her latest book, *This Changes Everything*. In her speech, Klein explained how the climate crisis must force us to abandon the free market and restructure our political systems. In closing, she said something particularly

significant: "If you care about climate change, don't go to the supermarket and buy the latest sustainable light bulb. Get into a room where there are people discussing the issue". The economic system in which we find ourselves encourages the isolation of the individual, thus also the destruction of solidarity networks and political action in the city. A society that bases its values on consumption and the pursuit of profit destroys community life and its associated pleasures. Perhaps the most radical thing we can do today for the environment is, as Naomi Klein pointed out, to gather less green but to gather more among ourselves to recover the idea of sustainability.

Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
- Juan Bordera: [A handbook against climate denialism in the axial decade](#)
- Juan Bordera: [El Niño and its \(flaming\) sea in the era of the Great Acceleration](#)
- Juan Bordera/Antonio Turiel: [Rational and Irrational Rationing in the Age of Energy Descent](#)
- J. Bordera, et al: [On How 'Lobbies' Water Down the World's Most Important Climate Report](#)
- Juan Bordera, Agnès Delage and Fernando Valladares: [The Time for Civil Disobedience is Here](#)
- Juan Bordera / Antonio Turiel: [The End of Abundance](#)
- Álvaro J. de Regil: [The Unbearable Unawareness of our Ecological Existential Crisis](#)
- Álvaro J. de Regil: [Transitioning to "Geocratia": the People and Planet and Not the Market Paradigm — First Steps](#)

❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

❖ **About the author: Cristina Goberna Pesudo** is an architect, critic and university lecturer based in New York and Barcelona.



❖ **About this Brief:** This commentary was originally published in Spanish by CTXT in November 2022. This commentary has been published under Creative Commons, CC-BY-NC 4.0. You are welcome to reproduce the material for non-commercial use, crediting the author and the original publisher.

❖ **Quote this paper as:** Cristina Goberna Pesudo: Sustainability: a catalogue of ideas received – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, March 2024.

❖ **Tags:** capitalism, democracy, sustainability, ecology, climate change, Anthropocene, degrowth, greenwashing, consumption.

❖ The responsibility for opinions expressed in this work rests only with the author(s), and its publication does not necessarily constitute an endorsement by The Jus Semper Global Alliance.



Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

© 2024. The Jus Semper Global Alliance
Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemper.org/>
e-mail: informa@jussemper.org