**LIVING WELL WITHOUT GROWTH:
HOUSING ALTERNATIVES, DEGROWTH
AND THE EXAMPLE OF SVARTLAMON**

A Research Paper presented by:

Eirin Margrethe Sundby
(Norway)

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Major:

**Human Rights, Gender and Conflict Studies:
Social Justice Perspectives**
(SJP)

Specialisation:

Environment and Sustainable Development

Members of the Examining Committee:

Kees Biekart
Julien-François Gerber

The Hague, The Netherlands
November 2019

Disclaimer:

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the International Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

Inquiries:

Location:

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Maps

List of Appendices

Abstract

Organised around the logic of growth, competition and wealth accumulation, the mainstream housing sector fails to fulfil people's need for affordable and secure shelter that does not compromise ecological limits. Seeking to address this problem in a socially just and environmentally sound way, degrowth theory challenges lavish dwelling standards and commodified housing and argues that we need to reconceptualise notions of wellbeing and sustainability. In this paper, I explore degrowth approaches to housing through a case-study analysis of the alternative neighbourhood Svartlamon in Trondheim, Norway. The analysis draws on 11 semi-structured, qualitative interviews and is guided by the question: "How can the alternative housing model at Svartlamon help us understand the nexus between degrowth and wellbeing, sustainability and ownership?". The findings suggest that it *is* possible to achieve subjective wellbeing also with a lower housing standard, but only if the reduction in material wealth brings about other favourable aspects that contribute to wellbeing, such as for instance surplus time. Furthermore, the study shows that when profit is not the ultimate goal, housing sustainability and ownership can in fact be conceptualised in many different ways. To scale up degrowth housing, it would therefore be important to emphasize and promote especially alternative ownership models, as these have the greatest potential to radically transform mainstream, growth-oriented housing.

Relevance to Development Studies

The gravity of the global ecological crises and social injustices produced by and within the capitalist system calls for radical responses. This study adds to the growing body of literature on 'alternative' lifestyles, radical imaginaries and other ways of living that oppose the dominant growth-oriented development paradigm. By focusing on degrowth and housing in Norway, the research presented in this paper defies that the Global North exists outside the 'sphere' of development. On the contrary, to prevent further environmental degradation, it is necessary to question and challenge the 'standard' and model of development that countries such as Norway set.

Keywords

Alternative housing, degrowth, sustainability, wellbeing, community-initiatives.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Urban spaces, housing and consumption

Decades of over-exploitation of resources and conspicuous consumption to meet lavish life-style demands have had catastrophic environmental and societal effects. The need to adopt more sustainable lifestyles is pressing. Through a mainstreaming of 'sustainable development', as introduced and defined in the 1987 Brundtland Report, this process is portrayed as a matter of economic integration: to prevent environmental degradation we need to make sustainability profitable, develop sustainable technologies and promote 'green' consumer behaviour (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). In urban areas, the push for sustainable development has given rise to concepts such as 'Smart' and 'Green' cities, buildings and housing, where "complex control systems" help optimize resource efficiency and control the environment (Brandon et al. 2005: 177-178). This is believed to solve the problem of growth – by growing 'smart', the dwelling stock can continue to expand without exceeding ecological boundaries. However, while green solutions do place sustainability on the agenda, they often fail to address social injustice. In fact, critical urban studies have highlighted how efforts to make highly populated places more 'climate-friendly' have had adverse effects and exacerbated rather than ameliorated social inequalities (Rice et al. 2019). This is particularly seen in the housing market, where sustainability policies get worked into "capitalist growth dynamics" and end up contributing to "rising house prices and social exclusion" (Quastel et al. 2012: 1060).

Fortunately, not all calls for more sustainable lifestyles ignore the crucial link between social justice and the need for public alternatives countering unsustainable modes of consumption. Although not new ideas as such, many people have in recent years established 'alternative' and green ways of living and working together, with eco-villages and transition towns constituting emblematic examples. In the former, people typically live in villages of 50 to 150 persons where they use "local participatory processes to holistically integrate ecological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of sustainability" (Global Ecovillage Network, as cited in Zaręba et al. 2017: 3). Similar ideas can be found in the transition town initiative, which characterises itself as a movement that seeks to strengthen mutual collaboration between humans and stimulate transition towards a self-organising community that "reimagines and rebuilds a compassionate culture within limits [and] beyond the norms of the industrial growth system" (Transition Network n.d.). Alternative living is a hot topic, and both transition towns and eco-villages have been thoroughly studied. However, as cities expand, there is a need to look at how the same ideas can be implemented also in urban areas. This study seeks to do so by offering an analysis of Svartlamon – an experimental neighbourhood in Norway specifically regulated to promote urban ecology, cultural activity, and sustainable housing and business development (Municipality of Trondheim 2006).

By developing "ways of organising that are less focused on growth and profitability but more on social and environmental flourishing", initiatives such as the ones above take part

in a "politics for possibility" (Gibson-Graham, as cited in Phillips and Jeans 2018: 699). This type of politics is essential to "imagine a life otherwise" (Bloch, as cited in Levitas 2007: 290). In many ways, attempts to reimagine social wellbeing and decouple prosperity with economic growth echo principles found in degrowth literature, which offers "a critique of lifestyles based on mantras of working more, earning more, selling more and buying more" (Demaria et al. 2013: 197). Arguing for the impossibility of infinite (or 'sustainable') economic growth in a world with finite planetary boundaries, degrowth has come to inspire a myriad of alternatives (Demaria et al. 2013: 198). Common denominators for these are that they require the adoption of new ways of interaction and consumption, where simplicity and cooperation are key (Demaria et al. 2013: 202). In societies pushing for high-tech, 'smart' solutions, this is a tall order. Emphasising conviviality, slowness and frugality rarely goes down well in a capitalist system that values high productivity above all else and where prosperity is something that should be measured using quantifiable numbers. To go from imagining a life otherwise to actually living it, then, we must turn our attention to spaces in which this living takes place. Housing is a good place to start.

1.2 Research problem and justification

Why is the nexus between degrowth and housing relevant? First, because few, if any, sectors are subject to more market speculation and commercialisation than that of housing. Despite the existence of initiatives trying to decommodify housing to ensure affordable rent (Garcia and Haddock 2016: 394-397), the real estate market is still largely organised around the logic of competition, privatisation and growth. Housing represents a large sector of the economy, and big "industrial, financial and commercial players envisage more housing and larger houses built and sold as quickly as possible [to] make money and remain competitive" (Nelson and Schneider 2019: 3). Real estate and property investments are generally considered a safe bid because they generate a decent return of profit at a relatively low risk. Yet, the asset safety comes at a cost. As housing prices rise, so do mortgages. Increasing household costs force people into indebtedness, which drives economic growth like "a cog in the wheel of capitalism" and is one of the most effective ways to subdue resistance (Nelson 2019: 8-9). People preoccupied with paying back hefty loans can rarely afford to be picky about their working conditions or get involved in political action that might jeopardize steady income (Nelson 2019: 8). As such, indebtedness caused by an unregulated housing market pose a threat to democratic values of public participation and labour rights.

The conceptualisation of land and property as a source of primarily financial gain is problematic because it frames housing as a commodity to be consumed instead of a basic human right. Decent shelter is a prerequisite to realise nearly all everyday activities from rest to work to play. As less money is invested in public housing and housing and rental prices continue to rise, so does social inequality (Garcia and Haddock 2016: 397). This speaks to the second reason why housing is relevant, namely that shelter is a question of social justice and is far too important to be left unregulated and depoliticised. Furthermore, many of the things degrowth promotes, such as a reduced working week, revitalisation of green space and

limited use of fossil fuel vehicles (D'Alisa et al. 2014: 62; 143-144) depend on where and how you (can afford to) live. In turn, this influences whether or not you have to spend money on security; how long your daily commute is; and the availability of green spaces nearby.

The third reason is that since the construction of dwellings generally demand large amounts of material resources, all aspects of housing – from extraction to processing to building to furnishing – represent a significant environmental strain. IPCC even states that "[b]uildings embody the biggest unmet need for basic energy services […and] existing and future buildings will determine a large proportion of global energy demand" (2018: 677). With growing global awareness of the current climate crises, there is undeniably an emerging interest in houses built in more environmental-friendly ways with natural materials, solar panels on the roof and improved thermal insulation. Yet, evidence suggests that such dwellings remain the exception, not the norm (Nelson 2019: 6-7). Despite the fact that "buildings offer immediately available, highly cost-effective opportunities to reduce (growth in) energy demand" (IPCC 2018: 677), "the mainstream housing sector is conservative with respect to using environmental designs, practices and materials" (IPCC, as cited in Nelson 2019: 7).

There is also good reason to study alternative housing in an urban setting. Aall et al. argue that "there is an anti-urban bias in the degrowth debates which tends to deem decentralised, small-scale and self-contained human settlements as a normative spatial scenario of a degrowth society" (2017: 13). This is debatably because "cities have long been considered as growth machines, driving urban development and politics in the quest for wealth accumulation" (Aall et al. 2017: 18). Cities have also received the reputation of being "the primary cause of global ecological degradation", because they are seen as "major drivers of economic growth" (Aall et al. 2017: 18). However, we also know that cities are critical spaces of contestation, where struggles over the right to space, food, just housing and safe environments occur on a daily basis. The city is a space of vast disparity, and therefore a relevant unit of analysis for research on degrowth and social justice.

1.3 Research objective and question

Since degrowth stresses the need to reduce our social metabolism, the physical downscaling of living space naturally takes a lead role in degrowth approaches to urban development (Nelson 2018: 5-6). That said, hinting to degrowth's intention to politicise issues, Aall et al. also point out that shrinkage must take place in "a socially sustainable manner with a strong commitment to social equality" (2017: 13). In practice, this means that even though small dwellings such as for instance Tiny Houses[1] can be an example of a degrowth housing initiative, they are not 'degrowth by nature' just because they reduce consumption levels. Physical downscaling is not everything: to fit into a more holistic proposal, an alternative housing model must have redistribution at its core (Aall et al. 2017: 15). Moreover, according to

---

[1] The term 'Tiny Houses' is used to describe self-sustaining, often mobile, homes measuring 75m² or less (Anson 2019: 68).

Giorgos Kallis' ten degrowth policy proposals, degrowth in the housing sector should focus on "optimising the use of buildings [by stopping] the construction of new houses, rehabilitating the existing housing stock and facilitating the full occupation of houses" (Kallis 2017: 101-102). An implementation of this policy would require a coordinated political effort to regulate and reform the housing market. While useful, the policy proposals remain rather vague in terms of practicalities. Rehabilitation is probably better than demolition, but who decides what a 'good enough' housing standard is? Are there other ways to optimising dwellings than to stop new builds and will this lead to redistribution?

Although the body of literature studying alternative housing solutions and degrowth is expanding,[2] the topic is still far from fully explored. The aim of this research is not to attack current degrowth housing proposals. Rather, I want to take the conversation further by investigating what role housing plays in creating a degrowth future. There are several aspects that could be relevant here, but from my point of view, such an investigation needs to include at least the following: first, one must look at how the framing of housing as a commodity exacerbates social and economic inequality, particularly in urban areas. By analysing Svartlamon as an example of decommodified housing, we might learn more about how to go from a narrative of "housing for growth" to one of "housing for degrowth" (Nelson 2019: 4).

Second, as argued by Hagbert, the consumerist framing of housing also erases understandings of homes as a "node for radical social transformation" in which people construct their sense of belonging and redefine ideas of wellbeing (2019: 60). Most dwellings at Svartlamon are either old and have a low housing standard or are otherwise considered *'unsuitable housing because they do not comply with the rigid housing standard required elsewhere'.[3]* The concept of housing standards is interesting because while it appears to be an objective measurement to secure a certain living quality, this is far from the reality. In fact, it establishes a normative assumption of what material standard people need to live flourishing lives. Since degrowth rejects a notion of the 'good life' as something that hinges exclusively on the amount of material goods one has, it is relevant to explore this aspect by asking how living at Svartlamon influences the residents' understanding and experience of wellbeing.

Given the above, this study seeks to answer the following research question:
How can the alternative housing model at Svartlamon help us understand the nexus between degrowth and wellbeing, sustainability and ownership?

Sub-questions:
- Chapter 2: How is degrowth theorised and how does it apply to housing?
- Chapter 3: In what ways is Svartlamon an alternative housing model?

---

[2] See Nelson and Schneider (2019); Nelson (2018).
[3] Alex, a Svartlamon resident of two years. Paraphrased. See appendix 1 for the full profile of the interview participants.

- Chapter 4: How does the way in which people live at Svartlamon influence the residents' perception of wellbeing?
- Chapter 5: How does Svartlamon inform housing sustainability?
- Chapter 6: In what ways does Svartlamon's housing model counter the 'narrative of house ownership'?

1.4 Location and case study

The selected area of this study is the Scandinavian country Norway. Scandinavia is a region where large-scale social welfare typically contributes to low economic inequality amongst the inhabitants. At the same time, the Scandinavian countries' high standard of living enables a high-consumption society with an enormous impact on the environment. Large single-family houses are still very much the norm and the average floor size per capita is amongst the highest in the world, measuring more than 50m2 (Xue 2019: 186). As Xue argues, although scientists are still debating the minimum threshold for housing space, "universalising Nordic housing standards seems implausible environmentally" (2019: 186). In terms of housing politics, Denmark, Sweden and Norway have had quite different pathways: while the former two have been quite progressive in advancing housing alternatives such as co-housing, such projects still remain relatively small-scale in Norway (Stéfansdóttir and Xue 2019: 175).

Within Norway, I focus on a place that stands out due to its size and opposition model, namely the alternative neighbourhood Svartlamon. Svartlamon is a district in the eastern part of Trondheim, a large city situated in the middle of Norway. Svartlamon describes itself as Norway's first urban ecological area and is the home of around 250 people, many of whom are involved in music, handicraft and design projects. Culture and art are absolutely defining features of Svartlamon, or, as John, a long-time resident, phrased it: "*Svartlamon is the uterus of Trondheim's cultural life. A lot of things begin here and then spread out.*" The district itself is the result of several decades of civil struggle to keep old-dated wooden dwellings from being demolished (Svartlamon n.d.). In 1991, the residents of Svartlamon established the Svartlamon Resident Association, who after long protest and negotiations struck a deal with the municipality to turn the district into an "experimental area for urban ecology" (Svartlamon n.d.). The residents themselves are in the frontline of this work, and the neighbourhood follows self-governmental principles with equal participation rights and regular resident meetings. Over the years, Svartlamon has expanded its architectural repertoire and today the area consists of various dwellings ranging from listed single-family houses to shared apartments to mobile homes such as busses and tiny houses.

Albeit the most eye-catching, the neighbourhood's charming housing composition is not the only thing Svartlamon is known for. In addition to being a residential area, the district also houses a number of local businesses and initiatives such as a kindergarten, centres for recycling, free stores and eco-restaurants (Svartlamon n.d.). Because the municipality owns almost all property and land at Svartlamon and because the housing standard is relatively low, the residents pay rent below Trondheim's urban area market value (Standal 2019). As part of the rental agreement, the residents have an obligation to contribute to the

maintenance of the dwellings and the area itself. It is not possible to buy private property at Svartlamon and the neighbourhood is therefore seen as an alternative to increasing housing speculation and the commercialised and exclusionary real estate market seen elsewhere in the city (Standal 2019).

1.5 Methodology

The data this research bases its findings on is gathered through participant observations and qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted at Svartlamon during a two-week period in August 2019. I had nine interview sessions with a total of 11 participants.[4] Almost all the interviews took place at Svartlamon, either in the interviewees' own homes or outside in the common spaces. One interview with a resident-to-be took place in their current home outside of the neighbourhood. All but one conversation was recorded using a low-tech recording device. I purposefully opted against using my own phone to record because of privacy problems. While I am aware of Edwards and Holland's words of caution with regards to audio recording qualitative interviews (2013: 69-70), the benefits were considerably larger than the drawbacks: relying on a recorder allowed me to have more direct contact with the participants and established a clear signal for which parts of the conversation that I would use in my analysis. It also opened the possibility of double-checking and confirming verbatim expressions and the interviewees' "emotional timbre […] long after the interview itself" (Edwards and Holland 2013: 70). All interview participants were asked to sign a consent form and their identities have been anonymised as much as possible without losing contextually relevant information.

Located in the Hague and thus far removed from Svartlamon and Trondheim, I was not in direct contact with any gatekeeper who could give me access to informants before the field work. Recruiting participants online proved difficult for various reasons, and I therefore only had two interviews scheduled ahead of the fieldwork itself. These were with participants recommended to me by a project manager working on a research project concerning alternative living spaces in Norway. Upon arrival at Svartlamon, I identified the remaining interviewees through suggestions from the daily manager of the Svartlamon Housing Association and by using snowball sampling (Edwards and Holland 2013: 6). In addition to the interviews, I also had the opportunity to observe one of the monthly resident meetings, which gave further insights into the practical functioning of Svartlamon's self-governing structures.

Albeit streamlined interview questions increase the comparability of the respondents' answers, I chose not to use this for two reasons. The first is because during the fieldwork I was trying to unpack the *how* rather than the *why* behind people's conceptualisations of degrowth and housing. Exploring this open question, I found that I needed more flexibility. Secondly, all the interviewees lived in different types of dwellings. Some questions on for instance shared solutions were therefore not relevant to all participants. To increase

---

[4] See appendix 1 for the profile of the interview participants.

comparability yet remain adaptable, I chose to organise the interviews around six broad topics covering the participants' background and views on ecology, community living and housing politics at Svartlamon.[5]

All the quotes and text from Norwegian sources used in this paper are translated by me unless stated otherwise. To provide the most truthful translation, I have sometimes changed the sentences or concepts so that they correspond better to their original meaning. Being a native Norwegian speaker and having worked two years as a freelance translator, I am confident that this is done in a satisfactory manner. That said, some utterances have proved particularly tricky not so much because of the technical aspect of the translation, but because particular expressions often carry associative meanings. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 3, Svartlamon is as much a political project as it is an urban experimental one. This means that the meaning participants attribute to concepts such as 'equality', 'solidarity' and even 'degrowth' need to be understood within their specific political context.

1.6 Motivation, limitations and ethical challenges

For an outsider with no personal connection to neither Trondheim nor Svartlamon, choosing this unconventional neighbourhood as the case study for my research paper was both daunting and exciting. Daunting, because I did not know the place other than from what I had read in news articles and various press releases and I did not have any obvious gatekeeper who could give me access to participants. Exciting, because it is encouraging to see that there *is* a place for alternative urban living solutions, even in Norway. I say even because I - with the kind of overbearing criticism of one's own homeplace that you start to allow yourself after living many years abroad - had deemed Norway 'forever stuck' in climate hypocrisy a long time ago. Talking to people outside and inside of Svartlamon about housing, environmental issues and identity politics therefore gave a small but intriguing glimpse into how we might provide an alternative to the conventional profit-driven housing model seen elsewhere.

That said, I am also conscious that issues with access, the short time to conduct research and the length of this paper have limited the plurality of perspectives that I am able to present here. Unable to participate in any of the open days at Svartlamon prior to the fieldwork, I had to identify and reach out to most of the interviewees during the stay itself. This time pressure limited the amount of people I was able to meet with, as many of those I contacted were away on holiday or simply did not respond until after I had left Trondheim. The participants I talked with represent a rather diverse group when it comes to their type of housing, the length of their residence period, age, and gender. I believe this strengthens the research findings insofar as it avoids the promotion of *one* housing alternative as the "silver bullet" of degrowth housing, like Nelson and Schneider warn against (2018: 2). At the same time, each conversation underscored that every single Svartlamon resident has their own view on what the neighbourhood is and means for them. While I trust that chapter 3, 4, 5 and 6 provide

---

[5] See appendix 2 for the full interview guideline.

an accurate account of the opinions and lived experiences of the participants I talked to, I am cautious to make generalisations, particularly about a community I myself am not a part of. Repeating my point above, I do not seek to offer a perfect answer to how to degrow the housing stock, but rather to highlight perspectives that can inform this transition.

Finally, I have mixed feelings about the selection of a country in the Global North as my study location. I have been (and still am) wary that a study of alternatives in rich countries such as Norway can end up furthering the 'exceptionalism' often attributed to these initiatives. I am also afraid that by coming from Norway myself and studying Development studies in The Netherlands, I am unwilfully contributing to the eurocentrism that permeates mainstream understandings of development today. While my background as a native Norwegian gives me an 'insider' perspective and allows me to highlight nuances and find contradictions that might otherwise have gotten lost, studying my 'own' culture, so to say, also makes me blind to my own biases. A telling example is my Colombian friend who in a discussion about affordable housing solutions and shared outdoor space asked: *"But what about the price and need for security, like fences and guards? How do you expect to solve those issues if these alternatives were to be implemented in urban areas with high crime-rates?"*. Topics such as poverty fetishism and the fine balance between a voluntary and forced reduction of consumption have also been well conversed. This is not the space for a discussion on the replicability of context-specific solutions, but my friends' comment and many more have nevertheless forced me to question my own assumptions – also with regards to the limits of degrowth.

1.7 Structure of the paper

With Chapter 1 covering the research topic, research question, sub-questions and methodological concerns, the next chapter will provide the theoretical framework that this study builds on. Chapter 3 introduces Svartlamon in more detail. Chapter 4, 5 and 6 explore the topics of wellbeing, sustainability and house ownership respectively. Chapter 7 concludes the research and offers suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2 : Theorising and analysing degrowth

In this chapter, I will discuss degrowth as a theoretical framework and explore how scholars have interpreted its application in the context of housing. Relevant concepts that will be examined are social justice, wellbeing, sustainability and alternatives.

2.1 What is degrowth?

In the mainstream development discourse, growth is presented as the go-to solution for social problems and a driver of overall societal progress (Muraca 2012: 535). 'Development' has traditionally been understood in economic terms, and a country's 'progress' has consequently been measured by gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (Todaro and Smith 2015: 16-17). The understanding of growth as a catalyst for development is not entirely mistaken: statistically speaking, countries with a higher GDP tend to have a higher life expectancy, better educational services, and lower levels of income inequality (Todaro and Smith 2015: 59-60). However, in the past decades, the limits to and limitations of growth have become increasingly apparent. Congregated under the broad concept of 'degrowth', scholars have pointed out that instead of being a solution to problems of environmental degradation, growth causes and accelerates them (Kallis 2017; Demaria et al. 2013; D'Alisa et al. 2014). Insofar as the economy is a "subsystem of the finite and non-growing ecosphere" (Daly 2015: 8), infinite growth is an impossibility. To sustain growth in a world with limited material resources requires an increased exploitation and consequent destruction of said resources. Thus, development driven by growth cannot both grow *and* simultaneously protect the environment. The notion of green growth or 'sustainable development' is therefore an oxymoron which underscores rather than challenges "the economic rationality in the market economy" (Aall et al. 2017: 25).

As a radical environmental movement, degrowth is in opposition to market and technology-based fixes to ecological problems because tech innovations can never fully substitute natural resources (Daly 2015: 5), but also because these fail to address root causes of social injustice. Greening an economic system that is premised upon exploitation, accumulation and expansion is simply not enough (Kallis 2017: 24). Consequently, degrowth challenges this system's ability to provide both ecological protection and to fulfil the other promise of growth, namely social wellbeing and a good quality of life. As Muraca (2012: 540) states, this promise stems from the belief that "economic growth [will] increase the well-being of all because, as the well-known dictum goes, 'a rising tide lifts all boats'". This dictum refers to the idea that poor countries will experience an increase in economic inequality up until a certain threshold, "after which growth continues but inequality starts to decrease" (Muraca 2012: 540). According to this logic, the solution to socio-economic inequality is clear: the economy must grow for everybody to prosper. However, multiple studies have questioned this 'trickle-down effect', arguing that it is wealth redistribution policies that improve wellbeing in rich countries, not growth itself (Kallis 2017: 22). Furthermore, the wealth of these rich countries is acquired at the expense of others because growth "benefits from an unequal

exchange of resources between core and periphery among, and within, nations" (D'Alisa et al. 2014: 34). In their efforts to accumulate wealth, these countries simultaneously rob other humans and beings of their wellbeing. As a result, degrowth not only rejects that economic growth is the source of wellbeing; it also claims that growth is the main driver of global injustice.

Evidently, degrowth is more than 'just' an alternative economic concept. To advocate for degrowth of the economy without the accompaniment of other structural changes will produce nothing but negative effects. Instead, it is a holistic critique of the "hegemony of growth" (Demaria et al. 2013: 2009), which sees growth and modernisation as the only pathway to development, and the "growth fetishism" (Kallis 2017: 174, coined by Latouche 2010) that the current capitalist system has produced. As detailed above, this system is not capable of ensuring global justice. The inequalities and environmental problems we see today can to a large extent be attributed to over- consumption and wealth accumulation by the rich. A just transition to a sustainable future that does not violate biophysical limits therefore requires a redistribution of wealth and resources. This must occur through a "degrowth of the living standards of the rich classes of the North and South" (Demaria et al. 2013: 200).

To be able to do this, however, we first need to redefine and reconceptualise what it is that people need in order to prosper. As hinted to, the growth paradigm assumes that prosperity hinges on material wealth and ability to consume (as seen in for instance the use of GDP to measure human wellbeing). Degrowth, on the other hand, argues that by decoupling wellbeing from material wealth, it is not only possible but also desirable to live a 'good life beyond growth' (Muraca 2012). Or course, this idea is not new as such. Sustainability scholar Samuel Alexander traces the concept of ascetic living back to ancient Greece, old indigenous traditions and timeless religious beliefs (Alexander 2014: 163). There are also several existing worldviews that "break with the anthropocentric and androcentric logic of capitalism" and offer alternative notions of human flourishing such as *Buen Vivir* in Latin America, South Africa's *Ubuntu* and the self-governance-oriented *Swaraj* in India (Kothari et al. 2014: 366). Accordingly, degrowth does not promote exclusive or newly invented ideas of any sort, but rather finds its place amongst the variety of alternative traditions that already exist.

A first important step towards the decoupling of wellbeing and material wealth is to look at what it means in practice. The first argument we encounter here concerns the benefits of embracing a more frugal lifestyle – or, to use degrowth terminology – "voluntary simplicity" (Alexander 2014: 162). Simply put, voluntary simplicity claims that although a degrowth of one's living standard will entail a physical downscaling of consumption, this will not have negative effects on life satisfaction. In fact, it will bring the opposite: by voluntarily choosing to direct "more time and energy toward pursuing non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning", you might gain "more time and freedom to pursue other life goals, such as community engagements […] and artistic or intellectual projects" (Alexander 2014: 162). As such, frugality can increase your wellbeing more than what "working more, earning more, selling more and buying more" can do (Demaria et al. 2013: 197). This is also because

frugality offers a possibility to opt out of capitalism's endless drive for more, which can have distressing impacts on people's mental and physical health (Büchs and Koch 2019: 158).

To better understand the implications of degrowth's wellbeing argument, it is necessary to distinguish between objective and subjective wellbeing. According to Muraca, subjective wellbeing is normally understood as the wellbeing of individuals and their perception of what brings them personal happiness (Maraca 2012: 537). On the one hand, research on wellbeing and economic growth have found that subjective life satisfaction is not necessarily premised upon material wealth. The Easterlin paradox,[6] for instance, posits that growth only increases happiness up until a certain point (Easterlin 1974). This strengthens the decoupling claim. On the other hand, research within happiness economics also highlights that the paradox is only true provided that "our basic material needs are satisfied" (D'Alisa et al. 2014: 34). This notion of basic needs speaks to so-called 'objective wellbeing' that measures the quality of life based on objective living conditions such as "supply of clean water, food, housing [and] health promotion" (Büchs and Koch 2019: 158).

While the framework of basic needs is important because it sets a minimum baseline for what individuals need to live good lives (Büchs and Koch 2019: 161), Muraca argues that even these 'objective' criteria might be limited because it assumes a positive correlation between the fulfilment of the objective wellbeing and increased subjective wellbeing (Muraca 2012: 542). She states, "having more goods at your disposal does not say much about how people actually live and what they are able to do with them" (Muraca 2012: 542). To evaluate wellbeing, then, we need to put an emphasis also on the socio-political conditions and patterns that restrict or provide "real opportunities to shape one's life in a dignified and meaningful way" (Muraca 2012: 542).

2.2 Degrowth proposals

So far, I have given a small glimpse into what can be considered degrowth's main building blocks. Alternative formulations of the good life is one of them. Secondly, since green growth "reconciles economic, environmental and social development goals within the capitalist organisation of production and consumption" (Aall et al. 2017: 25), sustainability can easily be exploited for profit. To achieve a just and sustainable transition, then, we need a radical *system* change, not only the same model wrapped in green paper (Kallis 2017: 29). Thirdly, responses to ecological crises cannot be just unless they address global social inequality. Finally, degrowth infers both an intellectual and practical exercise. This turns the concept into one that advocates for a *holistic* transformation at all levels, consisting of a set of radical changes that simultaneously depend on and reinforce each other (Demaria et al. 2013: 192). However, what precisely is it that these changes consist of? What are core degrowth 'principles' and how can they be assessed?

---

[6] Named after the Paradox' founder, Richard Easterlin, who formulated the findings in 1974.

In his seminal book, *Farewell to Growth*, degrowth scholar Latouche presents a well-formulated and comprehensive review of degrowth's intellectual lineage and main arguments (Latouche 2009). He also presents something he calls the 8 R's of degrowth, which he stresses is not an exhaustive list but rather "independent goals that can trigger a process of de-growth that will be serene, convivial and sustainable" (2009: 33). These 8 R's are: "re-evaluate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, relocalise, reduce, re-use and recycle" (Latouche 2009: 33). The first two refer to what one could call the cognitive exercise of degrowth, namely to re-evaluate what truly brings joy in life and to challenge the ways in which wealth, poverty and scarcity is commonly understood. The third and fourth R refer to more practical efforts, such as changing growth-inducing institutions, ensure affordability of basic goods and "remove incentives to conspicuous consumption" (2009: 37). By re-localising (5th R) production of local needs, we will end up reducing (6th R) "the impact of our ways of consuming and producing the biosphere" (2011: 38). Reduction is also aided by the seventh and eight R – re-use and recycle, which will need to be scaled up considerably.

In addition to these goals, D'Alisa et al. (2014) have gathered a set of degrowth terminologies aimed at giving a deeper insight into the different streams of thought that degrowth builds on. Although emphasising that "degrowth expresses an aspiration which cannot be pinned down to a simple sentence" (D'Alisa et al. 2014: 20), there are a few that, to me, stand out as clear principles:

- *Voluntary simplicity* and *downshifting.* This talks about a voluntary choice to downscale consumption and live a more frugal life (Alexander 2014: 164).
- *Sharing* and *conviviality.* This refers to both the sharing of resources and goods (to reduce overall consumption) as well as enacting a form of symbiotic living (Deriu 2014: 106).
- *Commoning and (de)commodification.* Commodification represents the "symbolic, discursive and institutional changes through which a good or service that was not previously meant for sale enters the sphere of money and market exchange" (Gómez-Baggethun 2014: 94). Commodification underscores market logic and privatisation of property, and is thus in opposition to 'commoning', which represents the act of "shared stewardship [over] commons that are taken care of by a community or network" (Bollier and Helfrich 2014: 102).
- *Low-level democracy* and *autonomy.* Refers to the organisational ability and freedom to be self-regulating, but also the aspiration to make decisions over lifestyle independently from the subjugation of the capitalist system (Deriu 2014: 84).

Degrowth alternatives, be they eco-communities that promote self-sufficiency, urban farming initiatives, community kitchens or free shops, can of course promote all these principles and more. At the same time, it would be a mistake to expect that initiatives that are part of building alternatives to capitalism adhere to 'pure' degrowth. This is impossible firstly because degrowth is a "confluence point where streams of critical ideas and political action converge" (Demaria et al. 2013: 193). It does not propose one set 'method' or solution. Secondly, since our "imaginary of change" is shaped, restricted and "imprinted by core neoliberal rationalities" (Argüelles et al. 2017: 31), even alternatives can "produce and reproduce

neoliberal forms and spaces of governance [whilst] at the same time […] oppose neoliberal writ at large" (Guthman, as cited in Argüelles et al. 2017: 30). However, given capitalism's "inexorable push to corral every square inch of the globe into its logic of money and markets" (Demaria et al. 2013: 215), it is perhaps more appropriate to acknowledge that these alternatives exist *despite* capitalism. Following Gibson-Graham's (1996) work, "while it is imperative that knowledge of the real and present dangers we face is disseminated, seeing only barriers, overshoots, decline and collapse in our current predicament is to preach a mantra of disempowering despair" (Phillips and Jeanes 2018: 698).

Given the urgency of the current global ecological crises, it is essential that we take degrowth initiatives at face value and recognise them as places that "enable experimentation of the politics of the possible" (Phillips and Jeanes 2018: 698). The following section will concern itself with how this is done in and with housing: what are the challenges and how can they be addressed?

2.3 The problem of the real estate market

From a degrowth perspective, a first and obvious problem with a commodified and privatised real estate market is that it drives growth and social exclusion. Schneider argues that the growth paradigm frames dwellings as first and foremost financial investments, as "objects of conspicuous consumption and status symbols" (Schneider 2019: 16). This view is largely upheld by what Nelson calls the "narrative of house ownership" – the idea that if you have the financial opportunity, buying a private home is a must (Nelson 2019: 3-4). The narrative presents buying as the most sensible thing to do, not only because housing is considered a profitable investment, but also because renting is "denigrated as a waste of money" (Nelson 2019: 4)[7]. Considering how the ownership narrative lines up with neoliberalism's pervasive logic of competition, it is easy to see why people subscribe to it. The capitalist system produces expensive and insecure tenancy. As rental and housing prices increase, the incentives to buy private property is even higher – primarily because people want to purchase a home before it gets even more expensive, but also because they do not want to 'waste' even more money on rent. Unfortunately, this exacerbates the problem of housing unaffordability and turns urban areas into an exclusive playground for the rich (Nelson 2019: 5).

A second problem is "the environmental cost of dwellings" (Nelson 2019: 6). This concerns both the material use of the buildings themselves and the physical landscape that is cleared to make room for a constantly expanding housing stock. The problem is also very much linked to inefficient use of (living) space - on average, houses are getting bigger whilst households are getting smaller (Nelson 2018: 24-26). This means that large and luxurious single-family homes are problematic not only because they require large amounts of resources, but also because of their sheer size in relation to household members. A lower

---

[7] Slightly changed for improved syntax. Original citation: "The aspirational narrative denigrates renting as a waste of money".

density is likely to drive housing prices in urban areas up because it has a negative effect on the total supply of houses. This happens at the same time as governmental zoning regulations give preference to precisely this type of single-family dwellings or conventional solutions, effectively preventing more experimental and collaborative housing alternatives (Nelson 2018: 162-163).

A third issue is the attempt to improve sustainability through technological innovations. On the real estate market, it is easy to sell the green package: who does not want to live in a smart, energy-saving house? However, greening the housing sector does not automatically increase housing accessibility. In fact, it does quite the opposite. Examining examples of green dwellings, Nelson finds that while many do employ sustainable features such as for instance vertical gardens, the majority classify as luxury apartments, whose location and standard render them a financially unviable option for most people (Nelson 2018: 60-65). Furthermore, the implementation of climate-friendly policies in cities can potentially worsen social injustice because of ecological gentrification. This describes the process of low-income, non-white residents being displaced by rich ones as the result of "urban environmental improvements" such as walk-able neighbourhoods and eco-buildings (Rice et al. 2019: 2). This does not only force relocation of already vulnerable groups– it also undermines the work of social justice movements who fight for climate and housing justice.

Finally, sustainable technologies very rarely entail an adoption of more modest living standards, which is a cornerstone of large-scale degrowth housing (Trainer 2019: 124). Instead of the humble, maximum four-storey earth dwellings that Trainer envisions (2019: 125), modern sustainable urban buildings tend to go in the complete opposite direction by making use of several high-technological gadgets aimed at making the house more environmentally friendly. Dwellings are equipped with monitoring systems and dashboards to control every feature, from heating to lighting. This is problematic, because as Kallis explains, the efficiency gains brought about by technological innovation tend to cancel themselves out due to the "rebound effect" (Kallis 2017: 15). This means that whatever resources that have been 'saved' through efficiency technology, say improved heating systems, will rebound into increased consumption in other aspects of our lives, for instance through travel. To promote sustainability through technological innovation therefore proves tricky, if not impossible.

2.4 Degrowth housing models

Even though the problems detailed above occur all too frequently in the mainstream housing sector today, degrowth scholars highlight that alternative housing models and policies that counter these do exist. Degrowth housing models are diverse and can range from squats and eco-villages to co-housing and small dwellings such as Tiny Houses (Nelson and Schneider 2018). To evaluate their degrowth 'potential', they need to be contextualised. To take the latter as an example, Tiny Houses respond to the need for affordable housing with less environmental impact. At the same time, they can also "miniaturise the class problem of housing" (Anson 2019: 77) and be "co-opted in capitalist ways [as] a new housing commodity,

14

even secondary housing" (Nelson and Schneider 2018: 3). This stresses the need to scrutinise the intention of the alternative model: who are the initiatives meant for and who created them? Do the people who live there actively promote or commit to the degrowth principles presented earlier? Are the places, as Trainer puts it, "small and highly self-sufficient", "self-governed" and socially controlled settlements, in which "non-material pursuits deliver rich life satisfaction"? (Trainer 2019: 123).

Although alternative models are important, degrowth housing is also a matter of politics and political will. A part of this comes from honouring the right to housing by implementing price regulations through for instance social rent schemes, tax systems that favour renting over buying, and other housing policies such as requisition (Schneider 2019: 21-22). Other actions could be to "cap urban land consumption, introduce maximum housing standards [and] ban the construction of single-family houses" (Aall et al. 2017: 8).[8] Yet, since these measures counteract the growth paradigm and "doctrine of neoliberalism", it is also likely that they will receive significant pushback from many stakeholders (Aall et al. 2017: 18-19). To counter this, we need more than 'just' policies; we need to reconceptualise the meaning of home (Hagbert 2019: 58). The mainstream conceptualisation of home is consumerist in nature, "entangled with normative ideas of what a 'good life' constitutes" (Hagbert 2019: 59)[9]. But houses are more than just a purchasable product. They represent places where alternative and radical practices can be explored and homes that shape connections with ourselves and the rest of society (Hagbert 2019: 60). Policies therefore need to be coupled with a "re-politicisation of the home", where we go from individualised neoliberal framings of homes to actively embracing them as places to practice conviviality and autonomy (Hagbert 2019: 65). This requires "new formulations of the home" (Hagbert 2019: 62), which alternative housing models, degrowth principles and housing policies all can help contribute to.

---

[8] Changed verb form from gerund to infinitive for improved syntax.
[9] Slightly changed for improved syntax. Original citation: "entangled with normative ideas of what constitutes a 'good life'".

Chapter 3: The Example of Svartlamon

While recognising that Svartlamon does not use 'degrowth' as a self-defining word, a closer look reveals that as far as equitable downscaling, frugality and autonomy go, Svartlamon fits well with the characteristics of a degrowth community. In this chapter, I will show why this is the case by giving a brief introduction to the neighbourhood's history and detailing some of the guiding principles that Svartlamon is premised upon. This will give a glimpse into the peculiarities of the neighbourhood and help us answer what makes Svartlamon's housing model alternative.

3.1 Zooming in: Svartlamon as a site of counterculture

Map 1.1

Map of Trondheim, Svartlamon circled in red

Source: On the World Map webpage

On its own website, the neighbourhood describes itself in the following way:

> "Svartlamon is organised and run by principles of sustainable solutions, a flat structure, transparent economy, low standard, affordable rent. Svartlamon is unity, creativity, counterculture, communal work, participation, inclusion, community, ecology, art, culture, family, friendship, music, tolerance, festivals. Freedom. Svartlamon is about finding your own space, a place where you can live as the person you want, the way you want" (Svartlamon n.d.)[10]

Although the place now appears as relatively stable and grounded, this has not always been the case. Originally an industrial area inhabited by mostly working-class people, Svartlamon's image as a free-spirited cultural hub started to emerge in the 1980s, when artist, musicians, youth and students made their way into the area (Lundberg 2009: 64). Many of these had been part of the anti-establishment and radical groups that developed in Trondheim during the 1970s and were familiar with organisational strategies and political action

---

[10] The original text on the website is in Norwegian; this text is translated by me.

(Jubileumsgruppa 2018). In 1990, the Svartlamon Resident Association was established, and with it, a unified organ through which the residents could articulate their demands for an autonomous and creative urban space (Sager 2018: 459-460). With time, however, the Association's work turned into more than 'just' protecting this space and its houses from demolition. Carl, a writer and long-time resident at Svartlamon, describes the engagement as a struggle to create "*an alternative to the prevailing housing policies at the time. It started as a housing campaign: we believed it should be possible to live in the city without having a lot of money.*" The fight for housing affordability was closely linked to ideological ideas of autonomy and alternative living, and the engagement to keep the area turned into "*one of the biggest political struggles in Trondheim during the 1990s.*" (Carl).

The housing activists' collective effort eventually paid off. After prolonged confrontations with Trondheim Municipality and private industrial actors, in 2001, the municipality rezoned Svartlamon to an urban ecological area. Amongst other things, the new regulation plan stated that the area should facilitate experimental and sustainable forms of living and preserve a diverse urban and cultural environment – rooted in and driven by resident participation (Municipality of Trondheim 2006). Several actors have pointed out that there exists some mismatch between how the residents and the municipality understand the regulation plan's wording and objectives (Svartlamon Resident Association 2016a and b; Lundberg 2009; Hammer 2018). This has led to some frustration among residents but has also been part of shaping Svartlamon's pathway post-rezoning. Peter explains:

> "Historically speaking, Svartlamon has had a negative reputation amongst some people since it was a radical, occupied area. The critique has been that not a lot of things happen at Svartlamon. People look tired, the houses look tired… I think that over the years, people have understood more and more that it's important to create a positive image and to showcase all the good things that have happened here that people don't see at first glance"

Alex elaborates:

> "In the beginning, the place was a bit rougher. But the environment has changed; the former punkers have children and families now […] Many of the ideas that used to be radical are now fairly accepted. Not living in a single-family house is not so radical anymore".

3.2 Svartlamon today

As a self-managed neighbourhood, Svartlamon is premised upon a high degree of resident involvement. This involvement is crucial both to facilitate experimental projects that the residents initiate themselves (and thus simultaneously strengthen local participation processes) and to reduce project costs because residents donate their own time (Svartlamon n.d.). The resident involvement is also seen in the numerous working groups and committees in the area, responsible for everything from the making of Svartlamon's internal bulletin to improving the neighbourhood's green areas to collecting rent and handling the resident applications. To ensure a fair selection process, the latter group – FlyKo- is composed by a ten-person board that rotates each year. As per a decision made by the Housing and Resident Association, FlyKo should prioritise resident applicants according to the following criteria: young and new people; homeless people; economically or socially disadvantaged people; carpenters;

artists; people with particular capacities; and immigrants (Svartlamon n.d.). Home-owners are not eligible. The intentionality behind these criteria is clear; they are meant to *"give an entry ticket to those who cannot enter [the housing market] otherwise, yet still ensure diversity"* (Alex).

That Svartlamon is a place where socially excluded people can find a home was emphasised by several of my interview participants: *"It's a place where even people with social anxiety can manage to be social"* (John). *"People are quite honest about it – that several people here have social anxiety and other problems. It's also a place for those who struggle economically"* (Amira). This suggests that although Svartlamon today is different in terms of size and composition, the neighbourhood is still based on the same principles of redistribution and housing justice as when it originated. The principles are reflected in more than 'just' the resident selection criteria. One aspect is that you pay parts of your rent with communal work – a solution that favours those poor in money but rich in time. Another one is the terms of the rental agreement. Amira clarifies: *"It is possible to be two to three months behind on rent as long as you let the Housing Association know. Then you can work out an individual paydown plan. This gives the residents more responsibility"*. Ideas of redistributions are also extended beyond the neighbourhood's border through something called the 'solidarity fund'. Every month, a fixed part of the residents' rent goes into this fund. Once the fund reaches a certain amount, the residents collectively decide upon (a) charitable cause(s) that will receive the sum.

A third aspect that underscores degrowth ideas of conviviality and solidarity is the amount of shared facilities available to Svartlamon residents and sometimes external actors: a free fridge, a communal kitchen, a free store, a tool shed, the *Svartlamobila* (Svartlamon-car)*"that is shabby as hell but works perfectly fine to pick up second hand things" (*Truls), and a carrier bike, whose maintenance everybody is responsible for. Most of these facilities are provided by either the Housing Association itself or run by volunteers. There are however certain regulations in place that ensures that the sharing runs smoothly. For instance, for practical purposes, Svartlamon is divided into five sub-neighbourhoods. Each of these neighbourhoods receive a 'neighbourhood fund', which like the solidarity fund is redistributed from the residents' monthly rent. The neighbourhoods decide for themselves what to spend the money on, but it should benefit those who live in that area.

The appeal of Svartlamon's living model is apparent: every year, FlyKo receives over a hundred applications from people who want to live in the neighbourhood. To meet both interest and to continue to evolve as a neighbourhood, Svartlamon has spent the past years utilising already available space in new ways by building and welcoming several new houses. Some of these have taken the form of relocated tiny houses; others are the result of innovative self-building projects (see figure 1). The latter has now become one of the area's flagship dwellings, with five families living in six self-built experimental houses largely made from reuse material. The experimental houses have received considerable public attention both during and after the construction period, and the project was even a nominee for the 2019 European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture (Experimental Cities n.d.). Despite being built by the very people who now reside in them, both the experimental houses and a

new self-build project that is currently under construction are owned by the Housing Association. The dwellings are thus subject to the same rule that applies to almost all the other houses at Svartlamon, namely that they cannot be purchased by private owners.

Figure 1
Experimental houses at Svartlamon

Source: Fieldwork 2019.

3.3. Zooming out: Svartlamon & Norway

All in all, Svartlamon's alternative housing model, urban location, and autonomous and low-level governance structures makes the neighbourhood quite unique in a Norwegian context. Furthermore, as an open neighbourhood that arranges frequent cultural events, a yearly Eat the Rich festival and an Open Day every spring, Svartlamon is well-accustomed to local media attention and people and tourists wandering around on the premises. Over the years, the area has been subject of several research projects ranging from architecture (Haanes and Ohren 2015) and urban planning (Sager 2018) to master theses in the field of social anthropology (Hammer 2018), urban ecology (Lundberg 2009) and sociology (Thorkildsen 2003). Most recently, Svartlamon was incorporated into a large-scale intermunicipal research project – Bopilot - that looks at alternatives to market-driven housing policies. Its objective is to see how alternative housing can contribute to municipalities' vision of diversity, inclusivity and sustainability within regional borders (Vargel 2018).

Like most intentional communities, Svartlamon is far from a utopian place. Interpersonal conflicts occur just like in any other community, or as John puts it: *"Knowing your neighbours and sharing so much is nice, but it can also get too close sometimes […] This can lead to conflicts that you perhaps don't have in other neighbourhoods".* Amira also said: *"It's naïve to think that [Svartlamon] is ideologically pure. There is of course a certain degree of a 'not in my backyard' mentality here as well".* This does not diminish Svartlamon's importance as a real-life example that shows that it is

possible to do things differently. As Bopilot claims, one of the things that prevent experiments and innovation in the Norwegian housing sector today is a lack of information about alternative living solutions (Bopilot project description 2016: 2). And such solutions are desperately needed. As I mentioned in the methodology section in Chapter 1, Norway's extravagant standard of living is at odds with environmental sustainability. From a resource perspective, it is simply not feasible that the rest of the world would have this standard or the same amount of secondary holiday homes - homes whose energy use per m2 is worsening and whose size is increasing (Aall et al. 2017: 11).

Furthermore, despite the provision of social housing for disadvantaged people, the housing market in Norway remains largely unregulated. For the lower-middle class, buying or even renting a house in urban areas remains a distant dream. On average, national housing prices have been on a rise for almost three decades, with some years experiencing as much as a 20% increase (Delmendo 2019). In 2014 Norwegian households' debt-to-income (DTI) ratio was ranked amongst the worst top four in Europe with an average debt equivalent to 187% of income (Eurostat 2014). Knowing the role housing plays in furthering economic inequality (Arundel 2017: 179), Svartlamon's decommodified housing model represents an important counterweight to neoliberal housing politics both on a national and international level. Even though politicians and lay people acknowledge and problematise the Norwegian housing market's exclusionary character, little effort is made to counter the "narrative of house ownership" (Nelson 2019: 4). With its combination of high national wealth and extensive welfare system, Norway ought to be a good testing ground for housing practices that take sustainability and wealth redistribution seriously. Svartlamon's housing and living model could be a good starting point for this.

Chapter 4: Wellbeing and standards

Figure 2
One of the common outdoor spaces at Svartlamon.
Signpost states: "Safety".

Source: Fieldwork 2019.

4.1 What is 'living well'?

As detailed in Chapter 2, questions about wellbeing and living standards are central to the degrowth debate. The argument that it is possible to decouple ideas about the 'good life' from material standards is compelling, but does simplicity really lead to a higher life satisfaction? The material condition and sizes of the houses at Svartlamon are in stark contrast to the average, resource-intensive Norwegian home and are certainly below what the private housing market indicates that people want. In this chapter, I am looking at how living this way affects the residents' perception of wellbeing.

Talking to the Svartlamon residents, I was surprised to see how much the idea of voluntary simplicity seemed to resonate with the participants. A first testimony to this is that the low housing standard leads to lower living expenses because of cheaper rent. This is important for individual wellbeing, as all the interviewees agreed that the reduced rent

meant that there was less pressure to work fulltime simply because the cost of living no longer demanded it. Less work frees up time that can be spent on other things such as cultural projects, music, friends and family, and *"general stuff that you would want to do but that nobody gives you money for"* (Truls). You simply have more time to fiddle around and experiment – something that undoubtedly has played a huge role in turning Svartlamon into the cultural hub it is today. Eline, a resident who makes a living through creative projects, also drew a connection between low-cost living and a sense of personal choice: *"For those of us who work with music and art, [the low rent] gives more option to choose the projects that we want to partake in"*. Whereas she before had to evaluate each project based on how much money it would generate, the low-rent model has given her the opportunity to more freely choose the projects she is personally interested in.

At the same time, surplus time is not only a source of personal freedom. It is also essential to ensure flourishing community life and to maintain the Svartlamon dwellings. It is no surprise that creating a sense of togetherness and community requires effort. However, as mentioned by Eline and Aksel, the horizontal, self-governing structure Svartlamon upholds also takes time. Going to meetings is time-consuming, but they remain *"crucial to secure continuity of the [Svartlamon] project, for participation and to maintain an ongoing conversation about how we want to live"*. Moreover, Amira, a two-year resident, explains that surplus time is necessary for Svartlamon's housing model because proper maintenance of the old buildings is a slow process:

> "With the exception of the new buildings, people are supposed to conduct 'gentle maintenance of old dwellings'. This means that people spend time on their houses. That they don't do crazy, soulless, quick-fix projects, but that they mend things here and there over time."

These two examples underscore a 2018 thesis finding, namely that "giving time" in the form of communal/voluntary work is a core foundation of Svartlamon as an alternative living project that promotes community, ecology and participation (Hammer 2018: 54). In the thesis author's own words: "time is Svartlamon's glue – the putty that holds everyone together" (Hammer 2018: 54). Linking time with living standards and reduced living costs, then, we can argue that the surplus time is simultaneously an outcome of - and a prerequisite to - Svartlamon's communal living model.

Connecting the idea of wellbeing with frugality, Kallis argues that slowing down does not mean succumbing to idleness (Kallis 2017: 39). Rather, it is about embracing slowness as a counterweight to a system where increased efficiency is king, regardless of its degrading effects on people's health and on the environment at large. This aspect was brought up by a couple I interviewed together, Heidi and Truls. Heidi expressed worry over how pressure to work hard and long hours affects your mental wellbeing: *"People these days have a lot of mental problems, and I think it has something to do with how we live. It is a rat race. You have to have those numbers on your bank account and you have to achieve this and that within a certain time"*. Linked to this is the paradox that many do not even have the time to enjoy the 'output' of their work: a dream apartment might be nice, but *"you never get to enjoy it, because you have to work three jobs in order to pay for it!"* (Truls). Affluent lifestyles are often so expensive that the time you get to

spend enjoying the material goods you assume will add to your wellbeing is quite limited. For the couple, they agreed that reducing their living standard and thus also living costs had changed their attitude and mentality. Overall, they felt less worried about money and spent the extra time aside part-time work maintaining and improving their home without any rush.

4.2 Why standards matter

The experiences detailed above suggest that high material wealth is not necessarily a prerequisite for wellbeing, at least with respect to subjective experiences of wellbeing. The reduced housing standard is not seen as a loss or sacrifice because it brings about circumstances that add to overall life satisfaction. Still, according to so-called objective measurements of housing standards, the houses at Svartlamon are technically 'unsuitable' for living. These measurements refer to the minimal standards houses should meet in order to satisfy basic human needs (Xue 2019: 186), such as floor area, insulation, heating and availability of domestic appliances. This makes me wonder: what is the purpose and intention of minimum standards and how necessary are objective standards for wellbeing really?

Long-time resident John provides us with a useful starting point for this discussion. During our conversation, it became apparent that he had spent significant time thinking about the practical implications of living in substandard housing. Smiling, he told me that a few years ago, *"the Municipality of Trondheim was not able to provide social housing at Svartlamon because the houses were so run-down."* The standard was simply too low to serve this purpose. Seeing my shocked face, John laughed and added that a similar issue had occurred a while back when the refugee crisis reached its (mass media) peak. Wanting to be of help, the Svartlamon Resident Association *"had offered some apartments that could be used as temporary shelter for the refugees."* However, just like with the social housing, these apartments were of no use because they were deemed inadequate for refugees.

Of course, no elaborate imagination is needed to understand why housing standards exist. Most tenants or house-owners (to be) have either personal or second-hand experience with filthy, small apartments, leaky roofs and freezing, uninsulated houses. Minimum standards are there to ensure decent living space and to rationally justify normative standards as a prerequisite to fulfil basic needs (Næss and Xue 2016: 139). Indeed, the establishment of minimum housing standards play a crucial role in advocating for social rights and to protect people from exploitation and deprivation of rights. As such, minimum housing standards becomes a question of social justice – and an essential one at that. Yet, as mentioned several times already, it is evident that Norway's high housing standards overshoot any sustainable limits, environmentally speaking. On a planet with finite resources, this overconsumption occurs at the expense of people who have "yet to have their standard raised up to a minimum" (Næss and Xue 2016: 139)[11] and thus violates distributional ethics. From a justice perspective, then, the implementation of a maximum housing standard, especially with

---

[11] Slightly changed for improved syntax. Original citation: "…those not yet having obtained the minimum standard can have their standard raised up to that level."

regards to size, ought to be just as important as maintaining a minimum one. Unfortunately, maximum standard regulations are rare (Nelson 2018).

Layla, a part-time public sector worker, elaborated on the connection between standards and justice. She has lived at Svartlamon together with her partner for three years. Their home is considered substandard both in terms of size and material use. Talking about the future plans of herself and her partner, Layla mentioned that the substandard restricts family planning because "*although it might not be illegal to have a child living like this, it is likely that Child Protection Services will come knock on your door. A friend of mine decided to move [because of this] when they got pregnant*". On the one hand, the minimum standard is necessary to protect children and ensure that they grow up in decent conditions. On the other, living the way Layla and her partner do, the couple have no mortgage, extra time to spend with a potential future child because of their part-time work, and a secure tenancy. Even according to 'objective' measures, these factors are likely to contribute to a child's wellbeing. I mention this not to uncritically advocate for an abolishment of all minimum housing standards. Rather, I think both John and Leyla's comments demonstrate Muraca's point, namely that there are other things that affect overall 'quality of life' than meeting minimum standards (Muraca 2012: 539) – without this being a reason to not take basic needs seriously.

4.3 Standards, wellbeing and the use of space

In the discussion about standards it is also useful to look at how the reduction of living space affects wellbeing, given that downscaling plays such an important role in degrowth housing (Stéfansdóttir and Zue 2019: 171). Most of the old dwellings at Svartlamon are designed as co-housing where the residents share facilities such as bathrooms and sometimes also kitchens. There are many positive aspects about this, for example that "*sharing amenities forges solidarity amongst the residents*" because it is in everybody's interest to keep them in a good state (Sarah). Furthermore, as is the case with Svartlamon's well-equipped communal tool shed, many of these amenities would be too costly for individual purchase. Sharing these will therefore both reduce resource use and give residents access to facilities that they perhaps otherwise would not be able to afford.

At the same time, sharing can also be tricky. Contemplating his own housing 'journey' at Svartlamon, John stated that his needs changed in line with his changing family composition:

> "We used to have two toilets and three showers split between seven apartments. That wasn't a problem – you get used to everything. But now my child is so big that a tub in the kitchen only creates a mess. So it is particularly nice to have your own bathroom when you have kids."

The same goes for Peter, a self-builder at Svartlamon. Although eager to build his house in a conscious manner, he acknowledges how sharing might not be for everyone (paraphrased):

> "We opted for a solution with individual bathrooms and kitchens. And I actually think that is pretty smart. There's a lot of apartments at Svartlamon where you have to go to your neighbours' cellar to go to the toilet. And it's very good that they do that, but perhaps we can adjust

a little. When you build a house now, you can have a different standard than in the 1930s. [...] I also think that many of my acquaintances could never imagine sharing a bathroom. I think a lot of people would prefer not to have shared solutions, but still really want to live at Svartlamon. Because there is a lot of other things that is good with the area. And [sharing] is not a 'must' as such. By not opting for shared solutions, we might attract different people [...] We don't have to share a bathroom to live differently and to represent an alternative. It's almost better that we don't share, because then it is an alternative for more people."

Peter's observation sustains Hagbert's argument that housing can be "a node for transitions to a low-impact society" (Hagbert 2019: 57). It suggests that if located at a place like Svartlamon, even individual homes can potentially act as a vehicle towards a less resource intensive, convivial lifestyle – even for those who are either sceptical of co-living or whose family or individual needs are simply different. John and Peter's comments also show that to contribute to subjective wellbeing, the degrowth housing solutions need to be flexible enough to meet individuals needs without compromising environmental limits. Limiting the housing sector's environmental impact is essential, but this does not *have to* occur through co-housing. It can also come from downsizing other non-residential spaces by means of sharing – such as garages (which car-sharing can eliminate altogether,) tool sheds, hobby rooms and guest rooms. Sarah elaborates: *"Living more sustainably has to do with finding better solutions. You need functional rooms and practical, shared solutions."* These solutions must be demanded by the inhabitants themselves and also meet their wishes and needs: *"Ideas like a common vegetable garden must come from residents themselves, not from an investor that has decided to include it in his blueprint. Those who live there and are affected by the decisions must be able to influence these decisions"* (Truls).

4.4 Prerequisites to the good life

Heidi & Truls:[12] *"It doesn't matter that much if you don't have a water inlet the first years. Or ever."*

Me: *"Is it something that you miss?"*

Heidi: *"No, I feel that it enriches life because water is not as easily accessible."*

Truls: *"It is cosy, there's some kind of cabin feel to it."*

Heidi: *"It makes me happy. It is not natural for humans to live so luxurious lives. Too much comfort dulls your senses."*

Svartlamon is a lot more than a collection of houses, but the communal living model is undeniably shaped and sustained by its dwellings. Although very much part of formal institutions and regulations through the Housing Association and still an 'experiment',[13] the residents' experience of how Svartlamon adds to the quality of life is remarkably close to degrowth's formulations of the good life beyond growth. This final example of access to water is a good illustration of this. Examining the Svartlamon residents' insights I believe we

---

[12] Talking about the standard of their Svartlamon home.
[13] Several participants asked how long Svartlamon would have to be referred to as an 'experiment', and if not almost thirty years of success ought to be enough proof that it works.

are getting closer to if not the *limits* of decoupling wellbeing from material wealth, then at least some of the *prerequisites* to do so: The reduction of material wealth has to bring about favourable conditions that 'make up' for the perceived loss of wealth. In the case of Svartlamon, these conditions are reduced living costs, surplus time to spend as you please, opportunity to partake in and contribute to the community, or having access to amenities that you might otherwise not have access to. Without these, the reduction is not likely to result in increased subjective wellbeing, because there is nothing to 'gain' as such, other than perhaps the knowledge that the consumption practices no longer violate other people's basic rights.

On the one hand, this stresses the argument that degrowth needs to be "accompanied by alternative institutions and cultures that could address potential wellbeing losses" (Büchs and Koch 2019: 157). On the other, one could question to what extent people are willing to give up 'the good life *within* growth', especially seeing how reluctant people, institutions and companies are to lower their consumption levels even when faced with evidence of ecological crises worldwide. This does of course not weaken the moral weight or even urgency of re-conceptualising the notion of wellbeing. Heidi and Truls' choice to live without water inlet is commendable, but I am also reminded of the other conditions that make it 'beneficial' or even possible for them to prosper in substandard housing. Without these conditions, it is difficult to 'justify' a breach on minimum housing standards that are put in place to safeguard people's objective wellbeing. Moving towards 'voluntary simplicity', then, it will be important to make sure that it is both a voluntary shift and that the "alternative institutions and cultures" are in place.

Chapter 5: Sustainability and housing

Having discussed housing standards established to meet human needs, I now want to shift the focus to standards established to minimise the environmental impact of housing. In the construction industry, environmental standards refer to a set of requirements aimed at increasing the energy efficiency of the houses by using "energy sustainable technologies" (EST) (Krzemińska et al. 2017: 2). Over the years, a heightened interest in green building solutions has prompted the creation of 'smart' housing models such as passive, zero, or energy-plus houses. While these do improve the energy efficiency of residential buildings, homes equipped with ESTs have "a marred track record, especially in terms of unaffordability" (Nelson 2018: 62). Furthermore, given that *"everything is branded as environmental-friendly these days"* (Peter), there is good reason to scrutinise the way in which the environmental-friendliness of a building is measured and understood.

5.1 Defining housing sustainability

The building code Tek17 formulates a list of technical requirements and environmental standards that all new buildings in Norway need to meet (Norwegian Building Authority 2017). Tek17 is meant to ensure that construction projects "are planned, designed and executed on the basis of good visual aesthetics [and] universal design" (Norwegian Building Authority 2017: 8). While Tek17 establishes an important minimum baseline, the requirements also drive standardisation and thus prevent alternative housing. This is counterproductive to Svartlamon's objective of "developing and experimenting with new sustainable solutions" (Municipality of Trondheim 2006). The neighbourhood's regulation plan is therefore made in such a way that it is easy to get an exemption from Tek17. On the one hand, this has turned Svartlamon into a place where people who want to live in unconventional dwellings like a truck or tiny house can do so without violating the building code. On the other, experimentation with materials and building techniques has exposed some problems with the sustainability measurements Tek17 operates with:

> "The normal requirements for new buildings [Tek17] don't apply to Svartlamon. And that can be negative for the energy efficiency, for instance if you use single-glazed windows instead of double-glazed ones […]. But in theory, building with only recycled materials is extremely environmentally friendly. Like for instance the experimental houses. They are made from garbage. Everything is reuse material" (John).

A couple who lives in these houses elaborates:

> "The experimental houses have been built according to vacation property standards, which you technically are not allowed to have in permanent housing. This means that they don't have as thick walls, flooring and roofs as normal houses need to have these days. Normal houses need extremely thick walls, almost 50cm, to minimise heat loss because that saves energy. And then you need incredibly thick windows - three layers. That also saves energy. But with such an air-tight home you also need a good ventilation system. This requires a lot of energy too."

Of course, there is nothing wrong with a well-insulated house. The problem is more related to what is and is not defined as sustainable housing. Since the experimental houses do not have the required insulation, they are per definition not energy-conserving houses and therefore do not meet the formal environmental standards as measured by Tek17. At the same time, since they are built using mostly recycled materials, there is reason to believe that they are at least as 'sustainable' in terms of material use as other houses, since thick walls and ventilation systems also represent a significant resource drain. However, this does not fall within the formalised rules for what sustainability is 'supposed' to look like.

Alex provides another insight into this seemingly contradictive measurement:

> "An energy plus house of 500m2 is considered environmentally friendly because the energy usage per square meter is low. But if there is only a small family living in it, the energy usage per m2 is all of a sudden a lot more. In our house we have poor insulation – we could not even have built a potting shed with this insulation. But then again, we use a lot less energy because our home is so small. So technically, [the sustainability measurements] are inaccurate".

This underscores one of the core arguments of degrowth, namely that sustainability is not just about implementing ESTs to uphold current consumption levels without depleting natural resources, but about "consuming and producing less, *much less*" (D'Alisa et al. 2014: 24). To do so, sustainable housing needs to pay attention to space, or more specifically floor space per capita. As Næss and Xue argue, reducing the energy consumption per m2 with tech innovations is not enough, because growth in the building stock always entails "increased consumption of building materials, land and energy" (Næss and Xue 2016: 133).

5.2 The politics of sustainability

Speaking about sustainability and housing at Svartlamon, Sarah told me:

> "There are a lot of things that don't make sense when it comes to sustainable housing, for instance energy labels. It is incomprehensible that an old house here at Svartlamon or a house built with recycled materials gets a low energy label, but a giant single-family house in a fancy area in Trondheim that replaces all its windows with double-glazed ones gets a 'very energy efficient' label."

In addition to underscoring John and Alex's points, Sarah's comment here suggests that the 'problem' of sustainability in housing is not so much that the measurements are off, but that 'environmental-friendliness' somehow gets reduced to a matter of calculations. This is problematic because, as shown, these calculations are not necessarily straightforward. It also raises the question of what the purpose of sustainability labels really is. If it is to reduce environmental strain, research suggests that "smarter designs of dwellings and cities" can do this up to a certain point, but that "the possible 'decoupling' between [housing stock] growth and environmental damage is only relative, not absolute" (Xue, cited in Næss and Xue 2016: 144). If the point is to 'green' the housing stock, improving a dwelling with sustainable technologies is typically associated with higher expenses related to both the

building process itself and the property's purchasing price (Nelson 2018: 60-65). This renders dwelling fitted with ESTs less, not more, attainable for the general public. As Peter said:

> "An energy plus house is good in that it produces more energy than what it uses. But it is also very expensive and complicated, and it requires a lot of external materials and high-tech solutions that are difficult to maintain yourself."

Accordingly, ESTs are not likely to promote any of degrowth's principles of simplicity, affordability, self-sufficiency and autonomy. Several of the residents I spoke to said that using solutions such as solar panels and compost toilets was out of the question because it is unaffordable. With a view to keeping the price low, they had instead opted for shared solutions and "*recycled windows and products with manufacturing errors*" (Eline) that could not be resold. The possibility to experiment in this way can partly be attributed to the area's regulation plan, since it facilitates exemptions from Tek17. At the same time, thinking about how to scale up Svartlamon's housing model and move toward degrowth housing, it is neither enough nor desirable to 'just' create more neighbourhoods that can also get Tek17- exemptions. While this is important for continuing to experiment with alternative housing, the point should not be to escape the requirements. It should be to start thinking differently about housing and sustainability and to make it formally possible to do so. Alex explained it well: the requirements are important since they "*ensure that no one ends up living in the slums, but they are perhaps too rigid and need to be updated*". The specifics of this update would have to be discussed, but more flexible regulations could help normalise alternative hosing. In turn, this could challenge the growth-oriented housing model and place an emphasis on affordability instead of profitability.

Chapter 6: House ownership

Intertwined with questions of wellbeing and sustainability, a third aspect of degrowth housing is the reframing of housing as a home instead of an asset. Over the years, various researchers have shown how house ownership, being a prime driver of wealth accumulation, exacerbates inequality (Arundel 2017). Yet, these findings do not seem to deter the "ideology of mass home ownership", namely the belief that house ownership has an "equalizing capacity as a mechanism for the democratization of wealth" (Arundel 2017: 178). Similar to Nelson's "narrative of house ownership" (Nelson 2018: 4), this ideology promotes the 'positive sides' of house ownership, for instance the fact that property represents an important source of household economic security. While this is true, such a framing does not take into consideration that it is precisely neoliberal policies and market liberalisation that renders the purchase of private property for financial security necessary in the first place (Arundel 2017: 178-180).

With its decommodified housing model, Svartlamon is in many ways an antithesis to the house ownership ideology. With the exception of the tiny houses and the trailers parked on the area, all the houses at Svartlamon are owned by either the Housing Association itself or by the Municipality of Trondheim. If the residents move out, they do not receive compensation for any home upgrades or other renovation expenses. From personal experience, I know that the Norwegian house ownership narrative is very much alive. Svartlamon's opposition to profit-maximisation therefore strikes me as remarkable. In this chapter I seek to deepen our understanding of this opposition by asking the following questions: In what ways does the rent-only policy at Svartlamon influence the residents' idea(s) of house ownership? What motivates living in the neighbourhood?

6.1 The meaning (and purpose) of house ownership

"People hardly question the logic of buying and owning a house. But owning is not always the most practical option – what if you want to move abroad one year? What are you going to do with your house?" (Sarah).

"It is a special feeling. We definitely have the feeling that we own the house. We know that we don't […], but home is where we are. We have a completely different sense of ownership to this place than what you get when you only buy an apartment" (Eline, self-builder).

As it turns out, there are many aspects of house ownership that influence how Svartlamon residents understand housing. In my view, Sarah and Eline's comments serve as a good illustration of particularly two sentiments that emerged during the interviews, namely that house ownership is not unequivocally positive and that there are more things that impacts your 'sense' of ownership than whether your name is on the purchase contract or not.

To start with the first, the element of the 'logic' of buying a house was something that made me curious. In the ownership narrative, the logic is self-evident: 'Don't be stupid - buy a house'. In fact, all your energy should go into saving enough money for a down payment. Yet, as Layla points out, even if you do that *"you don't own your house, your bank does […]. My belief is that nobody who has a mortgage truly owns their house"*. Alex also elaborates on the relationship between income and ownership: *"When you buy a house, you lock your money completely into that mortgage and only a small part of your income can be used for other things"*. As such, not only does house ownership force you to work long hours, it is also likely that most of your income and savings will be spent paying back your loans. This highlights how, contrary to neoliberal ideas, ownership isn't necessarily a source of personal freedom – it can also represent the opposite. This is further articulated by Sarah, who points out how ownership, supported by the ideology of private property as freedom, only gives the illusion of choice:

> "[When you rent] there are often a lot of rules about what you can and cannot do with your apartment. You cannot make it 'your own'. But we need to remember that this applies to the private market, too. Because when you own a house, you will always refurbish with a view to what adds value to the house, and not necessarily what you would like for yourself. All your choices are about that."

At first, I thought the picture of ownership painted by the interviewees was overly negative. Surprised by my own reaction, I reflected on why I thought the residents' portrayal was so pessimistic. After a while I realised: the feeling isn't pessimism at all - it is unfamiliarity. Of course, it is not unusual to hear that private property can be a social and financial burden. Things always need to be fixed or repaired and you are bound by your mortgage for decades to come. Still, faced with the decision of owning vs. not owning, the correct answer somehow always seems to be the former. It is uncommon to hear people pointing out the positive aspects of not buying. To me, this speaks to how deeply entrenched the narrative of (material) ownership is. However, in the face of rising housing prices and insecure labour markets, what about the argument that house ownership provides economic security?

Talking about renting and financial security, Alex told me: *"Owning does give a sense of security. But renting here [at Svartlamon] also gives predictability."* We might unpack the meaning of this by considering the following statement given by Sarah: *"The Norwegian housing sector lacks regulations. The rental market is very precarious, and you often only have a three-year tenure."* It is not unreasonable to think that the obsession with buying a house partly stems from a wish to escape the conditions tenants face on the rental market: temporary contracts, overpriced apartments and little room for individual alterations. The desire to not rent can also be a matter of principles: *"I don't want to rent an apartment from a rich landlord who earns money by overcharging […] By having a regulated, public housing market, at least you feel like you are not paying too much"* (Peter). Arguably, the housing model employed at Svartlamon eliminates many of the renting vs. ownership concerns people have to deal with on the private housing market. In consultation with the Housing Association and neighbors, the Svartlamon residents are free to experiment with and change their apartments as they want. Although the Association is

technically free to increase the rent, it is still *"substantially lower than what is found elsewhere in Trondheim"* (Carl). Furthermore, as Alex points out, the tenancy is predictable, at least as long as Trondheim Municipality continues its contract with Svartlamon Housing Association. They could choose to discontinue it – but if anything, that would only strengthen the argument that regulation is needed.

At the same time, when push comes to shove, it is difficult to argue against the assertion that from an economic perspective, renting (on the free market) is a waste of money. However, according to John, this argumentation is a bit 'beside the point' – at least in the case of Svartlamon:

> "[Buying a house] makes sense from a free market perspective and from how we traditionally understand the principles of personal economy here in Norway […] When you live at Svartlamon you don't accumulate capital because you don't own a house. And since the housing market is growing exponentially, you could say that the longer you stay here, your chances of being able to purchase a house become lower and lower. But at the same time… most residents don't want that. The whole point of not owning a house is precisely that we don't want to have a bottomless mortgage. We don't want it."

Accordingly, it does not make sense to try to rationalise ownership vs. renting with measurements that only considers the monetary value of the property. Peter explains: *"You cannot think in economic terms on what pays off. You have to think about the other things that you get here and what you learn in the process"*. This attitude is especially relevant for the self-builders at Svartlamon, because why would you otherwise be willing to put in years of work to build a house that you do not own yourself? Aksel and Elise, a couple who have spent considerable time building their own house at Svartlamon, show that their conceptualisation of ownership is not motivated by monetary gains:

> "It is about living differently and escaping the rat race. And at Svartlamon, the main question is 'what is a home?' We've been thinking about it a lot with regards to ownership. How liberating it is to not own a house […]. Since we rent and don't own, we have a different attitude to common areas and to the future. We don't live in this house to sell it. We are going to live here and that's why we need to take care of it."

Aksel and Eline told me that building their own house had created a strong sense of ownership because they were part of creating something 'bigger', a home, together with more people. Instead of being concerned about the possibilities of losing out on profit, Eline said that not owning had changed her view of value and worth: *"Many people have a lot of money and they don't want to lose it. I have people around me who are rich, yet I am the only one who doesn't worry about money. That's the freedom of not owning a house."* In many ways, this echoes the findings presented in Chapter 3 that show that life satisfaction can come from sources other than material goods.

Figure 3
Two signposts at Svartlamon, stating
"Share & borrow instead of buying" and "More time for urban ecology".

Source: Fieldwork 2019

6.2 Why live at Svartlamon?

So far, I have presented several examples that show how Svartlamon's housing model counters mainstream views of ownership and housing. What still remains unclear is how Svartlamon, despite being a much-needed alternative, *challenges* the logic of capital accumulation. As shown throughout the paper, there is no doubt that Svartlamon allows for and facilitates alternative living. Based on the responses from the interview participants, the neighbourhood clearly offers the opportunity to live differently: work less, spend more time on hobbies, share and hang out with neighbours and friends are major attraction points. However, residents are also free to not do so. Why, then, would you want to live or not live at Svartlamon?

Understandably, a low rent is a contributing factor as to why so many people wish to live at Svartlamon. So is its location: *"The neighbourhood is lucrative: it is very close to the city centre and it is very cheap"* (Layla). Eline, Aksel, Sarah, John and Peter's utterances suggest that Svartlamon's value cannot, and should not, be measured according to the logic of profit. If one chooses to work fulltime, the low rent undoubtedly gives good opportunity to save up money. On the one hand, this serves as an important argument <u>against</u> house ownership,

because *"if your rent is cheap, you can invest the X amount of money you save by not living in a private house in a pension fund instead"* (Sarah). The need to use a house as a financial security for when you get old is thus lessened. On the other, it is not a given that the extra money you save on low rent goes towards retirement savings. As Layla says: *"Some people that have lived here many, many years have managed to save up so much money that they have bought a house somewhere else that they rent out […]. In my view, this is an exploitation of our system – you exploit the fact that it is cheap to save up money and buy a house. Then I personally think 'well, go and live there instead if that's what you want'."*

Observably, the issue of low rent is not tension free. First, it is important to acknowledge the political weight Layla's statement has. The possibility of exploitation of welfare services (either through free-riding or loopholes) is a go-to-argument amongst conservatives as 'proof' of the failure of socialist policies. It is not my intention to bring forward such a claim, which I believe the general discussion in this paper testifies to. Instead, I would like to take this issue a bit further by asking how we, in debates about housing affordability and social justice, can move beyond using house ownership as the ultimate purpose. That steep housing prices and unregulated housing market are drivers of urban gentrification and social inequalities is an undisputable fact. This substantiates demands for housing policies that ensure affordability and more social housing. Yet, at least in the Norwegian context, the main problem seems to be that housing unaffordability prevents young and poor people from entering the housing market. The government offers several measures for this, including reduced down payment requirements for young people; municipal start-up loans for low-income groups; and policies that favour the building of cheaper, smaller apartments (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, Government of Norway 2019). The problem, however, is that none of these challenge the narrative of house ownership in any way – on the contrary: they are all aimed at making it easier for the abovementioned groups to enter the commercial market.

The debate on ownership is a complicated one. According to the logic of mass house ownership and in a society run according to free market principles, the measures mentioned above are crucial to reduce social inequality and wealth disparity. Furthermore, with regards to wealth accumulation, *"there is no doubt that inheritance is the most important thing, the inflation in housing prices has been enormous. Inheriting a house gives you more than you can save in 30 years"* (Alex). House ownership can therefore also be viewed as a fundamental "source for intergenerational solidarity" (Garcia and Haddock 2015: 398). However, this begs the question: should the 'end goal' of housing policies be to level the playing field by ensuring that disadvantaged groups also get a chance to accumulate capital through house ownership? How does that contribute to a just degrowth transition?

If we are to take degrowth housing seriously, the above suggests that we must move beyond the ideology of house ownership and question the purpose of private property. At the same time, it is not necessarily evident that degrowth is irreconcilable with private ownership. John's comment on Svartlamon and principles of solidarity is a good illustration of this: *"I think that as soon as I have the financial means, I will probably move from Svartlamon. But that*

is not because I feel the need to own something myself. It is more because I would feel that I would occupy a place that someone else needs. So I view it from a perspective of solidarity more than ownership as such". Assuming that this sentiment is shared by others at Svartlamon, John's observation suggests some tension between the wish to not 'occupy' a place someone else might need more than him and to buy a house and thus partake in the same exploitative 'rat race' that Svartlamon seeks to counter.

Amira took this matter further by saying that in the end, questions about what the 'right thing to do' is, whether to stay or to go, and who has the 'right' to live at Svartlamon boil down to a matter of principles:

> "I personally think we should talk more about these issues, not necessarily to make set rules, but to raise awareness. What if you own a secondary home? Or if both of you earn more than a million NOK? Should it be ok to live here if that is the case? Where should the limit go? […] I am not saying we need regulations, but we need to discuss it in order to figure out what type of place we want to be."

Evidently, neither house ownership nor distributional ethics is a straightforward matter. Concurrently, it is not entirely fair to formulate a critique against Svartlamon residents on the basis that some choose to move out and buy a home. After all, *"the normal thing in society is to own something yourself"* (Carl). An important way to 'counter' this normality would be to provide more options for housing that have an alternative, collective ownership model. These could be similar to Svartlamon or take a different form, but both the number of resident applications and the fact that residents consider moving out to give other people a chance to live at Svartlamon show that there is indeed a need and demand for this.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Figure 4
Signposts at Svartlamon. The black signpost states: "For the earth to survive,
capitalism needs to go". The bottom green one states: "Community".

Source: Fieldwork 2019.

7.1 Summary of findings

Degrowth is a call to fundamentally change the structures in society that (re)produce social inequality and are the root causes of the ecological crises we are witnessing today. To do so, we need to create an alternative economic system that rejects the paradigm of infinite growth, that takes biophysical limits seriously and that advocates for a "democratically led redistributive downscaling of production and consumption in industrialised countries" (Demaria et al. 2013: 209). In this paper, I examined how this can be done through housing – both in a conceptual and material manner. Using the alternative neighbourhood Svartlamon as a case study, I have answered the question of how the neighbourhood's housing model can help us understand the nexus between degrowth and wellbeing, sustainability and ownership.

From an environmental point of view, the Nordic living standard is lavish and unsustainable. The Svartlamon residents' responses suggest that lowering one's material standard

36

does not have to jeopardize subjective wellbeing. Svartlamon's substandard housing gives rise to several social and economic benefits such as surplus time and more financial and individual freedom that add to the interviewees' life satisfaction. This strengthens the claim that it is possible to decouple wellbeing and material wealth. However, since the increased or at least sustained subjective wellbeing is grounded in the provision of these benefits, it is unlikely that a downscaling that *does not* bring about these effects will be successful. It is therefore not enough to just implement policies such as minimum or maximum housing standards without simultaneously also looking at whether and how these affect people's chances of formulating a 'good life beyond growth'.

As for the inquiry on sustainability, many of the Svartlamon residents advanced the same concerns about the energy efficient technologies that is seen in degrowth literature, namely issues of affordability, inaccurate or insufficient sustainability measurements and difficulties with maintenance due to the innovations' complexity. In addition to this, a both implicit and explicit outcome of the experimental building at Svartlamon is that it challenges conventional ways to understand and measure the sustainability of dwellings. This helps to formulate a more organic understanding of sustainability, in line with principles of simplicity, reuse and recycling and less constricted by ideas of profitability. While the solutions are financially motivated in the sense that the residents try to keep costs low, they are not specifically selected to increase the value of the dwellings. Instead, the dwellings are tailored to the inhabitants' needs and wishes and form part of a *"holistic ecological perspective"* that incorporates *"mental aspects as well; that you learn how to build, the practical and how things are connected"* (Peter).

When it comes to ownership, the respondents showed how renting instead of owning does not need to be as negative as the 'narrative of house ownership' portrays it to be. A first step to challenge this narrative is to highlight that ownership is not synonymous with freedom – it also brings indeptedness and a huge amount of responsibility. Secondly, it is necessary to look at the underlying reasons why people buy houses. If people want secure tenancy and the possibility to make the space 'theirs', this does not necessarily have to be solved through private ownership. Improving tenants' rights and strengthening housing policies can also help meet this need. Furthermore, several respondents pointed out that the question of ownership cannot be reduced to a question of profitability; renting will never be more 'economically smart' than private ownership. Instead, one must evaluate the housing model based on what it gives beyond the possibility to accumulate wealth. This speaks to a very different conceptualisation of 'home' than a neoliberal understanding of what housing is and does, and can help refine and strengthen arguments to decommodify the housing sector.

7.2 Degrowth housing at Svartlamon and beyond

While Svartlamon in many ways is a good example of a degrowth housing model, Ferreri warns that research on small-scale initiatives risk "reproduc[ing] imaginaries of exclusivity in which innovative housing options exist only under rare conditions and are accessible only to those who have specific sets of resources" (Ferreri 2019: 110). To be "truly 'subversive'",

degrowth housing needs to "address the challenges of reimagining and transforming existing housing [solutions]" (Ferreri 2019: 110). One could argue that Svartlamon's socio-historical context as well as its relatively small size limit the extent to which the model can be replicated. At the same time, many of the examples of alternative practices given in this paper are not exclusive to Svartlamon as such, but rather demonstrate a different attitude to housing altogether. Svartlamon's flexible regulation plan certainly facilitates these practices, but viewing housing as a need rather than a commodity and placing an emphasis on self-management are elements that easily can be applied beyond Svartlamon as well. The fact that Svartlamon is now included as a 'best practice' example in the Bopilot study[14] is a good illustration of precisely this, and Svartlamon can therefore be an inspiration for intiatives also outside of Norway.

The ability to 'reimagine and transform' refer to the alternatives' potential to "produce and maintain housing outside the logic of growth and mainstream urban development" (Ferreri 2019: 110). I would argue that this is something the Svartlamon model does insofar as the decommodified dwellings prevent housing speculation and the decision to focus on sustainability and community comes from the residents themselves. The residents John and Truls described it well: *"People have to feel that they make decisions themselves. That's the essence. A lot of things are possible if people feel it is a common project". "To make it work, things need to be grassroot-driven. You cannot have a rich investor who says: 'this place will be self-sufficient, with a great common garden' and then it's just empty words."* Evidently, to avoid that alternative models are "recuperated for neoliberal ends" (Gilbert 2014: 158), it is essential that principles of redistribution and autonomy are taken seriously. Yet, this also presents a bit of a challenge, since scaling or strengthening of alternative housing normally involves some degree of top-down management. How can we make alternative housing models accessible for more people, whilst still ensuring grassroot involvement and avoid said 'recuperation for neoliberal ends'? More research is needed on this important question, as this can help bringing degrowth housing from the margins to the centre of the housing sector.

---

[14] See details on this study in Chapter 3.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Profile of interview participants

Pseudonym:	Age:	Identifies as a:	Occupation:	Affiliation to Svartlamon:	Date of interview:
John	Mid 40s	Man	Unemployed	Resident for ten years	01.08.19
Peter	Early 30s	Man	University worker	Self-builder	02.08.19
Sarah	Mid 30s	Woman	Administration worker	Employed at the premises	05.08.19
Carl	Mid 40s	Man	Writer	Resident for 20 years	07.08.19
Amira	Mid 20s	Woman	University worker	Resident for two years	08.08.19
Alex	Mid 20s	Man	Student	Resident for two years	09.08.19
Layla	Mid 20s	Woman	Part-time worker in public sector	Resident for three years	10.08.19
Aksel	Mid 30s	Man	Self-employed	Resident for two years	12.08.19
Eline	Mid 30s	Woman	Artist	Resident for two years	12.08.19
Truls	Mid 20s	Man	Part-time worker	Resident for five years	12.08.19
Heidi	Mid 20s	Woman	Trainee	Resident for three years	12.08.19

i)   Practical questions: How does the selection procedure work, how is Svartlamon organised, what type of people live there, etc. The aim of these questions was to learn more about the place through the residents' own words.

ii)   Background and motivation: Why does the interviewee (want to) live at Svartlamon, where did they live before and what made them apply for residency?

iii)   Community living: How does living at Svartlamon affect the residents' lives? What type of activities is the interviewee involved in? What are the benefits and drawbacks of sharing facilities (or not) with other residents?

iv)   Housing politics: What is the interviewee's stance on housing politics? How does the interviewee understand Svartlamon's housing politics? What practical consequences arise from the lack of private ownership?

v)   Environment and ecology: What does it mean that Svartlamon is an "experimental arena for urban ecology"? What is the interviewee's own understanding of sustainable housing?

vi)   Social justice: In what ways does Svartlamon promote social justice and principles of solidarity?

References

Aall, C., P. Næss, H. Walnum, and J. Xue. (2017) 'Two Contrasting Scenarios for a Zero-Emission Future in a High-Consumption Society', *Sustainability* 9 (20): 1-25.

Alexander, S. (2014) 'Simplicity', in D'Alisa, G., F. Demaria and G. Kallis (eds) *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era,* pp. 162-165. New York and London: Routledge.

Anson, A. (2019) 'Framing Degrowth: The radical potential of tiny house mobility', in Nelson, A. and F. Schneider (eds) *Housing for Degrowth: Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities*, pp. 68-79. London and New York: Routledge.

Argüelles, L., I. Anguelovski and E. Dinnie. (2017) 'Power and privilege in alternative civic practices: Examining imaginaries of change and embedded rationalities in community economies', *Geoforum* 86: 30–41.

Arundel, R. (2017) 'Equity inequity: Housing wealth inequality, inter and intra-generational divergences, and the rise of private landlordism', *Housing Theory and Society* 34 (2): 176-200.

Bollier, D. and S. Helfrich (2014) 'Commons', in D'Alisa, G., F. Demaria and G. Kallis (eds) *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era,* pp. 102-105. New York and London: Routledge.

Bopilot Project Description (2016) 'Innovasjonsprosjekt i offentlig sektor'. [Innovation project in the public sector]. Accessed 22 October 2019.

Brandon, P.S., A.C. Sidwell and J. Yang (eds) (2005) *Smart & Sustainable Built Environments.* Oxford: Blackwell publishing.

Daly, H. (2015) 'Economics for a Full World' Great Transition Initiative: Toward a Transformative Vision and Praxis'. Accessed 28 September 2019 <https://www.greattransition.org/publication/economics-for-a-full-world/>.

D'Alisa, G., F. Demaria and G. Kallis (eds) (2014). *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era.* New York and London: Routledge.

Demaria, F., F. Schneider, F. Sekulova and J. Martinez-Alier (2013) 'What is Degrowth? From an Activist Slogan to a Social Movement', *Environmental Values* 22: 191–215.

Deriu, M. (2014) 'Autonomy', in D'Alisa, G., F. Demaria and G. Kallis (eds) *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era,* pp. 82-85. New York and London: Routledge.

Deriu, M. (2014) 'Conviviality', in in D'Alisa, G., F. Demaria and G. Kallis (eds) *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era,* pp. 106-109. New York and London: Routledge.

Delmendo, L. C. 'Norway's housing market stabilizing'. Accessed 16 September 2019 <https://www.globalpropertyguide.com/Europe/Norway/Price-History/>.

Easterlin, R.A. (1974) 'Does economic growth improve the human lot?', in David, P.A and M.W. Rede (eds) *Nations and households in economic growth: Essays in honor of Moses Abramovitz,* pp. 89-125. New York: Academic Press.

Edwards, R. and J. Holland (2013) *What is Qualitative Interviewing?* Bloomsbury Open Access: Bloomsbury academic.

Eurostat (2014) 'Gross debt-to-income ratio of households (Code: tec00104)'. European Commission: European Statistical Office.

Experimental Cities. Experimental Housing at Svartlamon. (n.d.). Accessed 10 September 2019. <http://experimentalcities.com/experimental-housing-at-svartlamon-2017/>.

Ferreri, M. (2019) 'Refurbishment vs demolition?', in Nelson, A. and F. Schneider (eds) *Housing for Degrowth: Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities*, pp. 109-119. London and New York: Routledge.

Garcia, M. and S.V. Haddock (2016) 'Special issue: housing and community needs and social innovation responses in times of crisis', *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 31: 393–407.

Gibson-Graham, J.K. (1996) *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy.* Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.

Gilbert, L. (2014) 'Social Justice and the Green City', *Brazilian Journal of Urban Management* 6 (2): 158-169.

Gómez-Baggethun, E. (2014) 'Commodification', in D'Alisa, G., F. Demaria and G. Kallis (eds) *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era,* pp. 94-97. New York and London: Routledge.

Haanes, H. and T. Ohren (2015) *Experimental housing at Svartlamon.* Trondheim: NTNU. NTNU Open. Accessed 14 June 2019.

Jubileumsgruppa (2018) 'Okkupasjon og politisk rabalder – 20 år siden kampen om Svartlamon'. [Occupation and political clamor – 20 years since the Svartlamon struggle]. *Bydelsnytt* 29.11.2018. Accessed 6 November 2019 <https://bydelsnytt.no/2018/11/29/okkupasjon-og-politisk-rabalder-20-ar-siden-kampen-om-svartlamon/>.

Kallis, G. (2017) *In defense of degrowth. Opinions and minifestos.* Open Commons.

Kothari, A., F. Demaria and A. Acosta (2014) 'Buen Vivir, Degrowth and Ecological Swaraj: Alternatives to sustainable development and the Green Economy', *Development* 57 (3-4): 362-375.

Krzemińska, A., J. Lach and A. Zaręba (2017) 'Energy sustainable cities. From eco villages, eco districts towards zero carbon cities', paper presented at the International Conference on Advances in Energy Systems and Environmental Engineering (ASEE17), Wroclaw, Poland. E3S Web of Conferences 22, i.d. 00199.

Latouche, S. (2009) *Farewell to Growth*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press.

Levitas, R. (2007) 'Looking for the blue: The necessity of utopia', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12: 289–306.

Lundberg, A.K.A. (2009) 'Vi er ikke en gjeng samstemte anarkister' [We are not a bunch of harmonious anarchists]. Master thesis. Oslo: University of Oslo.

Ministry of Local Municipality and Modernisation, Government of Norway (2019) 'Boligpolitikk for alle' [Housing policies for all]. Accessed 2 November 2019 <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/boligpolitikk-for-alle/id2663311/>.

Municipality of Trondheim (2006) 'Decision on changes of the Svartlamon regulation plan R 219b'. Accessed 5 September 2019, <http://svartlamon.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/1176897121_kart__reguleringsplan.pdf/>.

Muraca, B. (2012) 'Towards a fair degrowth-society: Justice and the right to a 'good life' beyond growth', *Futures* 44: 535-545.

Nelson, A. (2019) 'Housing for growth narratives', in Nelson. A and F. Schneider (eds) *Housing for Degrowth: Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities*, pp. 3-13. London and New York: Routledge.

Nelson, A. and F. Schneider (2018) 'Housing for Degrowth', policy paper presented at Institutionalisation of Degrowth and Post-Growth: The European Level Seminar. Brussels (17 September).

Nelson, A. (2018) *Small is Necessary. Shared living on a Shared Planet*. London: Pluto Press.

Norwegian Building Authority (2017) 'Regulations on technical requirements for construction works'. Accessed 25 October 2019 <https://dibk.no/byggereglene/Building-Regulations-in-English/>.

Næss, P. and J. Xue (2016) 'Housing standards, environmental sustainability and social welfare', in Næss, P. & L. Price (eds) *Crisis System: A Critical realist and critical environmental critique of contemporary economics*, pp. 130-148. London: Routledge.

Quastel, N., M. Moos and N. Lynch (2012) 'Sustainability-As-Density and the Return of the Social: The Case of Vancouver, British Columbia', *Urban Geography* 33 (7):1055-1084.

Rice, J.L., D.A. Cohen, J. Long and J.R. Jurjevich (2019) 'Contradictions of the Climate-Friendly City: New Perspectives on Eco-Gentrification and Housing Justice', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*.

Sager, T. (2018) 'Planning by intentional communities: An understudied form of activist planning', *Planning Theory* 17 (4): 449–471.

Schneider, F. (2019) 'Housing for degrowth narratives', in Nelson, A. and F. Schneider (eds) *Housing for Degrowth: Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities*, pp. 14-29. London and New York: Routledge.

Standal, K. (2019) 'Hvorfor hører vi så lite om Svartlamon?'. [Why do we not get any news from Svartlamon?]. Accessed 20 May 2019 <https://www.harvestmagazine.no/pan/hvorfor-horer-vi-sa-lite-om-svartlamoen/>.

Stéfansdóttir, H. and J. Xue (2019) 'The quality of small dwellings', in Nelson, A. and F. Schneider (eds) *Housing for Degrowth: Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities*, pp. 171-182. London and New York: Routledge.

Svartlamon. Tavla. [The Board]. (n.d.) Accessed 20 May 2019. <http://svartlamon.org/tavla/>.

Svartlamon. Hva er Svartlamon. [What is Svartlamon]. (n.d.). Accessed 20 October 2109 <https://svartlamon.org/om/organisering/>.

Svartlamon Resident Association (2016a) *Evaluering av evalueringen av Trondheim kommunes involvering på Svartlamon.* [Evaluation of the evaluation of Trondheim Municipality's involvement at Svartlamon]. Trondheim [In Norwegian].

Svartlamon Resident Association (2016b) *Merknad til evaluering av Svartlamon.* [Additional note on the evaluation of Svartlamon]. Trondheim [In Norwegian].

Todaro, M. and S. Smith (2015) *Economic Development.* Boston: Pearson.

Trainer, T. (2019) 'The Simpler Way', in Nelson. A and F. Schneider (eds) *Housing for Degrowth: Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities*, pp. 120-130. London and New York: Routledge.

Transition Network. Purpose. (n.d.). Accessed 6 May 2019 <https://transitionnetwork.org/about-the-movement/the-charity/purpose/>.

Vargel, A. (2018) 'Innovasjonsprojekt om alternative boligløsninger'. [Innovative project on alternative housing]. *Norske arkitekters landsforbund.* Accessed 21 May 2019. <https://www.arkitektur.no/innovasjonsprosjekt-om-alternative-boliglosninger/>.

World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) 'Our Common Future'.

Xue, J. (2019) 'Housing for Degrowth', in Nelson. A and F. Schneider (eds) *Housing for Degrowth: Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities*, pp. 185-195. London and New York: Routledge.