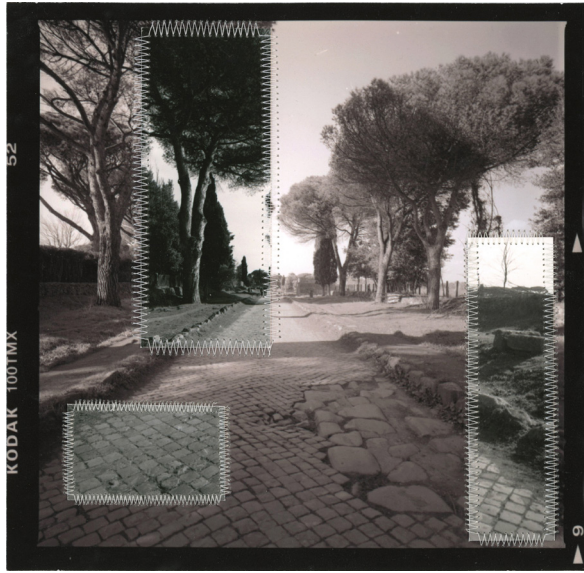


# Radical Vernacular

DWELLING, DIVERSITY, DOMESTICITY & DEGROWTH



Mireille Roddier, *Via Appia mendings* (Rome, 2022)

**Radical Vernacular** is a transdisciplinary seminar cross-listed between the departments of **Architecture** and **Women's and Gender Studies**. The seminar probes the potential of vernacular forms to help regulate our ever-increasing energy consumption and dissipation in the service of climate change mitigation and social well-being. **What do we mean by vernacular forms?** All linguistic, architectural, economic, ritualistic, or other marginalized tangible and intangible knowledge that resists mass-standardization and interconnectivity in favor of resilience and small-scale self-regulating autonomy. **What do we *not* mean by vernaculars?** Forms that exclusively belong to either past or distant cultures, respectively eliciting nostalgia or othering; forms that are perceived as "styles," produced by visual imitation and mindless reproduction; or commodified forms that hold any degree of exchange value, including cultural capital. Our definition of vernaculars can be located midway between bell hooks's "margins" and Ivan Illich's "vernacular domains" – as sites that resist the dependencies induced by thermo-industrial processes such as specialization and centralization; as sites that privilege use value over symbolic accumulation.

The seminar is predicated upon a few empirically verified postulates:

1. At our current rate of accelerating energy consumption, **we do not have the resources to reach sustainable renewable energy practices before overshooting our planetary boundaries beyond danger zones.** To reach a safe, just, and sustainable global civilization, a phase of degrowth is now inevitable for advanced industrial societies.<sup>1</sup>
2. By **degrowth**, we refer to **a reduction in the production, circulation, and consumption of our energetic, material, and informational resources**, often identified by a reduction in the GDP. "Green growth" and "sustainable development" are not options, but myths propagated by orthodox economists. Energy efficient machines do not reduce, but tend to increase total energy consumption, as posited by the Jevons paradox and concomitant rebound effect.<sup>2</sup>
3. Proponents of growth economies rely on austerity measures to activate scarcity and need. Defenders of social justice and environmental protection oppose the term "**austerity**" with a "**happy sobriety**" and emphasize the **correlation between lowered energy consumption, well-being, and abundance** (of free time, of meaning).<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the seminar will emphasize the gains (quality, community, diversity, conviviality) over the perceived losses (quantity, efficiency, fungibility, accumulation) of giving up our "imperial modes of living."<sup>4</sup>
4. Dwellings and settlement patterns not only index and materialize quotidian gestures and value systems, but they can also reproduce them. By studying low embodied and low operational energy structures (buildings, objects, know-how) and the conditions for their production, use, and maintenance, we can experience and learn from their **embedded values and associated habitus**.

The seminar, addressed to designers no more than to *all* dwellers, will turn to **ecofeminists and degrowth scholars** and ask questions as diverse as: can standardized manufacturing produce spaces of emancipation? How do we make sense of vernacular objects through the forms of labor that have produced them? Is the preservation of heritage more than a means of reifying the biases of dominant cultural narratives? Can we trust technological innovation's claims of sustainability? How do we understand the markings of home in light of homelessness, displacement, fragmentation, and diasporic settlements?

We will posit that vernaculars can serve as tactics of deceleration by foregrounding local everyday use over excess productivity and accumulation. Vernacular forms can also identify and enable realms of belonging, opening questions of inclusion and site-specificity in an increasingly transient society. Through readings, discussions, creative projects and self-defined research, we will sift through many of the contradictory narratives and theoretical paradoxes raised by the study of forms (linguistic, economic, narrative, architectural) that resist mass-reproduction within a globalized world. Together, we will explore **practices of care, maintenance, and repair**, along with their respective modes of transmission and know-how, by questioning both the agency and the burden of reproductive practices. To curb the relentless incitement for innovation imposed by a logic of economic growth that is devastating our biological and cultural diversity, **we will focus on processes of exnovation that, far from being restrictive, offer an opulence of pleasures and creative engagements with life itself.**

1. Cf. the Sixth Assessment Report of the IPCC (March 2023) and the expert presentations, plenaries and panel discussions that took place at the EU Parliament's "Beyond Growth" conference in May 2023 (<https://www.beyond-growth-2023.eu>).

2. Timothée Parique, et al., "**Decoupling debunked: Evidence and arguments against green growth as a sole strategy for sustainability**", *European Environmental Bureau* (2019)

3. Ashish Kothari, Federico Demaria, Alberto Acosta, "Buen Vivir, Degrowth and Ecological Swaraj: Alternatives to sustainable development and the Green Economy." *Development* 57, 362-375 (2014); Pierre Rabhi, *The Power of Restraint* (Actes Sud, 2018); Kate Soper, *Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism* (London: Verso, 2020).

4. Stephan Lessenich, *Living Well at Others' Expense: The Hidden Costs of Western Prosperity* (Polity Press, 2019); Ulrich Brand & Markus Wissen, *The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism* (Verso, 2021)