Slow and steady,
wins the race

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Unlimited?

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When focused on a specific topic, we sometimes need to get a view of the bigger picture. Working on farmers' workaround meant believing in a frugal world where design can help everyone adopt a new lifestyle. But by concentrating on the exact tools that can be extracted from the workaround practice, I did not find time to explain how we ended up in a world so addicted to growth, nor how design is collaborating with it. So in this abstract, I will take the time to look at our global production system and try to draw the outline of the upside-down world of degrowth. I will try to discover how it can be applied to a new type of design.

Front cover:
Piano piano si va lontano (2nd version)
Bianca Argimòn
150 x 113 cm / 59 x 44,5 inches
lightfast pencils on Arches paper

Introduction

Since the very first step of design, formalized by the first World's Fair in 1851 at the Crystal Palace, the world has been led by the idea of progress. Industries have helped it become the major economic model, allowing for comfort and a pleasant way of life through the development of factory–made objects. The Western way of life has brought about more and more products, while providing more and more choices. Originally, designers were against the Industrial Revolution, but they soon followed by offering their services to the growth economy. Design has developed with and for the industry and capitalism, which has been the dominant model.

This model has been profitable for over 200 years, but the first cracks began to show in the 1970s. At that time, scientists and experts worldwide started noticing how this way of life was affecting the environment. Growth was supported by extractivism, with the belief that Earth's resources were infinite, which is clearly not the case. Furthermore, the Western lifestyle is responsible for the destruction of biodiversity, the degradation of air quality, the consumption of all available resources, and the global environmental crisis. It has even failed to meet its original goal: providing a decent way of life for everyone. This is why it is necessary to move to a more sustainable model. In fact, what we need is degrowth.

For designers, one source of inspiration seems to come from farmers. In difficult situations, many use a model of resilience known as workaround. This concept, explored in *Système D*[1], is the main theme of a research work on how design can create new tools for degrowth. In this abstract we will look at the bigger picture and attempt to explain how design and designers have supported the growth economic model. First, we will explore the tools they used to defend this model, and then we will find ways to fight it and move to a new way of designing.

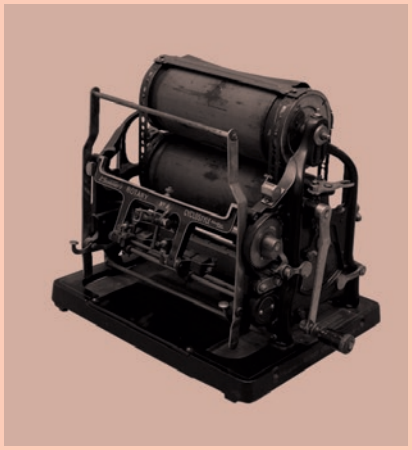
1 Système D, essay on the farmer's workaround

Part 1 Design of Growth and growth of design

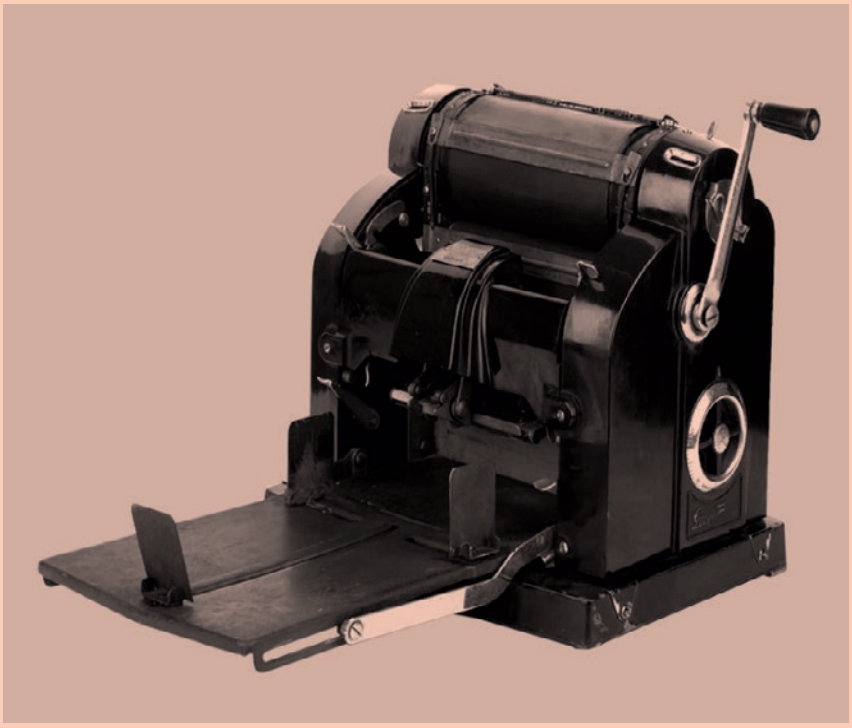
To define these tools, the following research will base its explanation on the life and work of Raymond Loewy. More than a successful designer, he was one of the pioneers of modern design. His role in the establishment of growth design was huge because he helped create the profession of industrial designer. It will be helpful to define the characteristics of growth design. Moreover, his work has had a significant impact on the daily life of US citizens, so there are many usable examples to define how it works. Therefore the USA is the place where capitalism and growth have grown best.
In many ways, R.Loewy encapsulates what a capitalist design is.

A. Good design sells better

When Raymond Loewy started working in the US, it cannot be denied that many industrial objects were not as carefully designed as they are today. Indeed, no one was in charge of their design because the profession of designer did not yet serve the industries. Those proto-designers worked originally against the industry, seeing it as an awful exploitation of workers. For example, William Morris tried to design honest and good furniture. On the other hand, industrial objects were limited to the conception of engineers. The major requirement was to make money. To do so they designed objects with good (salable) functionality and an easy (and cheap) production. The shape of an object was mostly determined by the techniques, so design was dictated by machines. We can see the major change between before and after design by looking at the *Gestetner duplicator* redesigned by R.Loewy. It is a textbook example of how effective industrial design can be.



Gestetner Duplicator · Gestetner company · Before 1929 · © Graphéine



Gestetner Duplicator · Raymond Loewy · 1929 · © Graphéine

Before R. Loewy worked on it, the duplicator was purely functional, and the complex mechanism did not help users understand it. The principle used by the designer was to cover the complex machinery with a smooth surface. This made the device easier to understand and use. It also helped simplify the production, made it easier to clean, and made the object last longer because the internal components were protected. So, the first task of design is to make better objects. This is why, in the first place, companies hired designers. A good design is easier to use, easier to build, and lasts longer. Indeed, the *Gestetner duplicator* was sold for 40 years without aging.

A good design is easier to use, easier to build, and lasts longer.

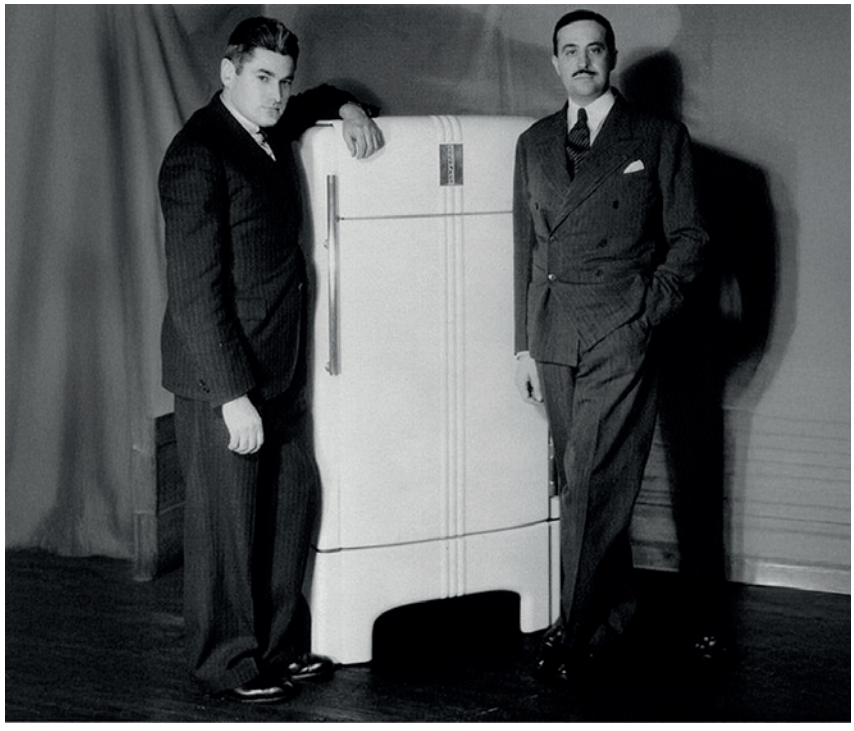
But the only reason companies care about well-made objects is because they sell better. If a product works better, consumers are more likely to buy it. Fridges in the 1920s were quite archaic. They were big, square metallic boxes and not very practical. When Loewy designed the *Coldspot fridge* for Sears Roebuck in 1934, he thought about everything. There was a spot for every

product of the typical American meal. It was easy to clean, had large storage, and fit well into the American home. The fridge was so well thought that it sold 20 times better than any other model at the time.

If it is put in the wrong hands, it can become truly dangerous.

It cannot be denied that design is a powerful tool, which means that if it is put in the wrong hands, it can become truly dangerous. An extreme example was shown in the *Evil Design* exhibition in Gothenburg, which highlighted the fact that good design at the service of evil can be highly destructive. Therefore, it is the responsibility of designerS to choose carefully who they work for. When it is for growth, design will support and follow growth. But the power of design is not the only factor that supports the economic model of growth.

Advert for the Coldspot fridge • © Graphéine



Raymond Loewy and Sears Roebuck with the Coldspot fridge • designed by Raymond Loewy • 1934 • © Graphéine

B. When design is dissolved in marketing

Progressively, design has become marketing. It has become a selling strategy. At first, this was simply a consequence of what was mentioned earlier: good design was better so it became a selling argument. That is the reason why design developed so fast during the post-war boom. But then, design was not simply part of a marketing strategy, it started to use marketing processes. Designers merged their original purpose into its economic function. They began to conceive objects not only to be good but to be salable. This could even overcome good functionality or practicality. It is not really entirely their fault, because the decision-makers often listen more to the marketer, when it is not them that design the product. In order to make a living, designers had to get around the rules. This is what R. Loewy initiated with streamline by creating appealing shapes that evoked speed, a symbol of the millennium, through aerodynamic forms. It involved a system of signs that linked objects to meanings. These meanings increased or decreased the esteem value associated with them. Streamlined objects were not actually fast, but they adopted the design typology of fast objects. In Loewy's streamlined cars, the design evoked the speed and power we expect to experience while driving. It reflected what the users looked like or what they aspired to look like.

Designers merged their original purpose into its economic function.

Starliner · Raymond Loewy for Studebaker · 1953 · © Graphéine

Consumers are choosing "speed over car, style over dress," as Holden and Calkins, the fathers of modern advertising, said. This is dangerous because it tricks consumers in their buying choices. They are not objectively choosing a good product but are selecting one that reflects the values promoted by society. Combined with the influence of advertising about what is considered desirable, designers support the market. This drives consumers to buy more and more, even useless objects, thus clearly sustaining growth. Thus, designers had been perverted by the market law. But how is it possible that consumers have been so deeply impacted that it is still the case a hundred years later.

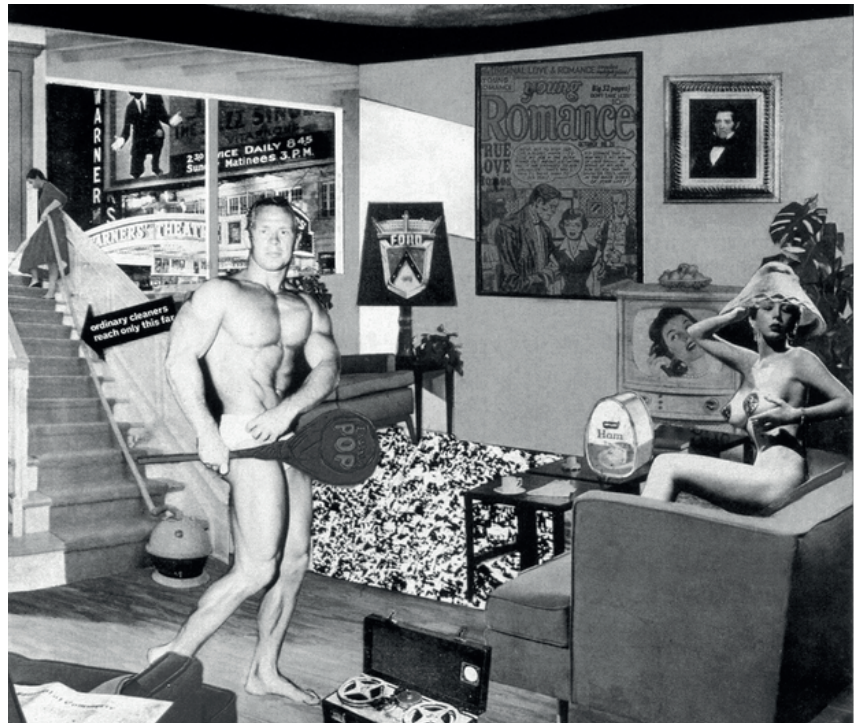
C. The impact on everyday life

The impact can be explained by the scale of the maneuvers. Growth was applied to every type of product (in large quantities?), due to mass production. In *Never Leave Well Enough Alone*, R.Loewy recalls an exchange with Walter Clark. The author wanted to write an article for a magazine showing how often people encountered the design work of Loewy's company. From the clock, the shower head, the carpet, the shaver, to the radiator, the cream tube, and the pencil, they listed everything. It took so long and was so boring that the article was never written. And outside the house, the products were on every street, in every city, in every advertisement, logo, etc.

We need to remember that the power of design, since its birth, is that while creating new objects, it creates new ways of living. Everyday life objects create the conditions that enable a certain way of life. They create an environment that influences our perception of the world. The average American's daily life is filled with brands, companies, and constant consumption, as shown, for example, by Pop artists in their works. Design could have been used to sustain a fair and good world, but it was perverted by capitalism to serve the needs of the bourgeoisie. It did actually sustain consumption and profit.

Nevertheless, some tools used for growth can also be used for degrowth. The power of good design is still an effective tool to create good objects. However, marketing and mass production are closely tied to growth, and degrowth can only happen if they are stopped. Last but not least, ordinary objects seem to be a good way to shift customs little by little. But is it possible for designers to use these tools for degrowth, and if so, how?

Just what it is that makes today's home so different, so appealing? • Richard Hamilton • 1956



Part II Design for degrowth

A. Power and responsibility

As we have seen, the design of growth suffers from a great lack of principles due to market perversion. The inclusion of designers in the market and within companies deprives them of their ability to make independent decisions. They can only apply very few criteria to their work because they need to make a living. So, if designers are so tied up with capitalism and growth and we want this to stop, why try to preserve design? Why not simply turn it down? Well, design will always be useful. The objects we use will always wear out at some point, so it will still be necessary to produce replacement objects. Also, over time, customs evolve, and new types of objects will emerge. So, we do not need to stop designing objects, we simply need to stop relying on a society of waste, where products are replaced before they wear out. To achieve this, designers will need principles. The integration of designers into the industry has led to an annihilation of their social potential. They have lost the ability to defend a sustainable and fair world because they do not follow any guidelines. However, some examples highlight the fact that strong principles can produce a design close to the values of degrowth. For instance, the Shakers created products that still inspire many designers today. This small community consisted of strong Protestant believers. They produced powerful yet simple designs of furniture and products. All their work in life was guided by their strong beliefs. They adhered to strict principles focused on not committing sins. They worked and prayed hard, and their community eventually disappeared because they did not allow themselves the right to have sex. They lived in a strict, modest, and faithful way. But, how do strong beliefs generate a certain type of design?

The integration of designers into the industry has led to an annihilation of their social potential.

Religious exercises in the Meeting house · New York State · The Shakers of New Lebanon · 1873 · © library of congress

This way of life resulted in objects that were strict, focused on functionality. The Shakers only produced the bare necessities—no excess products or anything unnecessary. Everything was thought out and improved for their use. Their chairs, for example, were designed to be hung on the wall to enable the community to do their famous dances. The furniture was strong and built to last. Because they were instructed to sit straight, they built benches without backrests, forcing the body to remain upright. Backrests only appeared as the community aged. All their production supported their way of life. Their objects were designed to serve their goals and were a reflection of their guiding customs. This highlights the fact that those responsible for the design of furniture in general and products hold a real political position. Design changes how society operates. Designers cannot blindly serve the interests of the dominant class, which benefits only them. It is ruthless. Designers need to be engaged and strive to create objects for a better world. Design has great revolutionary potential if it follows clear guidelines.

Designers need to be engaged and strive to create objects for a better world.

Apothecary shop inside the Living Quarters building · where residents were segregated by sex · at Hancock Shaker Village in Hancock · Massachusetts · established in 1791 © library of congress

Slow and steady, wins the race

B. Doing better all together

So designers need guidelines. To know which ones to follow, they have to be grounded in reality, to follow IPCC scientists and consider solutions such as degrowth, as explained by Vincent Liegey, an expert on the topic. He explains many ways of achieving degrowth in his numerous conferences and books. One interesting principle to look at is communal sharing. It means dividing resources among members of a community, which helps decrease individuals' impact by increasing the yield of one resource. The process is in part enabled by the division of labor. As individuals, we cannot produce everything we consume, and even if we could, it would not be that effective. The British economist Adam Smith, in his 1776 book *Wealth of Nations*, was the first to explain the effectiveness of the division of labor. Work specialization has been happening since the birth of humanity. "Cavemen" divided their work; some hunted, others gathered food or built tools. Even in a small community like the Shakers, there were carpenters, weavers, and cooks, because it saves energy. This method of communal sharing led to the industries we know today because it is the most efficient way of producing. But that is not the aim of degrowth. It does not aim for a globalized system dictated by market laws. It needs to be on a smaller scale in order to give everyone access to the circle of decision. This way, all members of a community can decide what needs to be produced and how. It feets to reality on the ground.

It needs to be on a smaller scale in order to give everyone access to the circle of decision.

This model can be made possible by design. For example, on Hokkaido Island in Japan, the students of Berkeley College of Environmental Design and the Kengo Kuma studio worked on a pavilion in 2014 that proposed a common place to farm and cook. A place like this does not exist anywhere else. This is a place where a small community of inhabitants works together to produce their food in a sort of communal way. They can adapt their production according to their needs, adjust it in order to produce less waste and ensure the quality of the food. It avoids the use of farming machines in a frugal way of producing. This leads to the second principle that can be applied to achieve degrowth: lowering our use of technologies.

Slow and steady, wins the race

C. The paradox of machines

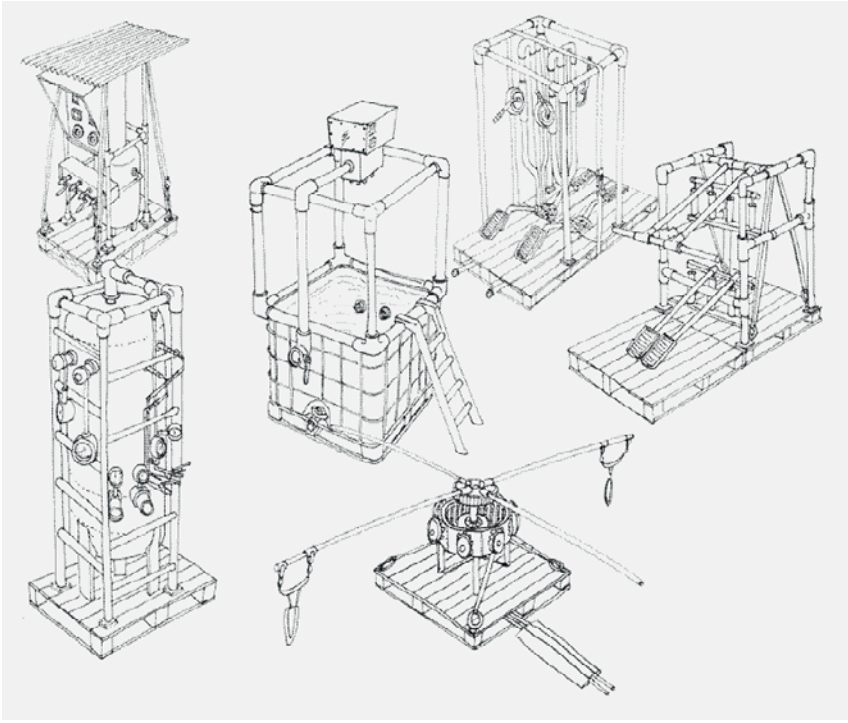
Technologies currently accomplish a massive amount of work, but the climatic conditions and the Earth's resources show us that we cannot afford them anymore. They use rare materials, and the amount of energy required for their use needs to be reduced. Low-tech is a way of producing objects with less energy and with non-polluting energy, while trying to maintain a decent way of life. Energy is the key consideration of low-tech's users because it concerns every object that moves, heats, or changes shape. The abundance of energy has allowed us to work less while accomplishing the same tasks with the help of machines. It works well because, currently, for the average US citizen, it replaces approximately the continuous work of 800 slaves. The idea, with low-tech, is to reduce energy needs by creating new systems and new lifestyles. This idea of human "slaves" serving us is well illustrated in the project *Human Powered*. Kris de Decker, author and founder of Lowtech Magazine, explored the creation of objects using human power in an article with illustrator Melle Smets. They imagined using the wasted energy produced during exercise. After some designs, they developed several prototypes.

There are two main critiques that can be addressed to the project. Firstly, as with many low-tech projects, there is absolutely no work on their aesthetics. They only use bare materials, pallets, and pipes. It can be justified because fewer transformations of materials use less energy. But it is the same problem that Frédéric Lordon explains when he talks about communism: "If communism is a gray proposition, it will lose the imaginary battle. But it does not have to be gray—far from it. In fact, the opposite is true. There Is no paradox in arguing that it can and must be luxurious. That is, it should shine with the beauty of well-made things because everyone will have the conditions to make things beautiful and well."[2] Shakers, in fact, produced well-made objects using few materials and little energy.

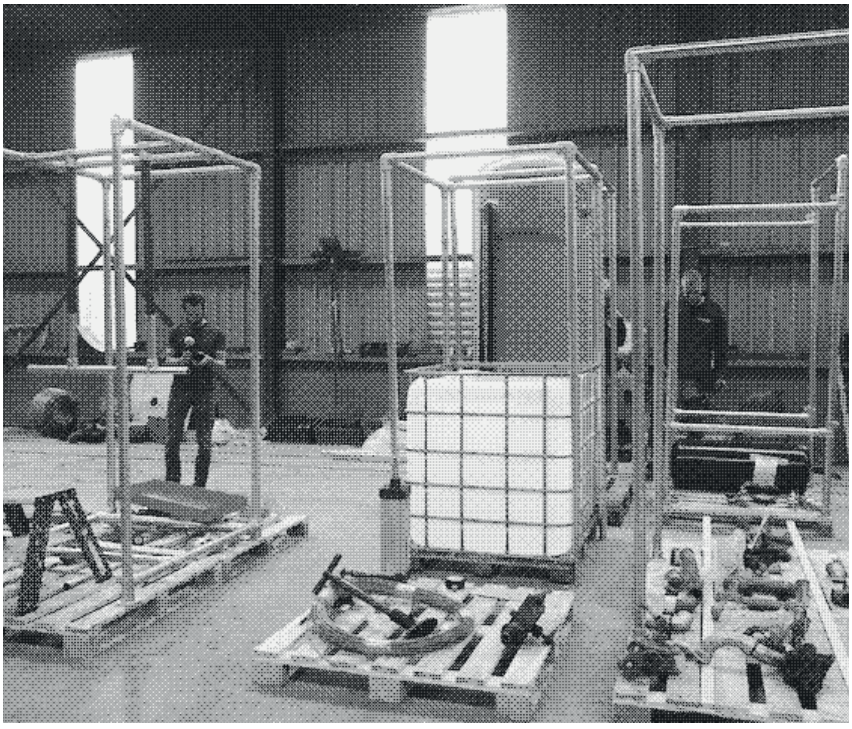
"That is, it should shine with the beauty of well-made things because everyone will have the conditions to make things beautiful and well."

2 Anthime De Crecy, "Design against capitalism", Frustration Magazine. Dec. 2024.

Various components of the prototype Human Power Plant. • © Melle Smets



Woodworking barn at Hancock Shaker Village in Hancock • Massachusetts • established in 1791 • © Congress Library



Various components of the prototype Human Power Plant. • © Melle Smets

Then, the second problem seems more unsolvable. Facing the massive use of energy, this type of solution seems minor. Because of the law of conservation, to achieve the same work for the same lifestyle, we need as much energy. Using human-powered objects means choosing real human slavery. Surely it is 100% renewable, but it is not really ethical. So it would be necessary to achieve a great shift in customs and abrogate the automatic use of machines so that low-techs become possible. It would mean leaving behind the Western way of life.

Conclusion

Forced to see the limits of our world, the future will confront us with the greatest change we have ever needed to operate: reducing our way of life. It is all the more complicated in a society so intertwined with growth. Our health system, our world of work, our food supply, and our education system are all based on the notion of economic growth. Growth is even consecrated in the constitution of the EU as a goal to reach. But degrowth is a task we need to achieve in order to offer future generations a world they can live in. And if design has been such a great help to make growth prosper, it is somehow its duty to help fix the situation. To do so, design will need to hang on to strict principles. It will have to solve a great paradox. Using communal production uses more energy than the industries for the same tasks, because it's less efficient and on a smaller scale. Yet, in the meantime, the use of energy would need to be lowered. So design can help us find the right balance between small communities cut off from the outside world and globalization. The techniques used by farmers in workaround can help achieve some of the goals set by degrowth. But to explore this subject, we invite you to discover *Vaille que vaille*, a research work carried out in French on the topic.

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Since the industrial revolution, design has sustained economic development. It became a part of the process of growth and lost part of its revolutionary potential. Current knowledge proves that this system is coming to an end. It is not possible to live in a finite world and hope for infinite growth. It is even necessary to reverse the process and go toward degrowth to enable future generations to live as peacefully as us on Earth. But how can a practice so linked to capitalism help stop it? With practical guidelines and a consciousness of the world we live in, degrowth can pave the way to an entirely new kind of design!