


Review

# Shrinking for Survival: Integrating Degrowth Principles into Texas Zoning Regulations

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**Abstract:** The degrowth movement is gradually gaining recognition within North American urban planning, but its influence and application remain limited. Most degrowth-oriented initiatives have remained at a small scale, mostly pertaining to communities and neighbourhoods. This study explores whether it is possible to incorporate degrowth principles into larger planning institutions and policies. The paper reviews existing studies on zoning policies and the degrowth movement, employing a qualitative research approach, and utilising secondary data analysis through document and critical discourse analysis. Through this exploration, this study aims to contribute to upscaling and institutionalising degrowth principles and to provide a clear outlook on the movement and its characteristics. Drawing on 32 key sources on zoning and degrowth, alongside two policy documents and a case study of Texas, this study applies coding, content analysis, and GIS mapping to explore the intersections of zoning regulations and degrowth principles in urban planning. The six key principles found to be essential to the degrowth movement—decoupling economics, fostering stronger communities, self-sufficiency, equity, political autonomy/collaboration, and ecological/environmental protection—were analysed in the context of the Texas municipal code for zoning to see whether current zoning ordinances follow the degrowth ideology. The findings reveal that while aspects of degrowth, such as affordable housing initiatives and environmental sensitivity, are present in Texas' zoning regulations, these remain minimal and often constrained by the overarching focus on economic profitability. To integrate degrowth principles more effectively, significant reforms are required, including disengaging zoning ideologies from economic growth, fostering autonomy and self-sufficiency, and reimagining zoning practices to prioritise equity, ecology, and collective resource management.

**Keywords:** zoning; evolution; degrowth; sub-branch; principles



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## 1. Introduction

Since its first application in 1880, the USA has heavily depended on zoning as its main land use control method [1]. This practice consists of categorising plots of land based on specific criteria. These criteria can change according to the type of zoning (from now on referred to as zoning sub-branches) or according to state regulations. Traditional zoning regulations, also known as Euclidean zoning, have driven American urban development, despite their drawbacks and the formation of alternative zoning sub-branches.

Another concept that has been gaining traction in American urban planning practices is degrowth. Although it is not a direct spatial intervention, the ideology of degrowth has become increasingly significant for our daily needs and circumstances, emphasising

resource conservation and abandoning the economics-driven planning perspective. Degrowth has only been applied at a neighbourhood level so far in the United States. To truly shift our planning processes and to encourage more sustainable practices and equitable resource distribution, economics-oriented city planning approaches have to be tackled institutionally. This paper aims to contribute to the upscaling and institutionalisation of degrowth. By combining the concepts of degrowth and zoning, the main contributions will be to clarify what the degrowth movement entails, and how it can be integrated into urban planning policy.

This paper takes zoning as an example of integrating degrowth principles into a major spatial planning tool used in the US, specifically focusing on Texas. Given that Texas is a state with flexible zoning regulations, degrowth principles can theoretically be easily applied in urban planning, allowing for interpretation of whether it is possible to integrate degrowth into broader contexts with flexible zoning regulations and assess its actual application. Hence, this paper will aim to answer two questions:

- To what extent are current zoning regulations aligned with degrowth principles?
- How can degrowth principles be better integrated into urban planning institutions and land use control methods, such as zoning?

By answering these questions, this paper will uncover whether degrowth principles can be applied in larger urban planning institutions at the city scale.

The principal findings show that although zoning currently resembles some aspects of degrowth, it mainly prioritises function and growth. By bringing together this frequently utilised land use control method and degrowth, our policies can actively pursue greater sustainability and downscaling to condense our built environments.

This study begins with a literature review to contextualise and create a better understanding of each planning tool, followed by the Section 3 to explain the use of secondary data to conduct research, and the selection of Texas as a case study to understand the real-life application of zoning and potentially degrowth. Afterwards, results will illustrate the level of overlap between current zoning regulations and degrowth principles in the State of Texas. The discussion will focus on the possibilities of aligning the foundations of degrowth with zoning practices. This is followed by a conclusion exploring what changes are required to fuse these two concepts in urban planning policies in the United States while answering the previously stated research questions.

## 2. Literature Review

This literature review is separated into two sub-sections. First, zoning is explored in terms of its purpose and the development and practical differences of sub-branches. This helps to build an understanding of the historical precedent attached to zoning and to show how common this planning tool truly is in American urban planning practices. The second sub-section will examine the degrowth movement, what it entails, and what its main goals are. By unpacking these two planning concepts, a more concrete understanding of both tools can be created, as well as a clearer path for research to see where and how these concepts may overlap.

### 2.1. Zoning

Since the late 1800s, zoning has been a major tool used across the United States to control land use [1]. By controlling the intensity and the types of developments that occur, Euclidean zoning helps allocate costs effectively across cities [2]. While its original aim was to avoid market failure and provide social welfare for communities, traditional zoning quickly faced criticism [3]. Its prioritization of economics and its highly political nature have been cited as contributing to segregation and environmental injustice. This

is underscored by the fact that when zoning was initially created, one of the two types invented was racial zoning, where minority groups were targeted and neglected [4,5].

Most of the initial developments in zoning ordinances were dependent on the urban elite and significant political figures. Their influence on institutionalised planning practices was based on their economic power and ownership of property [4]. An example of this is when height restrictions were upheld in 1909 in Baltimore, leading to urban sprawl for the sake of development [6,7]. The lower height requirements caused amenities to spread across the land to accommodate building, which subsequently led to the sale of more land and units. The sprawl caused by this has reinforced segregation and classism due to car dependence that could only be afforded by certain income groups [8,9]. The combination of urban sprawl and increased car use leads to environmental degradation due to high carbon emissions. Furthermore, the zoning of certain land use types can cause spillovers into other zones, affecting both the environment and public health [2,10]. This is further emphasised by researchers through the concept of 'environmental racism', claiming that poor and minority communities tend to inhabit zones prone to spillovers [11].

Lastly, for decades it has been argued that one of the major disadvantages of Euclidean zoning is its contribution to rising housing and land prices. This has been repeatedly argued by scholars to reinforce the discriminatory outcomes of zoning [2,4,8]. This argument is supported by evidence that restrictions on housing supply and development due to zoning ordinances increase demand and therefore drive up prices.

These practices, which placed more weight on economic growth and separation, continued well into the 1950s [9,12]. However, the criticism of zoning practices led to the creation of new types of zoning. In the 1970s, two sub-branches of zoning were introduced to urban planning discourse: inclusionary zoning and performance zoning [4,13,14]. More participatory approval processes for project developments were implemented, and affordable housing schemes were made more accessible and available through 'Priced Dwelling Units' as part of inclusionary zoning [9]. Inclusionary zoning mostly aims to include racial minorities and lower-income groups in targeted planning initiatives [8,13]. In accordance with the participatory aspect of inclusionary zoning, performance zoning can help reflect the character of a community more accurately through predetermined standards based on local conditions [10,15]. Additionally, performance zoning ordinances can be written in a way that encourages development and incentivises certain practices, meaning they can prioritise aspects such as environmentalism [15].

Another zoning sub-branch that emerged was incentive zoning. This sub-branch allows developers and planning institutions to negotiate floor-to-area ratios, enabling the construction of higher-density developments in exchange for social service provision (such as landscaping and public space, among others) [16]. Incentive zoning aims to address issues of sprawl and standardisation created by Euclidean zoning practices, promoting diversity in the urban fabric and shaping how our built environments look and function. However, this approach can arguably enhance market-based land use planning through the commodification of land [17,18]. By shifting the responsibility of providing public amenities to private developers, governmental institutions risk the construction of unattractive and underutilised public spaces that only meet minimal standards [19].

Lastly, to tackle the lack of environmental protection in Euclidean zoning, form-based zoning codes were created. By integrating buildings into urban contexts, rather than assigning zones to land use types, planners have more control over the environmental impact of buildings and can maintain sustainability and environmental stability [9,10].

While zoning was initially employed due to its economic and discriminatory tendencies, it has since transformed to tackle these issues while also incorporating sustainability and equity into its approach. The evolution of this practice has also partly reflected the

divide in opinions between those who defend strict regulations (Pigouvian) and those who defend public choice (Coasian) [20]. However, it is important to note that much of the discourse and research on zoning applications and sub-branches relies on older sources. This highlights the need for more up-to-date research on zoning to truly understand how the practice has evolved and whether there is space for more change. Through these changes, certain principles of degrowth can also be identified and potentially incorporated into zoning regulations to address the weaknesses of zoning (segregation, environmental degradation, and political inequity, among others highlighted in this section).

## 2.2. Degrowth

Evidently, traditional zoning practices reinforce certain economic cycles that only benefit property owners [21]. As Euclidean zoning helped to stabilise the real estate market and commodify housing, this is exactly what it has been criticised for, as such priorities neglect the need for community participation and social welfare provision in favour of profitable construction patterns for homeowners and property owners [21]. Alongside the criticism regarding the prioritisation of commodification and profit, traditional zoning is criticised for advancing urban sprawl, which is an undesired outcome, especially within the degrowth movement. This is because urban sprawl is perceived to be environmentally harmful and causes issues such as biodiversity loss [22]. To address these criticisms, modern zoning practices have begun to reflect certain principles of the degrowth movement. To fully understand the relationship between the reinforced cycles caused by Euclidean zoning and degrowth, we need to further explore what degrowth entails.

The degrowth movement has been defined in multiple ways. For instance, Savini (2021) claims that degrowth is “a collective and deliberative process aimed at the equitable downscaling of the overall capacity to produce and consume and of the role of markets and commercial exchanges as a central organizing principle of human lives” [21]. Other definitions proposed by Khmara et al. and Xue emphasise the importance of ensuring equity, well-being, and high quality of life while reducing ecological degradation and downscaling production to provide more sustainable livelihoods in both the short and long term [17,18,22]. Already, the importance of maintaining environmental integrity and relegating economic growth is heavily incorporated into the movement. Essentially, one of the key ideologies behind degrowth is to reduce competition and de-commodify aspects of urban life [21]. This is the opposite of the reality of zoning, which commodifies aspects such as housing and neglects land and resource conservation—both of which have been criticised.

A crucial aspect of degrowth is shifting the focus of urban planning from consumption- and valuation-based perspectives to those that are more focused on community-building [23,24]. This can be achieved through broadening socio-environmental responsibilities through our policies as well as our production and consumption trends, while also building relationships and emphasising the importance of networking to empower each other and make collective decisions [23–25]. More specifically, a key principle of degrowth that works towards this goal is reducing our consumption rates, rather than simply trying not to consume or produce more [24–26]. This can also help in reducing our carbon footprints and adopting more sustainable lifestyles [17]. This not only promotes ecologically sustainable practices, but it can also help create closely knit communities through initiatives such as community gardening [17]. These aspects also tie in with the principle of providing resources and urban space in an equitable manner. The degrowth movement pays special attention to reducing hierarchies in urban planning by putting citizens and their participation first, to allow for more choice in the planning process (similar to the Coasian approach mentioned earlier) [17]. This also encourages the development of community initiatives and collective

societies that live and share together [17]. These are aspects that are not considered in zoning regulations, as they mostly focus on single-family housing. By combining degrowth perspectives and zoning regulations, and therefore including a variety of housing, zoning can expand the built environment in a more inclusive and equitable manner.

However, as seen in the examples stated above, degrowth principles have not yet been formally introduced and integrated into urban planning policies. Currently, degrowth practices are based on community initiatives and small-scale neighbourhood projects. There is a lack of institutional integration, which limits the impact and spread of the movement, and this needs to be tackled [17]. This requires a more contextual planning approach, which may seem familiar from the development of form-based codes discussed earlier, to ensure ecological and cultural conditions are taken into account when spatial interventions are planned [21]. To do this, however, the movement needs to change its narrative from criticising economic growth to emphasising the human and ecological costs it brings, setting more achievable expectations in today's economic climate [26]. Decreasing the value of economic gain and instead promoting environmental stability and equity are crucial steps that have driven the movement; however, there are other possibilities to integrate the degrowth ideology into planning institutions. For instance, housing must be utilised better, both in terms of existing structures and by making homeownership more accessible to less economically advantaged groups of citizens [22]. Furthermore, the movement has to start setting clear foundations and definitions for its key pillars, goals, and applications to standardise its practice so it can be translated into public policies. This is an aspect of degrowth that remains understudied in current discourse. Scholars such as Kaika et al. also criticise the movement for paying little attention to upscaling and institutionalising its practices [27]. These aspects also need to gain more traction in the current discourse, which this paper is aiming to enhance.

By translating the key aspects of degrowth, urban planning institutions, and more specifically, the implementation of zoning regulations, can be improved to be more considerate of our urban environment, our resources, and how the built environment shapes interaction. The emphasis on ecological protection and equity, in particular, can help improve zoning to address its points of critique, while institutionalising and upscaling the degrowth movement.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The research conducted for this paper was based on qualitative secondary data sources, which were subjected to document and critical discourse analysis. During the document and critical discourse analysis, the content of each source was examined to uncover patterns of discussions surrounding degrowth and zoning. Common themes and linkages were identified, such as the influence of economics, politics, and community input. These patterns were crucial for the coding process and created a comprehensive outlook on how the interdependence between these themes shapes regulations, and consequently, our built environments. These secondary sources ranged from existing open-source research papers and books to public policy documents. This study consulted twelve sources on degrowth, and twenty sources on zoning (thirty-two sources in total) out of the ninety-four sources found using search engines such as Google Scholar. The research used in this paper ranges in topics from different types of zoning to the degrowth movement. While the search was kept as broad as possible, the thirty-two documents selected specifically focused on urban economics and spatial planning interventions, in relation to zoning and degrowth. From an original pool of 112 documents, twenty were directly related to urban economics, demonstrating the extent to which economics is prioritised in urban planning, compared to fifty documents referring to degrowth and fifty-nine to zoning. Other topics



common in degrowth discourse that were noticed during the collection of sources ranged from the origins of the concept to the housing and transportation sectors, and how they can implement more degrowth-minded practices. These research papers were used as a foundation for the literature review, to conduct a secondary data analysis of zoning and degrowth discourse. This foundation was built through coding and content analysis, to determine the main principles of degrowth, as will be further explained in Section 3.1. Furthermore, this foundation provided common terms and indicators associated with degrowth. This helped ensure internal validity, as this process ensured a standardised method of identifying degrowth practices, providing more insight into what was measured and how.

Alongside the selection of discourse, an important aspect of this research and the selection of secondary data sources was the process of finding and selecting which policy documents and policy briefs to use for the analysis. Through this process, two policy documents relevant to the United States and the case study of Texas were discovered. First, the Standard Zoning Enabling Act of 1926, which was the first public policy document to be used in the United States as a baseline for all states to follow when drafting zoning regulations, was selected to understand initial zoning regulations and to compare with more recent zoning regulations to assess how zoning ordinances have developed, and whether or not newer sub-branches were integrated over time. The second document, the Texas Municipal Code for Zoning, was selected as a more recent zoning ordinance applicable to the specific case study—and as a basis for comparison of multi-level policy. This document summarises which zoning regulations are standard in the state, and their purpose. As a case study, Texas is relevant as an anomaly to most other states in terms of how zoning is applied, as it is one of the least regulated states, due to the lack of a state-wide mandate for zoning regulation implementation [28]. The differing levels of implementation between cities, or even counties, in Texas may result in a rich variety of zoning landscapes that could facilitate the study of the different degrowth patterns either enabled or hindered by existing regulations which may or may not have been implemented.

In addition to the two policy papers found, a comprehensive list was made to identify all counties in Texas which zone, by accumulating all zoning codes of each county through a thorough online search. While these county-based codes were not used for analysis, this list was used to create a visual representation to understand how many counties in Texas engage in zoning practices. This map (found in Section 3.3) was created based on a list of states that implement zoning, and visualised using Graphic Information Systems (GIS). The map created is a modification of an existing polygon layer (a layer used to visualise the boundaries and shapes of areas on a map) found online [29], to only show the counties which enforce zoning regulations.

Lastly, two degrowth initiatives were found globally as points of comparison. These two initiatives (sustainable building bricks in Egypt and the Nieuwe Meent development in the Netherlands) are meant to provide examples of how degrowth can be incorporated into urban planning at the neighbourhood level. Each initiative highlights a different aspect of degrowth, such as fostering stronger communities, autonomy, and ecological protection. These initiatives will be used as comparison points to Texas, to see how degrowth practices can be improved in Texas, and what possible initiatives can be incorporated into Texan urban planning (See Section 4.3). Not only will this show possibilities for more degrowth-minded practices in Texan planning culture, but it will also provide external validity, as these comparisons will explore whether or not degrowth initiatives are applicable in different contexts.

In the following sub-sections, the coding process, operationalisation and selection of degrowth principles, and case study selection are outlined in more detail.

### 3.1. Coding Process

All data and sources collected for this research were subjected to a coding process using the qualitative analysis software, Atlas.TI, version 25.0.1. The coding process consisted of labelling terms and phrases in each source to categorise indicators and crucial pieces of information related to zoning and degrowth. This process is divided into two separate sections. First, the degrowth literature was coded (see Figures 1 and 2 for code trees) to identify the key principles of the movement. Secondly, the summary of the Texas policy paper was coded to find overlap between different zoning sub-branches and degrowth principles.

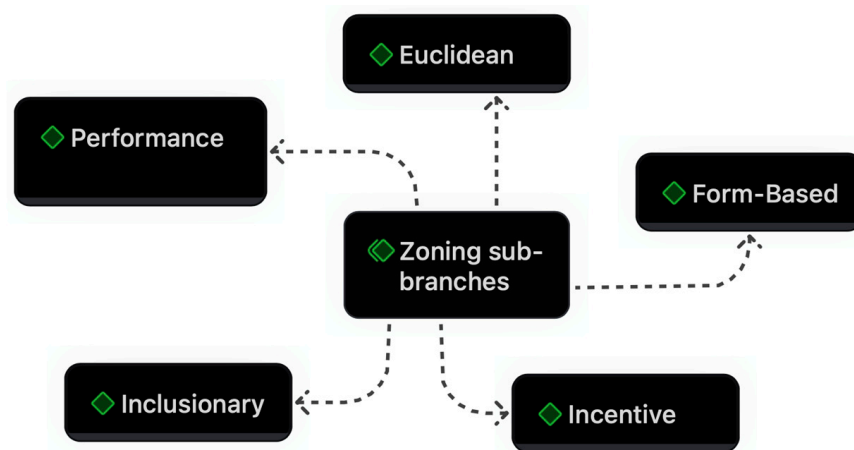


Figure 1. Zoning sub-branch code tree.

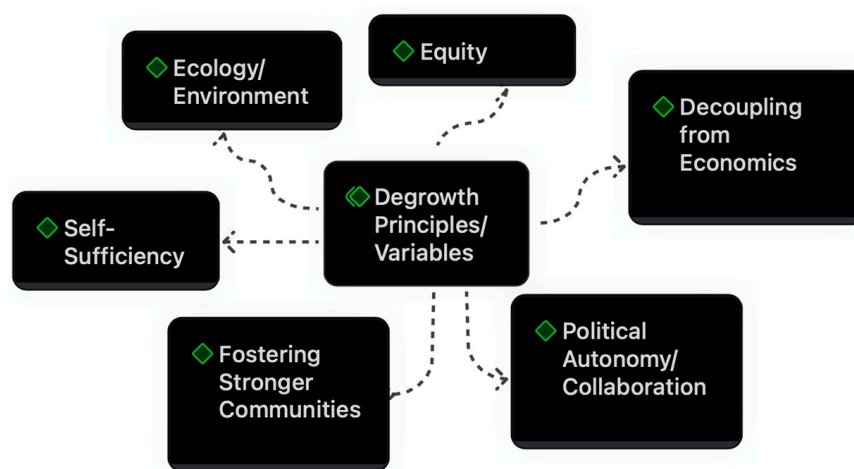


Figure 2. Degrowth principles code tree.

During the collection of the literature, an initial list of degrowth principles was identified. When each source was coded, it became clear that the initial list of principles had to be expanded to accommodate newly found trends in the literature. Therefore, during the coding process, new indicators were added, as explained in Section 3.2. Afterwards, all codes were revisited to avoid repetitions and miscoding. This led to the creation of the principles identified in Table 1 in a semi-inductive manner, by combining the initial list of indicators with new ones that emerged from the analysis process (see Figure 2).

**Table 1.** Operationalisation table.

Concept	Principles	Indicators	Explanation
Degrowth	Decoupling Economics	Decommodification	Deprioritising material and financial growth
	Fostering Stronger Communities	Conviviality, Cohabitation, Culture, Interaction	Providing community spaces for networking and solidarity
	Self-Sufficiency	Low-impact Livelihood, Downsizing	Reducing consumption and production patterns to avoid excess
	Equity	Cooperation, Collective Action, Equal Distribution	Democratically allocating resources in a socially just manner, to maintain well-being
	Political Autonomy/Collaboration	Decision-making, Participation, Organising and Regulating	Empowering residents and smaller entities to have influence over regulations and their living environments
	Ecological/Environmental Protection	Lowering Emissions, Renewable Energy Sources, Resource Conservation, Biodiversity	Encouraging sustainable practices to reduce waste, emissions, and consumption patterns, while preserving our environment

The second part of the coding process involved coding the summary of the Texas policy document. Although the same dimensions were used as for the coding of the literature, an additional code tree was used to identify zoning sub-branches (see Figure 1). By using both code trees, overlap between zoning sub-branches and degrowth principles was found, which will be expanded upon in Section 3.2. Furthermore, motives and generic ideologies behind zoning regulations were coded in relation to degrowth, to assess how much of the degrowth movement is reflected in active zoning ordinances, and how much of it remains conceptual.

### 3.2. Operationalisation

Based on patterns found during the coding process, a list of principles guiding the degrowth movement was identified. As discovered in the literature review, the degrowth ideology heavily depends on equity, environmental protection, and reducing the importance of economic growth in urban areas. These three aspects of degrowth are most discussed across the literature. Across these three aspects, six principles have been identified to encompass the ideology of degrowth, which are explained in Table 1.

The equity principle refers to the equal distribution of resources, while empowering all citizens. More specifically, the equity pillar details the importance of rights and equality, to provide equal opportunities for everyone. There is a strong emphasis on justice and providing social welfare [17]. This is closely related to another principle, which was identified as fostering stronger communities. This principle was separated from equity to highlight the concepts of cohabitation, conviviality, and networking, which are strongly dependent on degrowth initiatives [22].

The environmental protection principle, mostly referred to as ecological value in degrowth literature, encompasses everything ranging from climate change adaptation to reducing our ecological footprints through more sustainable and less consumption-heavy practices. Most importantly, this principle aims to conserve both our natural environment and our resources, through less consumption and production, and by efficiently using what is already available [17]. This notion also ties in with the fourth principle of degrowth,



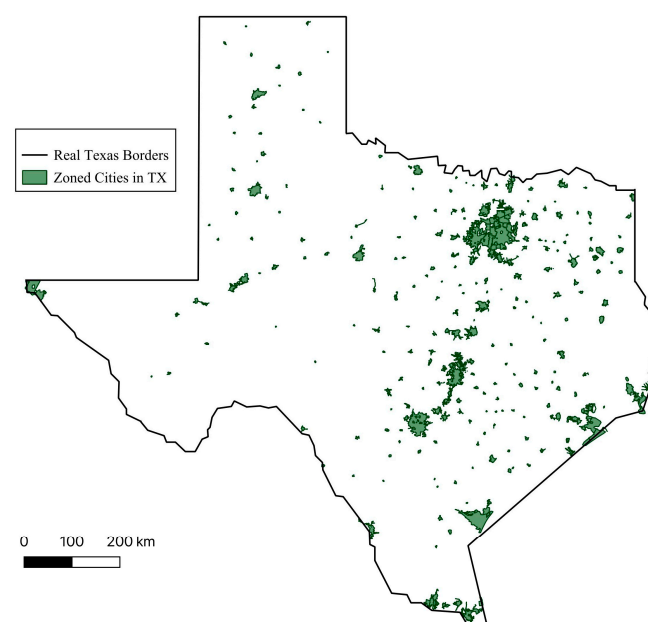
which is decoupling economic growth from urban planning. This means that an active effort must be made to reduce the importance of economic growth when planning our urban environments, as well as to downscale our lifestyles [21,24–26,30]. The act of downscaling also corresponds with the concept of self-sufficiency, identified as the fifth principle of the movement. Alongside reducing our consumption patterns, self-sufficiency also attempts to produce only what is necessary within smaller communities [25]. This can also be achieved through physical downscaling, which requires proximity between facilities, eliminating the need for transportation services [22]. This can also help protect our environment and reduce emissions.

Lastly, the political dimension mostly refers to the goal of diminishing hierarchy in urban planning, to provide opportunities for collaboration between planning institutions and communities. Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on deliberative democracy in the degrowth movement, to allow for greater empowerment and participation, as well as a level of autonomy for communities to self-organise and self-regulate [21].

Evidently, most principles of degrowth are interlinked and work together to shift our attitudes from an economics-based planning approach to one which prioritises social welfare and the environment. Each of these crucial principles identified as the main dimensions of degrowth was considered when evaluating zoning regulations in Texas. The operationalisation of degrowth principles not only provides better grounds for analysis but also creates a comprehensive overview of the movement and its components, which have yet to be defined concretely in common discourse, as noted in Section 2.2. While the explanation of each principle remains broad in this article, the operationalisation table can serve as a starting point to address this research gap.

### 3.3. Case Study

Texas is known to be one of the only states that does not enforce zoning regulations across the state [28]. In fact, while Houston, the second largest city covering almost 1740 km<sup>2</sup> of land, does not implement zoning [31], Dallas has been implementing zoning since 1910 [32]. This is due to the fact that, historically, residents across the state of Texas have rejected the notion of zoning [9]. This variation in the implementation of zoning by county or city can be seen in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Map showing cities in Texas that implement zoning [29].

The variation in implementing zoning regulations across the state is an interesting feature to study; more specifically, the difference between current zoning regulations and those proposed by the 1926 publication of the Standardised Zoning Enabling Act [2]. These changes can clarify whether there is a possibility of integrating ideologies such as degrowth into planning institutions, and how this can be achieved.

To truly see the varying extents of zoning ordinances adopted in each city in Texas, the zoning policies of each county would need to be analysed individually. However, this is beyond the scope of this paper; therefore, a summary of the Texas zoning regulations was used instead [33]. The municipal code itself was not relevant to this study as it is strictly procedural and only addressed appeal processes and levels of jurisdiction. The summary used was more insightful in terms of the content of zoning regulations.

## 4. Results

This section presents the findings from the coding process, to understand whether degrowth principles are present in the overarching zoning regulations issued by the state of Texas. Although the Texas municipal code is only meant for generic guiding purposes, giving individual municipalities the right to remove, edit, or add clauses, it provides insight into common practices across the state and a comprehensive overview of which clauses align with degrowth principles. To identify which principles align, the results showing which degrowth principles and zoning sub-branches overlap will first be presented. Next, more general findings will be outlined to see how degrowth principles have infiltrated the policy brief without a direct link to zoning. Lastly, the integration of degrowth in Texas will be compared to other degrowth initiatives implemented internationally.

### 4.1. Sub-Branches Used to Push Degrowth

Although all sub-branches of zoning are present to some extent in the Texas municipal code, there is little overlap between the various zoning sub-branches and degrowth principles. The overlap observed has been identified in Table 2. For instance, performance zoning was used to bring attention to environmental protection by aiming to ‘lessen congestion in the streets’ and ‘provide adequate light and air’ in the comprehensive plan of Texas [33]. A comprehensive plan identifies a strategy to achieve a city’s goals and ambitions to grow [33]. Zoning is one of the main tools to implement a comprehensive plan, essentially aiming to reach the goals stated within it. By extension, zoning in Texas aims to protect the environment through adequate light and reduced congestion. Another example is the combination of inclusionary zoning with the equity principle of degrowth, which is apparent in the clause stating that through urban planning, a ‘range of housing opportunities and choices’ should be created [33]. This not only aligns with degrowth, as there is a focus on widening the target group of development projects by setting prerequisites to consider different incomes and co-habitation possibilities, but it is also part of the ‘smart growth’ initiative [33]. This initiative is spread across the United States, and Texas has integrated it into its policies, alongside other states. The smart growth initiative also calls for strengthening and directing development towards existing communities, which hints at the fostering stronger communities principle of degrowth, as well as alluding to the idea of utilising what exists rather than expanding [33].

**Table 2.** Overlap between degrowth principles and zoning sub-branches in the Texas policy paper.

Degrowth Principle	Performance	Incentive	Inclusionary	Euclidean	Form-Based
Decoupling Economics	-	-	-	-	-
Fostering Stronger Communities	-	Yes	-	-	-
Self-sufficiency	-	-	-	-	-
Equity	-	-	Yes	-	-
Political Autonomy/ Collaboration	-	-	-	-	-
Ecological/ Environmental Protection	Yes	-	-	-	-

#### 4.2. General Findings

Through the coding process, it became clear that many initiatives, such as the smart growth movement, as well as various types of zoning and tools (such as planned unit developments, which provide flexibility to deviate from standard zoning regulations), have addressed various aspects of what degrowth has brought together into one movement. The idea of building on what we have rather than expanding and consuming more, for instance, has recurred both in smart growth and degrowth. This can also be seen in other parts of the policy brief summarising the Texas Municipal code, which aims to avoid urban sprawl and ensure close-knit communities both socially and physically. This was present in one of the smart growth clauses within the Texas municipal zoning policy brief, calling for ‘a range of housing opportunities and choices’, aiming at more varied and affordable housing options, but also in clauses stating the importance of fostering a strong sense of space and attractive communities, hinting at more inclusive zoning practices and stronger social cohesion. This is reinforced by the presence of multiple sub-branches in this dimension, suggesting that modern regulations consider urban areas as complex and cohesive systems with many facets, rather than collections of buildings and parcels which have to be profitable and spatially uniform.

The call for more varied housing options aligns deeply with degrowth ideology, as it tackles issues of equity, sprawl, and co-habitation simultaneously. The general idea behind these initiatives highlights the importance of issues such as a lack of affordable housing, private transportation dependence, and the role residents play in shaping their physical environment. Many regulations have been set through zoning to ensure these three issues are tackled. For instance, in the Texas municipal zoning regulations, it is stated that land use has to be mixed, and public transportation facilities and financing schemes have to be included, closely aligned with form-based zoning codes. Alongside avoiding sprawl, these clauses align with degrowth, as they direct development to be more compact and sustainable through shorter distances as well as more resource-efficient practices to reduce carbon emissions. And while the Texas zoning regulations encourage the development of public transportation, this may need to be adjusted to fit degrowth principles more closely. The Texas municipal code states that future transportation needs must be forecast, and financing for more transportation facilities should be planned, aiming to discourage private vehicle use [33]. While this is a more sustainable and resource-efficient method, it is not enough to be associated with degrowth. Rather, to truly integrate degrowth, the use of motorised vehicles in any capacity should be discouraged, in favour of closer proximity between facilities and amenities.

Nevertheless, while most, if not all, principles of degrowth specified in Table 1 are present to some extent in the zoning policies of Texas, there are two essential components

missing from seamlessly connecting the concepts of zoning and degrowth: intention and deprioritising economics. The degrowth movement has emphasised time and again that the intention to achieve its principles is what sets it apart from other initiatives. One of its main intentions is to remove the influence of economic growth on our cities and their development. This is a major point missing from the Texas municipal code, as there is no specification as to how this would be tackled, or how the economy would be decoupled from the built environment. Instead, there are certain clauses, such as the creation and enhancement of economic value clause in the smart growth concept, which prioritise the cost-effectiveness of urban planning and development projects, essentially suggesting the opposite of economic decoupling [33].

While there is clearly a motive to be more considerate of our environment and foster stronger communities, the motive for degrowth clearly lacking in the municipal zoning code. Although the main idea behind degrowth is present, there is no clarity as to whether or not these clauses and goals are meant to support the degrowth movement. The lack of direct reference means these clauses cannot be considered to truly be part of the degrowth movement. It is important, therefore, to change zoning ordinances to demonstrate the intent to integrate degrowth principles.

In addition to the lack of change in the economic perspective of zoning, we observed that the Texas municipal zoning codes were inherently similar to those proposed by the 1922 Standard Zoning Enabling Act (SZE) [34]. For instance, while political autonomy is an important aspect of degrowth, by dismantling the hierarchical structure of zoning affairs, there is no active attempt towards it. This is not to be confused with the town hall meetings and appeal processes available for residents to participate in, and voice their opinions regarding zoning affairs, as this is not a step towards political autonomy. While there is a degree of participation, this has been possible since the formal introduction of zoning in the early 1900s, whereas gaining political autonomy would require decision-making power and self-organised communities which are not reliant on state-wide regulations. Furthermore, the municipal code explicitly quotes sections one and three (Grant of Power and Purpose in View, respectively) of the Standard Zoning Enabling Act, which shows the lack of change in zoning regulations, especially regarding alignment with the degrowth movement. For instance, Section 2 of the SZE, concerning districts, and Section 7, regarding the Board of Adjustment, have been copied into the Texas municipal code word for word. The lack of change in this regard, and dependence on old-school zoning ideologies, suggests a lack of intention or even motivation to combine zoning with degrowth.

#### *4.3. International Degrowth Initiatives*

To gain an understanding of how degrowth initiatives impact neighbourhoods, and through which methods Texas can apply it to its own urban development trajectory, it is important to look at initiatives started internationally. This section will explore two degrowth initiatives, one from Egypt and one from The Netherlands. These practices will provide a new perspective on what degrowth initiatives can look like, and how even the smallest changes can become part of the movement.

##### *4.3.1. Bastoob, Egypt*

Due to the growing efforts by the government to encourage citizens in Egypt to move away from Cairo, there has been an increase in housing demand and construction in other regions of the country. Bastoob, a local business in Egypt, recognised the need for safe, affordable, and quick construction of housing, to be able to meet the demand, while providing adequate housing. As a solution, Bastoob has innovated an interlocking construction block [35]. These blocks eliminate cement in construction, due to their interlocking quality,

and are thermally insulating [35]. They have taken various principles from the degrowth movement such as ecological protection and equity. The technology behind the bricks allows for them to be salvaged and reused, if and when a house made of them is dismantled, and the elimination of cement significantly reduces the carbon footprint of the construction process [35]. Furthermore, the insulation characteristic of this block allows for less energy consumption as the brick itself can keep the house warm on its own. Furthermore, these bricks make safe housing more accessible to the people of Egypt, providing equity in terms of affordability and security. By encouraging practices or innovations such as these bricks, policymakers can provision multiple aspects of degrowth at once, with small actions and changes. Texas can take the innovation of Bastoob as either a tool or inspiration for more local innovation, as well as implement the usage of modern building technologies to reduce the strain put on our environment when constructing new infrastructure, and to simultaneously provide more secure housing.

#### 4.3.2. Nieuwe Meent, Netherlands

The Nieuwe Meent development project, started in 2018, is a cooperative housing development in Amsterdam seeking to detach from the competitive economic-minded housing market of Amsterdam by highlighting community sharing and cohabitation [34]. This development has adopted the ecological and community-building principles of the degrowth movement through the establishment of three key pillars: collective living groups, shared facilities, and caretaking [34]. The community fosters self-sufficient practices through agricultural and ecological education [34]. Furthermore, this development provides autonomy to its residents, as collectivism in this case also extends to decision-making power and participation [34]. This independent community has created a neighbourhood in which degrowth principles are nurtured and affirmed to provide affordable, resourceful, and autonomous housing in the neighbourhood. The steps taken in this community to provide autonomy and social interaction can be taken as a stepping stone for policies or actions to be taken in Texas, to integrate degrowth into urban planning and development. As seen in Section 4.2, Texas has already put effort into developing affordable housing. By taking the Nieuwe Meent as an example, these policies can be developed further to be considerate of housing other than single-family units, which fosters stronger communities and sharing practices.

## 5. Discussion

Although there are direct quotes and phrases used in the current Texas municipal zoning code from the SZE, it has also adopted various new sub-branches which have reduced the dominance of Euclidean zoning. Essentially, the foundations of zoning are already changing to become more considerate of other aspects of urban environments than economic growth. Although not all sub-branches considered in Table 1 have a direct correlation to degrowth principles through zoning clauses in the municipal code, all have been adopted in some capacity. The shift in nature of these regulations, from Euclidean to sub-branches such as performance and inclusionary zoning, already provides some insight regarding the changing perspective of planners. There is clearly an attempt at deprioritising Euclidean zoning and its consequences by focusing on more equitable and non-economical measurement practices. While this is a step in the right direction, there is no direct relationship formed with degrowth as it stands.

By definition, all sub-branches created in recent years are aimed at amending zoning practices to be more ecological and inclusive (which is, in fact, a zoning sub-branch on its own). As a matter of fact, across the literature, inclusionary zoning has been established to aim at providing affordable housing to enhance racial and social integration. This can

be seen as a base on which the equity principle of degrowth is formed. However, what sets degrowth apart from this sub-branch is its broader approach to social inclusion and integration, addressing systemic inequalities and fostering diverse communities. The equity principle of degrowth also emphasises the importance of communal spaces and resource sharing, aspects that are often missing from current zoning regulations [17]. By integrating degrowth principles with inclusionary zoning, developments can focus on both affordability and providing a variety of housing forms to appeal to a larger population. Similarly, incentive zoning aims to encourage more community-building opportunities through its exception- and bonus-based mechanisms [13]. Not only does this diversify the urban fabric, it also institutionalises degrowth, through the inclusion of collaborative living and flexible ownership schemes. This would shift the focus of zoning from traditional single-family units to more accessible and versatile housing options. This can also help with controlling our resource consumption, as the solution would lie within already existing structures, rather than expanding the boundaries of our cities to build more and newer structures, avoiding sprawl. Furthermore, more participation should be encouraged in the planning process. This trend has been growing in recent years; however, it is crucial to limit hierarchy in planning processes at an institutional level [17]. This can help address more pressing needs expressed by the public and empower citizens to become a stronger community with more equitable practices and shared habits. By including practices as such in our planning policies, we can ensure the inclusion of all three pillars of degrowth: equity, ecological integrity, and lower consumption [26].

Form-based codes also allow for more diversity in the urban fabric through their encouragement of mixed land-use planning. The mixture of land use can help avoid sprawl by limiting the distance between amenities, essentially allowing for a more compact city model, while also consuming fewer resources such as land or fuel. Lastly, performance zoning can be used as a foundation to integrate degrowth principles into zoning practices seamlessly, as it is meant to provide a framework to regulate standards more efficiently. Although it does not impact the built environment as directly as other zoning sub-branches, it provides motivation to be more considerate of the consumption of various resources and serves as a tool for accountability when assessing aspects such as carbon emissions, waste handling, and more. If the foundations of each sub-branch are expanded upon and used efficiently, degrowth principles can align and even elevate the mission and vision of these sub-branches to create a more environmentally sensitive and equitable zoning concept.

It is important to note, however, that while these sub-branches are already present in the Texas municipal code, there is still a lack of collaboration with the degrowth movement, undermining the potential of what can be achieved when the two are combined. This also limits how much degrowth can truly be institutionalised, as there is no regulation advanced enough to accommodate space for degrowth principles. This is especially true because most of the current zoning regulations are still highly dependent on Euclidean and old-school zoning ideologies. The commodification of land, and the cost-effective perspective on which Euclidean zoning is built, remain highly influential in the current zoning code of Texas, suggesting that although other principles of degrowth have the possibility to integrate, the main goal, which is to deprioritise economic growth, is still at the root of planning and zoning approaches. If the degrowth movement uses innovative building technologies such as the bricks made by Bastoob (See Section 4.3.1), or the cooperative approach seen in the Nieuwe Meent development (See Section 4.3.2), the movement can try to find common ground with urban economics, as these practices are clear examples of urban degrowth, which also happen to reduce construction and maintenance costs. However, to truly integrate degrowth principles and build upon the sub-branches present in the Texas



municipal code, the concept of zoning must be reimagined to highlight ideologies similar to that of degrowth, rather than economic growth.

## 6. Conclusions

As can be derived from this research, zoning regulations in Texas are rather flexible, providing opportunities to integrate degrowth principles and ideologies. A small overlap between zoning sub-branches and degrowth principles in current Texan zoning regulations (such as the overlap between equity and inclusionary zoning, or performance zoning and ecological protection) suggests there is potential for more development within these local regulations to institutionalise degrowth ideology through the framework of zoning regulations. Nevertheless, the small facets of degrowth that have been identified in the state's current zoning legislation (specifically resolutions such as affordable housing, community-building initiatives, and sensitivity towards the natural environment) are overshadowed by the lack of change in fundamental ideologies such as profitability. Zoning regulations in Texas illustrate the pressing need to reimagine urban planning frameworks to align with degrowth principles at larger scales and more directly, challenging deeply entrenched economic paradigms that prioritise commodification over resourcefulness. The influence of economic growth over urban planning policy has blocked the path for intentionally implementing degrowth-minded initiatives and policies. This begs the questions posed by this study: "To what extent are current zoning regulations aligned with degrowth principles?" and "How can degrowth principles be better integrated into urban planning institutions and land use control methods, such as zoning?". To answer the first question, it is important to note that although certain Texan zoning policies simultaneously address the concerns of degrowth, there is potential for more conscientious action to be taken. The second research question requires a more complex understanding of the changes that need to be made. Even though, theoretically, there is a possibility of amending zoning to integrate degrowth ideologies in a more institutional and tangible manner, fundamental changes have to be made to the practice of zoning. To truly reap the benefits of zoning sub-branches and their predisposition to be more inclusive of degrowth ideology, the influence of urban economics on urban planning regulation must be re-examined.

The major building blocks of zoning, which are profitability and economic growth, must be deprioritised to truly integrate the essence of degrowth. This may require some restructuring of urban economics, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, smaller steps can be taken to shift priorities in urban planning from economics to ecology and self-sufficiency. By promoting other principles and aspects of degrowth, indirect pressure on economic growth can be applied. For instance, understanding land as a resource to protect and cultivate, rather than a tradeable asset in our planning approaches, would result in less land being occupied during development processes, and land would be used more effectively. To achieve this, urban planning institutions have to shift focus from city-scale economic growth and introduce more legislation focused on resource conservation. This could involve policies that prioritise the repurposing of abandoned amenities and buildings over further construction. By encouraging a mindset of using what is readily available, rather than producing new facilities, degrowth can be integrated more structurally into zoning ordinances. This can also be used as a method to decouple zoning from economic growth by advancing development strategies that discourage the construction of new buildings, limiting potential profit accumulation while also treating the land that has already been developed as the scarce resource it is. Repurposing old structures and avoiding new construction and consumption could detach monetary value from land.

In the case of Texas zoning policies specifically, there are a couple of possibilities to adapt existing policies to be more degrowth-minded. Firstly, current zoning techniques in Texas do not include form-based zoning. By incorporating form-based zoning, Texas can prioritise social-ecological values. This would require more flexibility in terms of mixing land use in urban areas. Not only will this further emphasise the efficient use of already occupied land, but the mixture of amenities can also help reduce distances. Furthermore, the flexibility provided through form-based codes can help counter critiques of zoning standardisation. The reduction of distances is also a major tool Texan municipalities can use to transform their zoning regulations. Currently, Texan zoning regulations call for the expansion of public transport accessibility. However, to truly integrate degrowth, it is important to reduce all kinds of motor vehicle usage. While the use of public transportation is more sustainable than private vehicles, there is no attempt at containing urban sprawl, a key concern for the degrowth movement. The mixture of land use through zoning tools such as form-based codes can allow for the shrinking of cities, shifting the focus from managing urban sprawl through accessible transport to containing sprawl. Another aspect through which zoning regulations in Texas can be adapted to include more degrowth principles concerns the level of autonomy that is delegated. Currently, the state of Texas has given local municipalities and counties power over which state codes are adopted by their local regulations, which ones are amended, and which ones are declined. While autonomy is a major aspect of degrowth, this level of autonomy is not a new addition to the state's zoning regulations. In fact, it reflects the 1926 SZA model. This level of autonomy has to be expanded to fit modern planning approaches and the degrowth movement, extending autonomy and decision-making power to residents. To extend autonomy to residents, as suggested by the degrowth movement, Texas should aim to make appeal processes and public hearings of zoning reforms more accessible. Although these hearings are already open to the public, the announcements of these hearings are rather limited, making it hard to keep track of them. By publicising them appropriately and arranging hearings in accessible formats, more autonomy can be granted to residents, and participation can be more direct and effective. Lastly, Texan zoning codes can be amended to be more considerate of construction processes. Current zoning regulations in Texas allow interference with aspects such as density, building height, and the size of buildings. By adding control over, or simply encouraging innovative building technologies, urban development can take a more resourceful and sustainable approach. This not only integrates the ecological protection emphasised by degrowth, but it also allows for resource conservation and the reduction of consumption or production of new materials. These innovative forms of construction can include urban mining practices, where older resources and parts of demolished infrastructure can be reused in the construction of new structures.

Nevertheless, the implementation of these changes requires major changes in perspective. To institutionalise degrowth through zoning regulations, it is important for the degrowth movement to gain legitimacy. Currently, degrowth is a rather small-scale initiative, only observed in neighbourhood initiatives. It is important for the movement to broaden its reach and upscale its practices while also gaining more momentum. This requires allyship with different movements that have similar goals and lobbying for the movement to be perceived with an image of unity and perseverance. However, it is also important for the movement to change its narrative from anti-economic growth to an image that balances urban economics with its goals of conserving our environment and providing equity and autonomy. This is important not only to gain support from other movements but also from the public. By its nature, degrowth calls for practices that limit our consumption. This means that there may be luxuries or habits the public needs to give up, which can be a major cause of friction. The fact that degrowth requires changes in

lifestyles may not be appreciated by most; therefore, the movement has to tackle this in phases, rather than immediately calling for institutions to be decoupled from economics or for consumption and production rates to be reduced significantly. This can also cause potential political friction that the movement needs to overcome. As seen in this study, urban planning methods and institutions are heavily influenced by political figures and economic interests. If the degrowth movement wants to infiltrate planning institutions, it may need to compromise on certain goals to find a middle ground with political figures.

Reimagining zoning will require major changes but can allow for a more seamless integration of degrowth. Through these changes, and the addition of aspects such as ecology and autonomy, urban environments can meet the needs of our societies, as well as the environment, more efficiently. Exploring ways in which degrowth can be coupled with institutional planning tools, such as zoning, is one of the main contributions of this article. While the degrowth movement is growing, it has yet to break the barrier to institutionalised urban planning. By upscaling degrowth practices and finding potential outlets, such as zoning, to enlarge the operation of degrowth, this barrier can be overcome more easily. The second contribution of this paper is to provide a clear outlook on what the movement entails. Although more attention has been directed to the movement, there is no consistency in degrowth discourse as to what the main indicators and key principles are, and how they should be defined. This paper aimed to clarify the content of the movement and provide a foundation to build upon as we gain more insight into the intricacies of degrowth. To gain a better understanding of the degrowth movement, and whether its integration into zoning regulation, or other institutionalised planning tools, is feasible, further research can focus on whether other methods of land use planning can be created to be more considerate of factors such as equity, ecology, and political autonomy. Other avenues of future research could include a change in case studies, to explore the applicability of degrowth in the zoning regulations of different states in the US with varying levels of regulation, or to explore potential aspects of urban economics that can be adapted to be more accepting of degrowth principles to shift perspectives in urban planning from financial profit to equitable resource distribution.

Although this article has attempted to explore the degrowth movement in as much detail as possible, it has two major limitations that can be potential grounds for further research. Firstly, the explanations and exploration of the fundamental principles of degrowth remain rather vague. While this paper has combined all characteristics and aspects of degrowth into one paper, these aspects have only scratched the surface of a complex and intricate ideology. It is important to develop these explanations and principles further, to avoid confusion and better define the movement. Secondly, the points of comparison used (Egypt and The Netherlands) may not be considered the most appropriate. Although these case studies are concrete examples of the degrowth movement and how its principles can be used in urban developments, these case studies remain at the neighbourhood level and have not influenced local policy. It is important to highlight cases where degrowth initiatives have influenced policy or upscaled the movement overall.

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