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MATTERS OF TIME AND SPACE: TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY IN EVERYDAY LIFE*

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ABSTRACT
This article critically examines dominant sustainability narratives that prioritise technological innovation, market-based solutions and individual behaviour while often neglecting the socio-economic structures driving overconsumption. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in urban and rural Chile over the past decade, it explores how practices of care, repair and material creativity emerge in contexts marked by isolation, scarcity or exclusion. Far from advocating a return to pre-industrial simplicity, the text challenges the binary between modernity and tradition, suggesting that autonomy and material endurance are not incompatible with technological advancement. Through cases ranging from rural repurposing to urban protest adaptations, the article highlights how creative responses to material constraints reveal pathways to rethinking sustainability. It calls for a reimagining of our relationship with objects and consumption, fostering alternatives to the linear logic of production and disposal.

KEYWORDS: sustainability • autonomy • material culture • care • design

INTRODUCTION

Mainstream sustainability discourse continues to privilege technological innovation, market-based strategies, and shifts in individual consumer behaviour, often framed

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within the narrow logics of consumption (Lorek and Spangenberg 2014; O'Rourke and Lollo 2015). While these proposals respond to real challenges, they tend to overlook the deeper structures that drive overproduction and ecological degradation and reinforce a global hierarchy in which the Global South is seen primarily as a victim, i.e. contributing the least to the climate crisis yet suffering its worst consequences (Parks and Roberts 2006). This narrative, though grounded in empirical evidence, remains reductive: it sidelines the knowledge, agency and material practices that have long existed outside dominant models of development.

This article challenges that asymmetrical framing by exploring how practices of care, repair and material creativity emerge in contexts marked by exclusion, scarcity or disconnection. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in Chile, it proposes that sustainability can – and often does – take shape through everyday ingenuity and resourcefulness. Rather than treating marginality as a deficit, we examine it as a fertile ground for alternative temporalities and spatial practices that resist the dominant logic of disposability.

The analysis is structured around two key dimensions for thinking about sustainability from a critical perspective: time and space. On the one hand, it examines how dominant material culture, characterised by the valorisation of the new, the fast and the disposable (Pollay 1986; North 2013), has displaced other forms of relating to objects centred on permanence, care and re-signification. In this dimension, the ageing of things does not imply deterioration or loss, but rather the possibility of sustaining bonds, extending the useful life of objects and building alternatives to the logic of constant replacement. On the other hand, space is approached through experiences of isolation or disconnection, not as deficits but as conditions that enable forms of self-sufficiency and material creativity. In rural or urban peripheral contexts, where access to goods is limited and the circulation of objects restricted, fruitful practices of repair, reuse and adaptation challenge the notion of innovation anchored in highly connected scenarios (Florida et al. 2018).

These reflections are grounded in qualitative research conducted over the past decade in urban and rural households in Chile. A variety of 17 different research and artistic projects have been carried out by the Wonderful Things collective (Cosas Maravillosas n.d.), an interdisciplinary collective formed by the authors along with other social science scholars and artists working from Chile to promote sustainable ways of living through renewed attention to the material world we inhabit. The collective fosters the recognition and care of the things that make up our everyday environments, understanding that much of our relationship with the planet plays out through them. These projects have been based on qualitative approaches combining in-depth interviews, guided home tours, participant observation and diverse forms of visual documentation – including photography and video – across households of different socioeconomic contexts in Chile, allowing us to trace everyday practices and object trajectories over time.

Based on this perspective, and for the specific purposes of this article, the aim is to explore the practices and perspectives of those who live on the margins of mass consumption – whether due to structural exclusion or by choice –, understanding that these perspectives may contain relevant insights for imagining more sustainable futures. This is not about romanticising precariousness, but rather about making visible the trans-

formative potential of ways of life that, while historically subordinated, offer critical perspectives and concrete pathways for addressing today's environmental and social challenges.

BEYOND GREEN: RETHINKING SUSTAINABILITY FROM THE MARGINS

The contemporary sustainability discourse is shaped by a tension between market-driven approaches and more transformative visions of environmental care. While mainstream models often emphasise efficiency and technological innovation, they frequently fail to address the deeper socio-economic structures that perpetuate unsustainable consumption. This framework critically examines the prevailing narratives around sustainability through three interconnected sections: the dominant sustainability model, the intersection of consumption and everyday life sustainability, and the exploration of alternative ecologies linked to ageing and isolation. By shifting the focus from product-centred solutions to community-based and care-oriented practices, we seek to explore how marginalised and localised approaches might offer more sustainable ways of inhabiting the world.

The Dominant Sustainability Model

At the core of the climate crisis lies the inextricable link between consumption, production and environmental degradation. Industrial capitalism has driven unsustainable patterns of resource extraction and waste generation, leading to deforestation, pollution and biodiversity loss, among other pressing issues (IPCC 2023). These are not isolated but interconnected components of a broader system of ecological crisis, exacerbated by a dominant economic model that prioritises growth and accumulation over environmental balance (Moore 2016).

In response, recent years have seen an increase in global efforts advocating sustainability. However, many of these responses continue to rely on market-based solutions that fail to address the root causes of overconsumption (Lorek and Spangenberg 2014). The predominant approach frames sustainable consumption as the purchase of more environmentally friendly products rather than a fundamental restructuring of consumption habits (Jackson 2005). In this vein, Luc Boltanski and Éve Chiapello (1999) point out how the new spirit of capitalism embraces disruptive forms of appropriation that, rather than challenging neoliberalism, renew it through creative and ethical discourses. Thus, economic agents increasingly adopt sustainable rhetoric as an investment strategy.

Defined as a dynamic process of economic transformation aimed at low-carbon development, improved resource efficiency and enhanced well-being through technologies and innovations that create jobs while minimising long-term environmental risks, the green economy model relies on efficiency-based strategies. It promotes theoretical improvements in resource use while encouraging industries to adopt more responsible practices (Mikhno et al. 2021). Discussions frequently centre on sustainability indica-

tors, certifications, recycling networks and consumer education, measures that, while valuable, remain within the same economic framework that fosters overproduction and disposability (O'Rourke and Lollo 2015). Critics argue that these top-down strategies prioritise economic viability over meaningful environmental transformation, reinforcing the cycle of production and consumption rather than challenging it (Kirchherr et al. 2017; Reike et al. 2018). Recent political shifts – such as governments loosening green regulations when perceived as economically costly, or the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement – underscore the fragility of these commitments and raise concerns about the long-term direction of the green transition.

Consumption and Everyday Life Sustainability

Empirical research suggests that the idea of a circular economy cannot be achieved through technological fixes alone but must involve a broader shift toward the "missing social dimension" (Murray et al. 2017: 376). Within the field of sustainable consumption studies, one of the most resonant systemic critiques challenges the logic of growth and accumulation that underpins dominant models of economic development. Scholars in this area emphasise that beyond merely shifting toward sustainable products, it is crucial to reduce overall levels of production and consumption (Cooper and Mayers 2000; Lorek and Spangenberg 2014). In line with this critique, various proposals have emphasised the need to rethink not only productivity levels but also the cultural imaginaries that sustain the desire for more. It is therefore crucial to reconsider lifestyles and everyday practices of care that shape our relationship with the material environment (Murray 2009; D'Alisa et al. 2014). It is no coincidence that research from sustainability studies suggest socioeconomic status is the strongest predictor of carbon footprint and greenhouse gas emissions (Wilson et al. 2013; Baiocchi et al. 2022; Starr et al. 2023), lending weight to the provocative assertion that perhaps the most effective way to reduce environmental impact is simply "being poor" (Gibson et al. 2011).

While market-driven solutions dominate the sustainability discourse, alternative models grounded in community-based and traditional practices of care, repair and resource stewardship continue to offer viable responses to the crisis (Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012; Bradley and Persson 2022; Errázuriz et al. 2024). However, the limited qualitative research on everyday consumption spaces (Shittu 2020) has meant that the sociocultural variables associated with consumption remain largely underexplored (Camacho-Otero et al. 2018). These gaps range from the cultural values that underpin the everyday decisions people make as consumers (Gibson et al. 2011), to the fundamental role that the domestic sphere plays in advancing more sustainable forms of consumption (Noorman and Uiterkamp 1998). Although ignored in sustainability policies, the 'use phase' holds considerable potential for reducing environmental impact through practices such as repair, maintenance and reuse (Teidearu 2024).

Building on these critiques, degrowth theory offers a broader political and economic perspective that aligns with many of these overlooked domestic and community-based practices. It rejects the ideology of continuous growth and calls for lower resource use and systemic transformation (Kallis et al. 2018). Rooted in activist movements, degrowth contrasts with top-down sustainability models by directly challenging dominant narra-

tives of growth and capital accumulation (Trantas 2021). Yet, its implementation faces obstacles due to the depth of change it demands and the need for broader value shifts.

This broader critique resonates with the documented capacity of consumers to act as active agents in modifying mass-produced goods (Redström 2008; Brandes et al. 2009; Mitchell 2011) and, ultimately, to be understood as agents who inevitably and continuously reshape and adapt the spaces they inhabit (Hallam and Ingold 2007). Consumers are in a position to take an active role in the care, maintenance, repair and re-signification of objects (Gregson et al. 2009; Dant 2010), thereby reducing premature disposal and the need to acquire new goods. This has been the driving principle behind various consumer and grassroots movements that have gained momentum in recent years. Initiatives – such as repair cafes, tool libraries, free stores, community gardens, among many others –, have played an important role in promoting alternative models of sustainability. Often strengthened and made more visible through social media platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram, they support everyday practices that move beyond the binary of acquisition and disposal, encouraging repair, reuse, resource-saving and community-based sharing. These practices also resonate with what Russell Belk (2015) describes as post-ownership forms of consumption, where access, sharing and collective use of goods challenge the traditional emphasis on individual ownership.

Practices that might once have seemed old-fashioned and outside mainstream consumer circuits are now being reimagined as acts of resistance by eco-conscious groups, particularly in developed economies. They offer an alternative, breaking away from conventional market-driven paths, reshaping consumer responsibility and offering strategies to put the idea of degrowth into practice.

This growing attention to organised grassroots sustainability efforts in wealthy economies aligns with the overrepresentation of these regions in research on sustainable consumption, while Latin America and other emerging regions remain significantly underrepresented, accounting for only around 5% of empirical studies (Sesini et al. 2020).

Despite receiving limited academic attention, these regions often exhibit distinctive consumption patterns and context-specific notions of sustainability (Bekin et al. 2007; Ariztía et al. 2014). Such practices frequently unfold outside formal capitalist systems and are closely tied to the everyday realities of vulnerable communities. Communities daily engage in practices of care, frugality and sufficiency without the visibility of mainstream sustainability discourse. These are segments of the population or territories that, for various historical reasons, have remained on the margins or have had limited access to and participation in consumer networks. These groups – often outside dominant media narratives – continue to maintain everyday practices that minimise resource consumption and promote long-term environmental resilience (Muñoz et al. 2023).

Outside the Frame: Ageing, Isolation and Alternative Ecologies

By shifting the focus toward these localised and situated practices – often rendered invisible – a broader understanding of sustainability emerges, one rooted in the mindful and responsible use of resources rather than the mere consumption of "more sustainable" products (Jackson 2005). These communities often demonstrate an alternative

way of living that challenges the prevailing economic model of disposability and overconsumption. A critical engagement with these practices could reveal valuable insights for addressing the climate crisis, yet they remain largely overlooked in sustainability policies. In the Chilean case examined in this study, public initiatives and consumer-oriented policies have made progress in improving access to sustainable products and reducing waste production, mainly by promoting practices such as recycling and composting. However, they rarely address the everyday use, care or possible interventions that could extend the lifespan of the objects people already own and consume.

The issue, however, is far from straightforward, as the low environmental impact of these groups is directly linked to the historically marginal position they have occupied within the market. While their reduced environmental footprint aligns with the value of sustainability, this condition is unlikely to be positively recognised in a consumer society, where social belonging is defined by the capacity to consume and to be consumed (Bauman 2000 [1998]), and where social classes differentiate, legitimise and reproduce their status through consumption practices (Bourdieu 2000 [1979]; Baudrillard 2009 [1970]).

The lack of recognition for these more frugal or market-disconnected ways of life has deeper cultural roots that go beyond consumer society. Such ways of life are associated with positions that have historically been perceived as contrary or peripheral to the modern ideal, and which successive models of development have sought to overcome. If modernity has upheld innovation and connectivity as core ideals of progress, then ways of being that are perceived as old, used or outdated – and those seen as isolated, disconnected or marginal – tend to remain culturally devalued, making it difficult to recognise them as meaningful or viable starting points for imagining alternative futures. Given that time and space are socially produced, and that capitalism has favoured the acceleration of time and the compression of space (Harvey 1990), the negative value assigned to forms of existence that lie outside these spatio-temporal norms becomes understandable.

Today, as the crisis of modernity and the exhaustion of modern values compel an inevitable questioning of hegemonic models and a search for more sustainable ways of life (Giddens 2009; Latour 2017 [2015]), there is growing interest in understanding and repositioning alternative forms and systems that have operated at the margins of modernity. These refer to spatial and temporal configurations that do not follow the logic of capital accumulation and retain a certain autonomy from the dominant model of production and consumption (Castree 2009).

This has been the case for Indigenous peoples and ancestral cultures, whose knowledge systems, practices and relationships with the environment have been historically delegitimised by Western thought, but which today offer crucial insights for rethinking dwelling, temporality, reciprocity and interspecies relations (Escobar 2010; Rivera Cusicanqui 2018).

However, unlike ancestral cultures, which have managed to gain some recognition within contemporary sustainability debates, the everyday material practices of other historically marginalised groups such as the elderly, low-income populations, small-scale farmers, informal workers, migrants and those living at the edge of dominant market circuits remain largely overlooked as legitimate grounds for imagining alternatives to the current civilisational crisis. Many of these practices, which characterise

the ways of life of a significant portion of the global population, continue to bear the symbolic burden of being associated with backwardness and a lack of modernity. This silencing prevents the recognition that they may offer more austere, resilient and sustainability-compatible modes of inhabiting the world.

Without intending to romanticise the precariousness and deprivation often associated with these groups, the aim is to make their material practices visible in order to recognise that responses to today's ecological and social challenges may not stem exclusively from the 'green' alternatives offered by the market. Rather, they may emerge from practical knowledge, forms of community organisation and modes of inhabiting the world that, though historically subordinated, carry critical potential in relation to the hegemonic model of consumption and production (Illich 1975 [1973]; Escobar 2018).

The following pages aim to explore ways of inhabiting that are commonly associated with old age and isolation, based on the premise that by reassessing these conditions, it becomes possible to uncover the value of subaltern sustainability practices that operate outside the formal market economy. These practices reveal an alternative paradigm, one grounded in adaptation, reuse and material circulation rather than linear consumption (Errázuriz 2018). This analysis is situated within a series of research projects developed over the past ten years, which have sought to understand the relationship between sustainability and everyday practices of care in various households across Chile's Metropolitan Region. The research employed a qualitative methodology, combining in-depth interviews, guided tours of participants' homes, participant observation and photographic elicitation. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how sustainability is both performed and constrained within different domestic environments. Across these studies, we engaged with households through repeated visits and case-based analysis, documenting how objects are used, stored, repaired and transformed in everyday life.

ENDURING MATTER: TIME, SPACE, AND THE ETHICS OF MAINTENANCE

Our relationship with objects is not just about what they are, but how they endure and where they belong. In a world obsessed with novelty and connectivity, rethinking material culture demands a deeper look at time and space. This section challenges conventional wisdom by examining two overlooked dimensions of sustainability: oldness and isolation. First, we delve into how the passage of time shapes our attachment to objects – and affects the objects themselves – revealing how wear, repair and continuity resist the pressure to replace. Then, we turn to space in terms of autonomy, not as a lack of connection, but as a fertile ground for self-sufficiency and creative adaptation. By valuing local ingenuity over global conformity, rootedness becomes a practice of resilience rather than scarcity. Together, these perspectives push us to reconsider the ethics of material endurance and the value of autonomous practices in a world driven by constant change.

Within the framework of Western modernity, temporality has been structured around a logic of acceleration, innovation and rupture with the past; an arrow moving forward. Technological and scientific innovation has been institutionalised as a driving force of progress, and contemporary capitalism has turned novelty into a commodity, promoting the constant consumption of the 'latest' in products, fashions and ideas (North 2013). Change is equated with progress, and this is projected onto new generations who are being thought of as bearing flexibility, creativity and openness into the future. Youth is not a biological condition but a cultural value associated – in the Western capitalist world – with productivity, adaptability and individual autonomy. In contrast, old age tends to be viewed as a stage of loss: of usefulness, strength, participation, meaning. As Norbert Elias (1987 [1982]) has argued, modern society relegates the elderly to loneliness and isolation, just as it hides death, as if these were anomalies incompatible with the active life it celebrates.

In the context of a consumer society, advertising reinforces, on the one hand, the value of youth as a collective that challenges authority linked to experience, age, or family tradition. On the other hand, it reinforces the idea of the new and 'history-less' society as synonymous with both efficiency and comfort (Pollay 1986). In the United States, birthplace of the advertising industry and a model for global consumer culture, even the idea of citizenship is constructed around the presumed contribution to the nation through increased consumption of more and newer goods (Cohen 2003). This impulse entails the normalisation of a logic of rapid disposal and replacement: what ages is replaced, what malfunctions is discarded. Durability loses prestige in the face of novelty, and with it, alternative sensibilities and meanings – those associated with wear and the traces of use in objects and places that gather patinas of time and meaning – weaken (Tanizaki 2001). The change is not only aesthetic or visual; it is also ethical and affective. It refers to different ways of inhabiting the world and relating to things.

This section is situated within that tension. It explores how older adults – though not exclusively – tend to relate to objects imbued with history not only for the memories they evoke but also for the kinds of relationships they enable, i.e. practices of care, repair, transmission and prolonged use. At the same time, it investigates how certain objects that have already been used by others, objects one acquires bearing marks and embedded pasts, elicit forms of attention and affection that differ from those encouraged by new objects. In this intersection of biography and materiality lies an alternative form of resistance to the modern mandate of forgetting and replacement. Finally, this section also examines how contrasting temporal regimes shape domestic life: while upper-class homes pursue a daily return to a near 'zero-point' that erases signs of use and suspends the passage of time, working-class households tend to accept the visible accumulation of objects over time, creating layered material environments that remain flexible and open to repair, reuse and adaptation. In line with a cultural theory of value that focuses on how objects shift in status over time (Thompson 1979), all cases reveal that the value and durability of objects fluctuate and depend on cultural constructions sustained by social structures and everyday practices.

In contrast to the prevailing tendency of contemporary consumer culture to valorise 'newness', research on the domestic environments of older adults shows that many

such households exhibit a remarkable persistence of objects, with furniture, curtains, rugs and other items often remaining in the same position for decades (Ranada and Hagberg 2014; Errázuriz 2019; Stafford and Carter 2021), suggesting a resistance to the rapid cycles of replacement.

Although this apparent stability might suggest that these domestic settings are static, one of our case studies, in which we mapped and photographed home spaces and objects along with their histories, care routines and symbolic meanings, shows that they are, in fact, continuously and gradually transforming. Even as objects seem enduring, they are continually affected by everyday processes such as cleaning, repair and maintenance. For instance, routine practices such as storing clothing with mothballs, preserving shoes in carefully arranged boxes and periodically repairing worn furniture play a crucial role in sustaining the longevity of household items. Such maintenance practices are integral to the domestic strategies of care and contribute to the construction of an 'extended self', in which the home is deeply intertwined with personal identity (Belk 1988; Chapman 2005). This case was developed through in-depth interviews, photographic documentation and object mapping conducted inside the household.

Moreover, visible signs of wear and tear on objects are not necessarily stigmatised by the elderly, but frequently embraced as markers of their lived history. In line with Junichiro Tanizaki's (2001) reflections on Japan, the patina on wooden floors or the subtle wear on everyday utensils is often seen in our case studies not as deterioration, but as signs of continued use and care. This is particularly evident in the functional or private areas of the home, where the practical purpose of objects takes precedence over aesthetic considerations. A dented pot, the natural blackening of a frying pan, a tap with worn chrome and traces of rust, or the fading and discoloration of sheets and towels, such transformations are generally accepted as long as they do not compromise the object's primary function. This perspective challenges dominant consumerist narratives that equate wear with obsolescence, even suggesting that objects with patina appeal to us because their visible ageing mirrors our own, helping us come to terms with the passage of time (Wagner 2019).

This approach to object ageing recognises maintenance, repair and re-signification not as optional tasks, but as essential processes for prolonging an object's useful life. Rather than discarding objects at the first sign of wear, many older households adopt strategies that prioritise long-term care and gradual transformation. The permanence and long duration of objects in the homes of older people, along with their natural inclination to establish relationships of care, may diverge from any logic of innovation or novelty. Yet they embody a way of inhabiting time that challenges the dominant temporality of acquisition and disposal (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2013), offering instead an ethic of maintenance. This ethic is expressed not only in affective terms, but also in terms of concrete utility and everyday economy: preserving, repairing and adapting objects helps to avoid unnecessary expense, make use of existing resources and sustain more frugal – yet no less dignified – ways of living. Rather than individual choices, these are moral practices of care (FitzGerald 2024) that legitimise long-term coexistence with the material environment. The elderly person's home under study not only provides shelter and protection for its inhabitants, but also embraces practices that preserve the value of the objects and materials it contains: waxing and polishing the wooden floor periodically, checking appliance filters, repairing loose furniture in a timely manner,

keeping original boxes as added protection when storing, saving packaging, string and containers that might be reused. Within this framework, material longevity becomes intertwined with biographical longevity, and the home is shaped as an environment where relationships with things embody values of continuity, care and sufficiency.

Photo 1. Mixer carefully kept in its original box for several decades. Photo by Tomás Errázuriz.

Just as older adults tend to retain and maintain household objects over long periods, similar logics of care emerge when we shift our focus beyond old age to consider used objects that circulate from hand to hand in different households in Santiago.

In contrast to the common emphasis on the desirability of the 'new' (Campbell 1992; Coskuner-Balli and Sandikci 2014), used, old or even vintage objects may play a vital role in the broader ecosystem of domestic possessions (Clarke 2000; Laitala and Klepp 2017). This was evident in most of the households we visited in the Metropolitan Region of Chile,[1] where second-hand items are frequently valued and enjoy life cycles that extend well beyond their initial owners. Many household items, ranging from furniture and kitchenware to clothing, were neither bought brand-new nor discarded outright. Instead, they passed through multiple hands, circulating within family or community networks and often finding new homes once their usefulness waned in the previous household (Errázuriz et al. 2024).

This circulation takes place outside conventional commercial channels. Rather than a process of re-commodification and singularisation (Kopytoff 1986) through buying and selling in second-hand markets (Gregson and Crewe 2003), the second-hand belongings maintained in these households consist of items left in public spaces, belongings inherited across generations or possessions shared among and exchanged between rela-

tives and acquaintances. Although these channels are usually considered peripheral compared to the dominant consumer market, even in the sustainability literature, they contribute to an alternative and more sustainable mode of managing material goods.

Some middle-class young people living in older areas of the city reported regularly picking up items left on the street in their neighbourhoods, and just as often, leaving things out themselves for others to take. A similar dynamic appears in higher-income neighbourhoods, where young professionals, while not collecting objects directly from the street, often participate in neighbourhood WhatsApp groups to exchange used items. However, the most frequent circulation of used objects tends to occur within family or friendship networks. Based on interviews conducted across multiple households in Santiago, interviewees mentioned clothing passed down between siblings or cousins, objects moving from parents' or grandparents' homes into newly formed households, or second homes furnished entirely with items – and stories – originating in other houses.

Second-hand objects within these networks carry deeper meanings linked to acts of social support and to the personal histories of prior owners (Hood 2016). In many cases, individuals who received or passed on items described the emotional significance of those objects, citing how the stories or memories attached to their past lives can foster a sense of co-responsibility. This notion of shared stewardship means that caring for the object feels almost obligatory, as if preserving it also preserves a bond with the people who owned it before (Finch and Mason 2000; Frykman 2016). There is often a corresponding desire to continue the item's journey; rather than discarding it once it no longer suits their own needs, owners may give it away to another friend or family member, extending its life cycle and embedding it in an ever-widening community of users. One interviewee, speaking about her clothing, mentioned that she is constantly receiving and inheriting 'new' items, while at the same time passing along everything she no longer wears or that no longer fits. The classification of these garments as 'new' despite being old or used by a previous owner challenges linear conceptions of temporality, unsettling the advertising-driven equation between novelty and newness.

Such circulation practices highlight the role of social bonds in fostering attachment to second-hand items. Because these goods are perceived as laden with prior stories, they invite a kind of 'caring economy' that moves well beyond purely economic considerations (Errázuriz et al. 2024). Moreover, people's commitment to second-hand objects frequently manifests as upcycling, understood as an emancipated self-production, where individuals take on the dual role of consumer and producer, co-generating value outside the boundaries of the consumer market (Coppola et al. 2021). Unlike the short-term value associated with newness in purchased items (Dinnin 2009), many second-hand goods in the households studied gain renewed worth through creative restoration, enhancement or even by the action of placing them in a different ecology of objects. Interviewees not only described how they reverse processes of devaluation through maintenance, repair and aesthetic updating of the items they find or receive. They also shared examples of creative projects where parts from unrelated, functionally obsolete objects are combined to generate something entirely new. One participant proudly showed us a terrace table he had built from discarded wooden planks and a pair of cable drums he found on the street.

New owners invest time, resources and emotional energy to restore or relocate these items, forging a sense of ownership and sometimes developing stronger personal con-

nections to them than they would to new products. As a result, second-hand goods become catalysts for a different relationship with material possessions, one more firmly grounded in care, reciprocity and longevity. Moreover, the ability to slow down the deterioration of objects and even enhance their value through intervention reinforces the previous idea that novelty is not exclusive to newness, but rather a cultural and dynamic construct shaped by the practices and meanings consumers assign to objects (Coskuner-Balli and Sandikci 2014).

From a sustainability perspective, these findings challenge the traditional consumer-market paradigm that equates 'better' with 'new' (Campbell 2021). Instead, they underscore how the shared histories and emotional bonds surrounding used and eventually old items can reshape consumption patterns in more responsible ways. When the value of an object is tied to the commitment and care invested by multiple owners over time, it shifts the focus from rapid replacement to longer-term stewardship (Errázuriz 2019). In this sense, second-hand items are not simply cheaper or cost-free alternatives to new products; they represent a model of consumption anchored in community support, resourcefulness and respect for the embedded histories of everyday objects. Additionally, examining the circulation of objects among multiple users who take on active roles in their care and transformation offers new perspectives for thinking about durability beyond the specific relationship established between an object and a single user, a perspective that has long prevailed in design discourse (van Hinte 1997; Chapman 2009).

When examined in greater depth, the prevailing market-oriented narratives that frame 'old' or 'used' items as obsolete, unreliable or lacking in value emerge as social and cultural constructs rather than objective truths (Hood 2016). These narratives become significantly less persuasive when one observes how such objects function in the lives of populations that are – voluntarily or not – less immersed in contemporary consumer markets (Errázuriz et al. 2024). What consumer society often dismisses as 'old' or 'outdated', i.e. marked by visible deterioration or uncertainty, can, in fact, signify adaptability, resilience and security within these contexts. Conversely, 'new' does not inevitably connote innovation and progress alone; it can also bring disruptions, discontinuities and heightened environmental costs (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2013).

It is important to note that temporality, in both its material and symbolic manifestations, is not always linked to the long-life cycles or extended phases of objects, environments or living beings. There are also shorter cycles in which efforts to manage the passage of time align with specific ideals and precepts of inhabitation. Our research shows that households of different socioeconomic backgrounds engage differently with the passage of time and the ageing of materials (Muñoz et al. 2022). In upper-class homes in Santiago, the more public-facing spaces – or representational areas – tend to cultivate an aesthetic of timelessness, where signs of wear and deterioration are systematically erased through continuous maintenance and replacement. In these settings, ageing is perceived as a flaw to be managed rather than an inherent material process, reinforcing a consumption-driven cycle that prioritises renewal over repair. This aesthetic is sustained by the often invisible labour of domestic workers, whose role is to restore the home to a near 'zero-state' or 'newness atmosphere' each day, ensuring that every object is returned to its designated place and that signs of daily use are eliminated. This aesthetic ideal is also widely legitimised in real estate advertising and in disciplinary representations of domestic architecture (Cruz-Petit and Errázuriz 2020).

In stark contrast, the public-facing spaces in working-class homes are more prone to reveal the passage of time, integrating objects that show visible wear yet remain functional. These households exhibit a greater tolerance for the fluidity of material possessions, where many items do not have a fixed or clearly defined place. Unlike upper-class homes, where it is possible to return to a near 'zero state' that reinforces an aesthetic ideal consistent with a culture of distinction (the living room, dining area, home office), working-class homes are marked by a constant layering of uses and meanings, responding to the shifting demands of everyday life. Smaller living spaces and the prioritisation of function over aesthetic appearance foster the inevitable coexistence of diverse objects. The passage of everyday time – across days, but also months and years – is visible throughout the home: a sewing machine sits next to bags and boxes with materials and unfinished projects; children's toys; the keys, wallet and loose change of the household head; a table set for afternoon tea; diplomas, mementos and first communion photos; and a bag containing a broken porcelain figurine waiting to be repaired all find their place. This temporal openness fosters an extended use of resources, discouraging premature disposal and facilitating conservation as an embedded aspect of everyday life. Rather than striving for a static, curated environment, these homes accommodate the evolving materiality of objects, allowing for ongoing adaptation and improvisation (Muñoz et al. 2022).

Photo 2. Living room in a working-class home in Santiago. Photo by Camila Dobbs.

The variety of cases observed across Santiago reveals a multiplicity of ways in which households relate to the passage of time through material objects. Whether through the quiet persistence of old furniture, the circulation of second-hand items or the layered coexistence of things in domestic spaces, these practices invite us to rethink dominant associations between newness and value. The data show that old or used items are not merely tolerated but actively preserved, restored and repurposed as they offer not only stability and reassurance but also foster forms of involvement rooted in care, appreciation and recognition. In contrast to the market-driven logic that equates novelty and newness with progress, these practices embody temporal sensibilities anchored in longevity, improvisation and shared responsibility. Temporal relations with objects are not linear or universal but culturally constructed, shaped by social class, spatial constraints, aesthetic expectations and moral economies of use. Recognising these diverse temporalities challenges the prevailing narrative of consumption and opens space for more situated, plural and sustainable understandings of material life.

Space

Capitalism has promoted connectivity as the ultimate desirable condition for social and material progress. The ability to move people, goods and information seamlessly across distances – although protected by the state – has been portrayed as the backbone of civilisation, shaping urban planning, economic policies and even social aspirations (Harvey 1989; Castells 1996). This relentless pursuit of connectivity has not only fostered economic growth, for a few, but has also entrenched the very consumption patterns and resource exploitation that have led to the current ecological and social crisis. As Neil Brenner (2004) argues, the emergence of global cities and the rescaling of state space have positioned connectivity as a core principle of capitalist development, creating networks that privilege central nodes while marginalising peripheries.

This underlying logic permeates contemporary political and scholarly debates, whether they revolve around the concept of "right to the city" (Lefebvre 2024 [1968]), the dichotomy of centre–periphery (Castells 1977), or the rural-urban divide. In all these discussions, the tension between isolation and connectivity remains central. While access to urban services and economic opportunities is often framed as a right, the notion of connectedness also sustains socio-spatial inequalities, favouring those integrated into the network over those relegated to its fringes. Tim Cresswell (2010) points out that mobility itself has become a politically charged concept, shaping who belongs and who remains on the margins of modern society. Some regions thrive on the constant flow of people and goods, while others remain on the margins, either by circumstance or by choice.

In these not-so-connected spaces, though, creative solutions emerge, not from abundance but from scarcity. In semi-isolated rural areas of Chile, agricultural workers transform everyday objects into tools and machines that serve new functions, driven by necessity rather than nostalgia. The exploration of such spaces remains an under-examined field, particularly within peasant environments where the circulation of objects is notably limited, access to new products is constrained, and the few items that do arrive often remain indefinitely in the household (Opazo et al. 2023). In two separate pro-

jects conducted across rural homes in Chile's central valley, interviews, guided tours, and planimetric and photographic surveys revealed that these settings, far from being static, exhibit a dynamic relationship between domestic objects and their surrounding environment. Local tools, technologies and knowledge are essential for sustaining and continuously reproducing the household, ensuring that objects are not merely acquired and discarded but integrated into the fabric of daily life (Errázuriz 2018; Muñoz et al. 2023).

In these contexts, most objects are either handmade or modified by the inhabitants. New items are rare, and every object requires constant attention and care. This hands-on relationship fosters a deep familiarity and understanding of material culture that stands in stark contrast to the disposable culture prevalent in urban spaces. Ownership is conceived not as mere possession but as an ongoing responsibility and a form of care, where the value of an object is intertwined with its ability to be maintained and repurposed over time (Isenhour and Berry 2020).

These conditions configure a certain perceptual and creative scope in rural inhabitants that allow them to see beyond an object's intended purpose. Many interviewees demonstrated a creative and attentive perspective on materials by recognising potential in objects beyond their original form. Such a vision allows them to imagine new uses, transformations and adaptations for everyday items, thereby revealing an adaptable and sustainable approach to consumption that is deeply rooted in local practices of repair and reutilisation. Recycling or reuse does not arise from a deliberate effort to reduce environmental impact; rather, it reflects a longstanding, embedded relationship between communities and their environment. Materials undergo continuous transformations, underscoring an ethos in which 'waste' is not really part of the vocabulary (Rinkinen and Shove 2023).

In a rural household in San Pedro de Melipilla, observed during fieldwork and documented through on-site observation and photographic recording, an old, broken kitchen – no longer usable despite multiple repairs – was carefully dismantled: during the course of several years, the stove burners were removed and transformed into plant stands, supporting pots of herbs by the garden door. The heavy iron grates became the base for a makeshift barbecue pit. The metal oven cavity itself, scrubbed clean, became a storage box for firewood, keeping it dry near the outdoor cooking area. The knobs, detached and polished, were mounted on a wooden plank in the workshop, now used as hooks for hanging tools and aprons. Even the gas pipes, disconnected and cleaned, found a second life as supports for a trellis where tomatoes climbed. Nothing was wasted, even the screws and small components were saved, stored in a jar for future use. Every part was reimagined with care, woven into the daily rhythms of the household. The kitchen, once a singular unit, now lived on as scattered fragments, each piece redefined by necessity and creativity.

Boundaries between maintenance, care, repair and reuse therefore merge, and there are no fixed definitions of an object's lifespan. Each artifact occupies a fluid state, subject to transformation in response to evolving needs. This is not a passive relationship, but a deeply participatory one, premised on recognising the inherent properties of each material and imagining its potential reconfigurations. By embracing such an adaptive stance toward everyday objects, autonomous households and isolated communities offer a valuable perspective on how broader societies might re-examine their own interactions with the material world.

In any case, this is not merely a rural phenomenon, but a broader condition of isolation, autonomy and self-determination. Whether in geographically remote areas, politically ostracised regions or deliberately self-sufficient communities, creative practices of design-by-use often arises from the challenge of making do. In a research project we conducted during the 2019 social uprising in Chile (Greene and Errázuriz 2024), we examined how both objects and embodied practices were repurposed in response to conditions of repression and resistance. In the context of mass protests, where demonstrators lacked specialised equipment to confront state forces, everyday objects were transformed to express collective discontent and challenge power structures. The material was gathered through field observations, photographic records and the documentation of objects and practices circulating in protest settings. Kitchen utensils were repurposed as noise-making instruments, urban furniture was reconfigured into barricades and ordinary materials were adapted into protective gear against police violence.

In such a context, the scarcity of specialised defensive objects and the lack of formal training for confrontation stood in stark contrast to the abundance of tactical improvisation and the creative resignification of materials. Protesters, many of whom were expressing their discontent with the unequal geography of opportunity produced by capitalism in Chile, engaged in acts of material subversion, transforming the mundane into tools of resistance. This process was not only localised but also shaped by the global circulation of knowledge. Social media and other digital platforms facilitated the rapid dissemination of protest tactics, allowing participants to appropriate and adapt strategies from other movements. For instance, techniques to neutralise tear gas canisters, widely shared online, were directly influenced by the strategies developed during the 2019 Hong Kong protests.

Photos 3a–3d. Rural workstations. Photos by Ricardo Greene.

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Photos 4a–d. Improvised shields during the 2019 Chilean protests. Photos by Ricardo Greene.

In contexts of social unrest, protesters often lack access to conventional defensive tools, as the state holds a monopoly over their distribution. This absence of resources forces them into a form of self-sufficiency, where urban objects are creatively repurposed as makeshift defences. By disrupting the established order and redefining the use of public infrastructure, for example turning street signs into shields or using metal barriers as barricades, protesters do more than resist state repression; they actively reconfigure the urban environment itself. The streets, traditionally sites of circulation and consumption, become arenas of contestation where material ingenuity and collective action reshape the dynamics of power and visibility. In this process, the inability to access state-controlled goods does not result in passivity but instead fosters new forms of agency, creativity and resistance, demonstrating how scarcity can become a catalyst for transformative social practices.

The need to repurpose everyday objects extends beyond moments of political upheaval and into the realm of everyday problem-solving. Across social media platforms and YouTube channels, one finds a proliferation of what could be termed 'witty solutions': practical responses to daily challenges that rely on the adaptation or transformation of objects originally designed for different purposes. Devoid of aesthetic or commercial pretensions, these solutions can be understood as forms of bottom-up innovation, often emerging within communities with limited access to mainstream markets. The phenomenon is not exclusive to a single cultural context but instead reflects a broader, transnational logic of material ingenuity. In India, such adaptations are referred to as *jugaad*; in Brazil, they are known as *gambiarras*; and in Chile, the terms *hechizo* or *chasquilla* describe similar improvised solutions. In English, the concept aligns with the notion of life hacks (Martínez and Laviolette 2024) and, in American pop-culture, the resourcefulness associated with the fictional character MacGyver, famed for his ability to resolve almost any challenge using whatever materials were at hand. And in Cuba, under a long-standing economic embargo, a strong culture of repair and reuse has been crafted. Cars from the 1950s are not merely vintage collectables but active participants in daily life, maintained and reimagined through sheer ingenuity.

Even when there is access to certain ubiquitous materials, what prevails here are logics of scarcity that bring about a way of being self-sufficient despite the apparent abundance. It is not always about the lack of objects but about the need to find a resolution with what is at hand, reimagining the potential of everyday items. We collected thousands of such cases and shared them on an Instagram account called *@albumdechispezas* ('album of witty solutions') dedicated to showcasing these improvised adaptations. These cases were compiled through digital ethnography, including the systematic collection and analysis of user-generated content shared on social media platforms, as well as contributions sent by participants who shared solutions they encountered in different contexts through the platform. Analysing them, a striking pattern emerged: certain industrialised objects dominated the imagery, consistently reappearing across different contexts. These were not high-tech components or expensive materials but rather ubiquitous, inexpensive items readily available for reuse. Among the most recurrent were used tyres, plastic bottles, supermarket carts and plastic fruit crates, objects that, despite their ordinary nature, proved remarkably versatile. Their abundance and accessibility enabled an almost limitless range of adaptations, demonstrating how discarded materials could be reintegrated into everyday life, not as disposable remnants but as fundamental resources to creatively solve everyday challenges.

Far from being isolated instances of individual creativity, these examples illustrate broader material cultures of repair and improvisation. They highlight how resourcefulness is not merely a response to necessity but a dynamic, creative process that redefines the relationship between consumption, waste and innovation. In this sense, what might be dismissed as makeshift solutions can instead be understood as strategies that challenge dominant economic models, offering alternative ways of engaging with materiality that prioritise reuse over disposability.

A similar catalogue of daily solutions in rural areas was produced for the Washing Machine Made of Beetroot exhibition (Rennit 2024), held in Estonia, a title borrowed from a deliberately absurd image in a popular Estonian song. The project, born in a country shaped by its socialist past and small-scale survival strategies, showcases everyday creativity under constrained conditions. The exhibition is more than a nostalgic look at Soviet-era resourcefulness; it highlights how, when formal infrastructures fail, informal ones take shape. During times of scarcity, people learned to build, repair and transform objects, creating hybrid machines and repurposing materials that would otherwise be considered waste. A washing machine made of beetroot, for instance, symbolises this inventive spirit as an emblem of resilience and adaptability.

Self-sufficiency is not idyllic; it is arduous and relentless. Yet it offers a critical perspective on contemporary ideals of progress. The '15-minute city' model, which envisions hyper-localised living with minimal commuting, resonates with some of these isolated practices. Instead of framing these approaches as regressive, they can be understood as forward-thinking responses to environmental and social crises. The Washing Machine Made of Beetroot exhibition captures this paradox: while the objects displayed may seem quaint or eccentric, they represent a proactive stance against obsolescence and environmental harm.

Chile is currently experiencing a demographic trend of reverse migration: urban migrants settling in rural areas, seeking simplicity but often replicating urban infrastructures. But unlike the rural inhabitants whose creativity stems from generational knowledge, these newcomers often romanticise isolation without fully understanding its demands. The resulting practices sometimes clash, as local ingenuity meets imported expectations, and the challenge lies in reconciling the desire for autonomy with the need for community. The shift from rural versus urban to isolated versus connected reframes how we interpret these phenomena. The value of isolation lies not in its distance from modernity but in its capacity to rethink modernity itself. It offers alternative modes of production and consumption, fostering sustainability not as a moral imperative but as a lived necessity. This approach also questions the assumption that connectivity inherently leads to progress. Sometimes, the most profound innovations arise precisely when connections are severed or constrained. From the beetroot washing machine to handmade agricultural tools, from Cuba's vintage cars to Chile's rural repurposing, these practices embody a critical insight: scarcity sharpens creativity, and isolation can be fertile ground for reimagining the material world.

By resisting the lure of disposable consumerism, these communities model a way of living that is both practical and imaginative, rooted in place yet responsive to change. Ultimately, this perspective does not advocate for isolation as an ideal. Rather, it calls for recognising the ingenuity it can foster. In a world increasingly marked by ecological crises and unsustainable consumption, these examples of creative isolation remind us

that progress does not always follow the smooth, linear path we imagine. Sometimes, it bends and adapts, transforming obstacles into opportunities and scarcity into abundance.

CONCLUSIONS

Concluding an article like this, one might feel tempted to become nostalgic, to invoke a longing for slower times and simpler lives. But that would miss the point entirely. This is not a plea to revert to a pre-industrial past, nor an idealisation of frugality or isolation. It is not a call to abandon technology, markets or the complex entanglements of modern life. Instead, it is an invitation to imagine different futures, different worlds, where autonomy and material care coexist with innovation and interconnectedness.

The challenge is not to reject modernity, but to rethink it. Progress, as commonly framed, equates to acceleration, novelty, and the relentless consumption of the new. As scholars of contemporary capitalism have argued, modern development has been closely tied to the compression of time and space and to the cultural valorisation of novelty and constant replacement (Harvey 1989; North 2013). This model, driven by capitalist imperatives, has led us to a crisis where the environmental cost of our way of life becomes increasingly unbearable. Within sustainability debates, this dynamic has been widely criticised for reproducing patterns of overproduction and overconsumption even when framed through the language of 'green' growth (Lorek and Spangenberg 2014; Moore 2016). Instead of merely opposing this model, the aim here is to envision a parallel path: one where technological advances do not undermine the ability to care, to repair, reuse and reinterpret the objects that already surround us.

The tension between time and space in sustainability practices is fundamental. On the one hand, the modern narrative glorifies speed, novelty, and continuous replacement, sidelining the value of permanence and endurance. The faster we innovate, the quicker objects become obsolete, leading to a disposability culture that fosters wastefulness rather than long-term care. However, in older households and isolated contexts, time is not measured by product lifecycles but by the ongoing relationships between people and their material surroundings. The very act of maintaining, repairing and re-signifying everyday objects challenges the notion that ageing is synonymous with decline. Instead, it becomes an opportunity to sustain connections, not just with things but with the practices and knowledge that make their endurance possible. In this sense, the everyday practices described throughout this article resonate with growing bodies of scholarship on repair, maintenance and care as central dimensions of sustainable material cultures (Gregson et al. 2009; Dant 2010; Teidearu 2024). Similarly, the concept of space is often framed through connectivity and global integration. Yet, isolation, rather than being inherently negative, can foster forms of self-sufficiency and creativity that are not defined by market availability but by human ingenuity. The challenge lies not in romanticising isolation but in acknowledging that autonomy can emerge from necessity, crafting responses to scarcity that are inventive and adaptive.

What emerges from this reflection is not a neo-luddite manifesto but a call to experiment with different ways of living. What would happen if we restructured our cities to reduce dependency on global supply chains? What if we reimagined our homes as sites

of repair rather than consumption? What if the public space, rather than being designed solely for transit and commercial exchange, became a place for collaboration, care, and creative reuse? These questions do not aim to romanticise precariousness but to question the logic that equates abundance with progress and scarcity with failure.

The practices examined throughout this text, from rural ingenuity to urban protest, illustrate how our material surroundings, when met with creativity and collective effort, can yield transformative possibilities. These cases are not merely anecdotes of resilience; they reveal the potential to break the consumerist cycle and establish alternative forms of inhabiting. As some scholars have suggested, many of these practices already prefigure different ways of organising material life beyond the dominant paradigm of industrial growth (Illich 1975 [1973]; Escobar 2018). If the crisis of modernity calls for new paradigms, then these practices, emerging from conditions of exclusion or self-imposed limitation, offer concrete pathways to reimagine our relationship with the material world.

It is not about rejecting technology but redefining our engagement with it. The disassembled kitchen or the makeshift shields crafted from urban debris are not symbols of backwardness but of a forward-looking creativity that resists linear narratives of progress. They teach us that autonomy and technological ingenuity are not mutually exclusive but can coexist. To move forward, thus, we must question our habitual relationships with objects, consumption and the spaces we inhabit. The crisis we face is not just environmental but existential: how to inhabit a world that we ourselves are exhausting through our unchecked habits of use and disposal. To envision futures that resist the logic of constant replacement, we need to cultivate a more mindful relationship with our material environments.

In the end, it is a call to embrace a more participatory material culture, where technology serves human and ecological needs rather than dictating them. It is about acknowledging that sustainability is not a fixed state but an ongoing negotiation, where the value of an object is measured not solely by its novelty but by the relationships it fosters and the possibilities it holds for transformation. Recognising and learning from these everyday practices helps to reposition sustainability not only as a technological or policy challenge but also as a cultural and material practice embedded in ordinary forms of inhabiting the world. Imagining these alternative futures does not mean giving up on progress; it means redefining what progress can look like when rooted in autonomy, care and shared responsibility.

NOTES

1 An administrative region that includes Santiago, the capital city of Chile, along with its surrounding urban and rural areas.

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