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Perspective

Thirdspace: 'Small circle' economies

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The Circular Economy (CE) is regarded as a viable alternative to traditional economic models, and a critique of unbridled consumerism made possible by innovations in production speed and efficiency. There is broad agreement on the need for its global implementation, to move away from the 'take-make-dispose' logic of modern production processes and achieve the highly desirable triple win of 'people, planet and profit'. At the same time, there are fundamental tensions in current understanding of the CE, perhaps unsurprising, given its over 200 published definitions (Kirchherr et al., 2023). Current understandings of the CE often emphasise large-scale, systematic shifts toward sustainability, focusing on closed-loop systems that minimise waste and maximise resource efficiency. However, these approaches can sometimes overlook the nuanced, localised, and adaptive practices that communities engage in at the margins. Such tensions call in question not only the CE's ability to solve global challenges, but its utility and viability.

In this essay, we consider an alternative perspective. We propose that nascent CE literature can be mapped to and extended through Edward Soja's (1996) influential concept of 'thirdspace'. Although typically used in geography and urban studies, Soja's thirdspace framework seeks to move beyond entrenched binaries and, instead, provide a nuanced, fluid, and inclusive understanding of messy liminalities. Through this, Soja's work has had a wide impact on academic disciplines studying culture change, spatial planning, policymaking, and – crucially – environmental studies, with a specific focus on the social, ecological, and built environment nexus, which the CE occupies. As a result, we opine that the CE also constitutes a messy and liminal thirdspace – a boundary – and point to the consequences of such a repositioning for future research.

The concept of thirdspace arises as a critique of entrenched (but not

always noticeable) binaries. As an example, CE research can be mapped along the 'real/imagined' binary. In this sense the CE is the utopic (and often criticised as unrealistic) alternative to existing production models, their linear, extractive, and environmentally damaging logic. Repositioning the CE as thirdspace allows it to account for ongoing, transitional difficulties between present realities and desirable futures. Consequently, as a thirdspace boundary, the CE can be both an adaptation of existing (recycling) practices, as well as large scale, transformative change through business model innovation, new product development and social responsibility. CE research also occupies the 'centre/periphery' binary. CE transition can be viewed as driven by centralised policymaking at national and even supranational level. This can appear at odds with the challenge of regional implementation, which requires the co-ordination of business, community and government stakeholders and is predicated on (often limited) collaboration and knowledge sharing (Cherrington et al., 2024). Occupying the thirdspace boundary between centre and periphery allows a move away from the need to implement and coordinate top-down CE policy and instead, move to a plurality of smaller-scale circular economies. Such 'small circles' would reflect their specific bio-socio-economic contexts, and incorporated diverse regional geographies, communities, and histories. These 'small circles' represent localised, community and place-based practices that operate within liminal spaces. When they interact, they form networks of exchange, cooperation, and mutual support, creating a dynamic ecosystem of circular practices. These interactions can take various forms, such as sharing resources, exchanging knowledge, or collaborating on initiatives. The overlapping areas of these small circles represent zones of shared interests, values, and objectives. This convergence not only strengthens the individual practices but also amplifies their impact, demonstrating the potential for a more inclusive and adaptive CE

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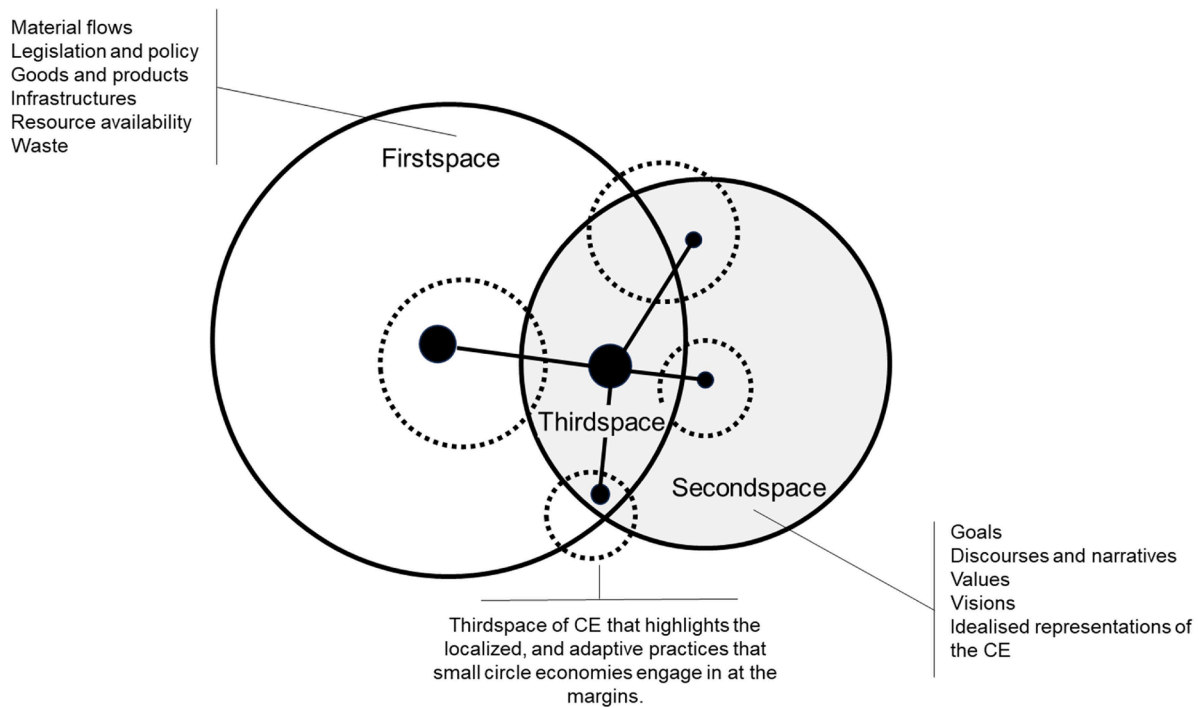


Fig. 1.. The CE as thirdspace.

framework. Finally, CE studies can also embody the 'subject/object' binary, whereby systemic issues such as environmental degradation, resource scarcity and waste are discussed as somehow separate from human experience. Moving into the thirdspace border can also allow the CE to engage with civil society, including grassroots organisations and communities. It can focus not only on slowing and closing material flows, but also on social protections and equity measures. Through this, it can enable advocacy, education, and community initiatives that promote responsible (consumption) as well as production.

In Fig. 1 (below), each dotted, small circle represents individual, small circle economies. There are overlaps between such small circle economies and existing, firstspace and secondspace practices (see Fig. 1 for examples of areas of overlap). Small circle economies exist at the margins of firstspace and secondspace and connect in thirdspace – for instance, by resource sharing, undertaking collaborative initiatives and running networking events, which facilitate knowledge exchange flows and community capital building. Academic institutions can further support the creation of localised ecosystems, by bringing together community, business, and local government institution stakeholders. This stakeholder nexus is represented through the all-black circles in Fig. 1 and refer to (an) individual(s), or teams co-ordinating the knowledge or resource sharing (Cherrington et al., 2024) in thirdspace.

The repositioning of the CE as thirdspace, that is - a messy, liminal space which includes physical and tangible material components, as well as imaginary and aspirational ones has several consequences for future scholarship.

First, the CE is a set of processes, not a set of outcomes. As thirdspace, the CE is not rigid, static, or fixed, but always produced and reproduced. Such a proposition views the CE as a boundary between what is (linear economy) and what is transitioned towards (a fully regenerative economy). Yet, this boundary is mobile, in response to interactions across three borders: the materiality of current practices, the symbolic language and visioning of a desirable future state and the plurality of regional knowledges and practices and community settings (Cherrington et al., 2024). Thus, to be impactful, future research should account for this complexity – whether by adopting an interdisciplinary lens, or by adopting longitudinal methodologies. In addition, scholars should

account for the systemic totality of thirdspace with its co-occurring and parallel processes, feedback loops and time delays.

Second, CE processes can accommodate a plurality of conceptualisations, which do not require coherence, synchronicity, or a single best way of implementing. In this way, the CE may be introduced and regulated in a top-down way through policy, legislation, and the setting of – for example – emission targets. The CE can be driven by technological and business model innovation, which can vary not only by setting but by industry and sector. The CE can also be a multitude of regional processes and thus constitute numerous small circles, accounting for regional knowledge and practices. If so, scaling up those processes would still present a formidable challenge on account of pre-existing barriers such as vested interests, short-term thinking, and institutional. Future research should study the hitherto elusive balance which businesses, policymakers, and communities, as occupiers of firstspace and secondspace, must strike.

Third, the plurality of CE conceptualisations must be anchored in specific bio-socio-economic contexts. Materiality is at the core of the CE, but it cannot be studied in isolation from regional stakeholders and their settings. Just as the viability of the CE economy is predicated on its ability to be intentionally restorative and regenerative, its impact must be measured on its success in opening and sustaining a just space for society with access to decent work. Here, researchers can chart regional tensions between the need to turn a profit, and overarching aspirations for social equity and environmental sustainability. Maintaining a regional lens also accords regional actors the agency to engage and reproduce the tensions, but also the connection between policymakers, businesses, and communities in their regional thirdspaces.

Realising theory into practice requires concerted efforts across multiple fronts. Businesses must embrace circularity as a core principle of their operations, redesigning products, processes, and business models to minimise waste and maximise resource utilisation. Governments must play a crucial role in setting enabling policies and regulations that incentivise but do not place unnecessary regulatory barriers to circular practices. Communities must be empowered and engaged to adopt CE practices in their daily lives, even on a 'smaller circle' scale. A thirdspace approach can help in focusing not simply on continuities with

existing (firstspace) practices and deficiencies with desirable (secondspace) goals but by accepting the need to study circularity on its individual, regionally and community-specific terms.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Constantine Manolchev: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Ruth Cherrington:** Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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