

First prototype of the solar powered server that runs Lowtechmagazine.com website. The solar charge controller (on the right) is powering the server (on the left) through a USB-cable.

[IRAD – Institut de recherche en Art et en Design](#)

## COMPTE-RENDUS INNOVANTS D'ANTIQUES TECHNOLOGIES

Interview de Kris De Decker, fondateur de Low-Tech magazine

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11 mai 2022 par [Kris De Decker](#), [Nicolas Nova](#)

### TEXTE

**Nicolas Nova:** You are the creator and author of “[Low-Tech Magazine](#)”, a magazine and blog that is published in English, Dutch and Spanish since 2007. Can you introduce us to this initiative?

*Kris de Decker:* I started my career as a high-tech journalist, the one who would interview people who had invented something new in science and technologies. After ten years, I realised that novelties often create more problems than they solve. That’s how – and also because I was very badly paid as a freelance journalist – I decided to start my own magazine, *Low-tech Magazine*, to solve those bold issues. And I decided to focus on “old technologies”, instead on reporting on new ones. If you read books about technology, you quickly realise that the introduction generally deals with their history from the 20th century on, as if nothing happened before. But of course humans have been around for much longer, always inventing things ! Looking at a wider historical context, you notice very different patterns and you come to very different conclusions. That became my goal with the magazine.

In the beginning, this made me a bit of a weirdo. People laughed at me, some even became aggressive! Things changed over time, I'm definitely not alone anymore in this. Of course, I also discovered that I was far from the first to have these thoughts, and that there was a whole tradition tradition that is much older than *Low-tech Magazine*. I'm probably still fighting a lost cause, but people don't laugh at me so often anymore. I've worked with universities, the blog is very successful... People start to realise that new technologies do not only offer advantages but also take something away. They come with a lot of problems. You win something, but you lose a lot at the same time. Smartphones are a good example of this: they are convenient but also addictive. People need them and hate them at the same time. Communication technologies are influencing our lives in a very ambiguous way. Within this context, my position isn't so weird anymore, and of course I keep going.

## Urban Fish Ponds: Low-tech Sewage Treatment for Towns and Cities \*

In the mid 20th century, whole cities' sewage systems safely and successfully used fish to treat and purify their water. Waste-fed fish ponds are a low-tech, cheap, and sustainable alternative to deal with our own shit — and to obtain high protein food in the process.



Page size: 1.26MB  
Screenshot from the solar version of Lowtechmagazine.com. Image: Fish ponds in the East Kolkata Wetlands – the largest sewage-fed aquaculture system in the world today. Source: Edwards, 2008.

### ***N.N.*: Low-tech Magazine started almost fifteen years ago. How did it evolve over time?**

*K.d.D.*: In the early years it was mostly me writing and doing everything by myself, but now we're a whole team. I did the [Human Power Plant](#) project with Melle Smets, then I did the [Solar Powered Website](#) with other colleagues. I have also worked with the [Demand Centre](#) from Lancaster University in the UK. People showed an interest in collaborating pretty early on, and it's accelerated ever since. I still write articles every now and then, but a lot of other things are happening at the same time – design projects for instance. The Solar Powered Website was a big jump as it attracted a lot of attention. It's an art project and a practical website at the same time, which sets it apart.

### ***N.N.*: The name of the magazine is quite evocative and important with regards to your purpose. How would you define the term 'low-tech'? Has its definition evolved at all in the last twenty years?**

*K.d.D.*: Well, the child had to have a name. At the beginning, some people found it sounded very negative. In the end, it says what it has to say. In France, where low-tech as an idiom is most popular, it is defined as a concept, as a noun, it's '*les low-tech*' as they say. But if you look it up in the dictionary, it's actually an adjective. The essence of the "low-tech" philosophy is the realisation that we keep reinventing stuff according to criteria that are very specific and clearly not sustainable. Every new phone is less sustainable than the previous model. The Amish in the US are my heroes in that regard. We don't need to copy the lifestyle of the Amish, but I admire that they keep a critical eye on new

technologies. They have trial periods to assess how a technology works, according to their own criteria; for instance to see if the effect is positive or damaging for the community. Of course, it also depends on the Amish groups. They don't all follow the same rules.

In my opinion, the effort in France to define '*les low-tech*' is a dead-end street. You cannot apply it to everything. It doesn't have to be appropriate technology from the 1970s with an old-fashioned smell to it, static and backwards. The Solar Powered Website, for instance, shows that you can apply low-tech to anything. It's about trying to stir technology in another direction, following different criteria.



Article « How to Build a Practical Household Bike Generator », Lowtechmagazine.com

***N.N.:* That's a good way to segue into the discussion on "de-production". As a long-time observer of low-tech solutions and ways of making things, have you come across interesting ideas or projects around this notion?**

*K.d.D.:* De-production is a new, interesting concept, one that I wasn't familiar with. But I can see the idea behind it. For many technologies, the first questions should be: 'Do we need this? Do we have to build it in the first place?'. If you take building for instance, it's easy to see that we could stop building new houses and just make do with what we have. It's been shown that many buildings in the world are actually standing empty. In a city like Barcelona, it's obvious that there's a huge shortage of living space and yet, at the same time, half of the city is empty because the apartments are second houses belonging to rich people who don't live there. It's just not well distributed. Another example is cars. If we stopped producing them, there would still be cars. Look at Cuba for instance. Cars can be repaired for ever and ever, without even having to give up modern technologies. But of course there's the economic aspect. It's not a coincidence that Cuba is a communist country.

The problem with concepts like de-production, degrowth and low-tech though is you could basically define them as 'how to kill the economic system.' Obviously, this is a very political stance that scares lots of people.

***N.N.:* With the notion of de-production, there's less emphasis on producing new things but you still need people to repair things, to maintain them and to clean them, to find spare parts and to produce alternative spare parts. This is both an economic and a design issue that's interesting to consider from multiple perspectives.**

*K.d.D.:* In our economic system, we're taxing labour. Labour is expensive. We're not taxing energy so much. Electricity is still very cheap if you compare the amount of time you need to produce it with the wages you would earn in the same amount of time. It takes at least 10 hours to produce 1 kWh on a bike

generator. I think the electricity price in France is roughly 0.20 euro per kWh, so that is what you would earn in that day!

As a result, in this system, everyone, and especially production facilities, is constantly trying to replace human labour with machines. So many jobs have been lost through technology. It would be a double win to turn it around and create a lot of interesting jobs. When I left school, the only thing I knew was what I didn't want to do. All the jobs looked equally crappy. I would have loved to be hired as a bridge operator for instance, and have time for myself while I worked. It would make sense to hire people instead of using machines, and people would be happier. By turning the dynamic around, you actually solve lots of problems, not just one. For a start, you create jobs and lower energy consumption. Whatever is presented as a solution today never goes to the core of the problem, which means it's not really a solution at all.



Article « Pigeon Towers: A Low-tech Alternative to Synthetic Fertilizers », Lowtechmagazine.com. Photo credit: Bekleyen, A. (2009). The dovecotes of Diyarbakır: the surviving examples of a fading tradition. *The Journal of Architecture*, 14(4), 451-464.

***N.N.:* The notion of production is based on this idea that we need to produce something new because it's the innovative part that matters to people, whereas in history there are examples of production that is not separated from maintenance, transformation or readjustment, in a sort of permanent coexistence with materials. This helps reframe the discussion around how we chose certain technologies and the question of their afterlife. In the past few years, have you come across examples that you've found stimulating about the consequences of degrowth or de-production?**

*K.d.D.:* Nowadays 'circular economy' has become a buzz word. But look back a hundred years and just about everything was a circular economy! Think about wool: nowadays sheep are bred for meat and the wool is thrown away because it's cheaper to get rid of it than to re-use it. It requires very intense labour to turn dirty wool into clothing. This would never have happened in the old days, when nothing got lost. There was no waste. Even human waste was re-used. Urine was fundamental for a lot of production processes. A simple example to answer your question is repairing. It's economically unattractive but it's easy to see the sustainability of it. And yet it requires a lot of research to find someone who can fix your stuff.

***N.N.:* It's not impossible though. In Haiti, in Port-au-Prince, people have no access to spare parts and yet they can repair a smartphone with parts from old phones and wooden pieces!**

*K.d.D.:* From the moment you leave Europe or the USA, it's there. Most people live a low-tech life. People in Ghana make cars out of our old cars, which are exported there. Is that a new car or a repaired car? In any case, it works and keeps working forever.

***N.N.:* It's a form of production in itself. Can one consider de-production or degrow as a trajectory instead of an end point? Not as a perfect solution for tomorrow morning but as a path that is context-sensitive. Situations and skills differ from one region to the next, as you often stress in**

## ***Low-tech Magazine.***

*K.d.D.:* Totally. If you've been following *Low-tech Magazine* for a long time you will have noticed that every five or six years I revisit the same topic, like sailing ships for instance. First I published an article that argued for the return of this kind of vehicle. Then people said sailing ships need too much human power, so I wrote an article about an automated sailing ship. In the last article, I ask the question how a future sailing ship could look like and then the answer is that it is mostly back to the old form and handling, with some improvements and compromises.

Every new article is just a step in the thinking process, and feedback in the form of comments makes the article almost immediately obsolete. So, really, it's a continuous project and a project of the commons. There's so much knowledge in the feedback, it's never-ending.

***N.N.:* There's also the archiving of the different projects, discussions and comments in *Low-tech Magazine*, which is a real treasure trove of ideas and inspiration, especially in the context of an Art and Design School.**

*K.d.D.:* Even though the archive is quite big now, in a way it's probably still just scratching the surface. Because of the time dimension of human history for one thing, but also the fact that low-tech has always been local knowledge. It's more than I can dig up by myself. We're so focused on one way of doing things nowadays – we put the same buildings in Switzerland, Dubai and Sweden. They might look different but it's the same technology. Likewise, the same agriculture is pushed in every environment, which is totally destructive. Traditionally, in the same country, the type of agriculture varies even from village to village, because of local weather, for instance. Another topic to focus on is discarded material there's also all the garbage from the industrial age – car parts for instance. They can serve different purposes. They're so abundant you could design a whole economy around it. Is that de-production or degrowth? I'm not sure about it, but it can lead to interesting alternatives to consumer society.

## CONTENU APPARENTÉ

Non classé



29.11.2022

### DE LA NÉCESSITÉ D'UNE NOUVELLE COMMUNICATION DANS L'ESPACE PÉDAGOGIQUE INTERGÉNÉRATIONNEL

Le même formé avec la phrase « Ok Boomer » résume bien le fossé qui s'est creusé entre les générations ces dernières années. D'un côté des Millenials et des Gen Z en...

Design d'espace, Master en  
Architecture d'intérieur



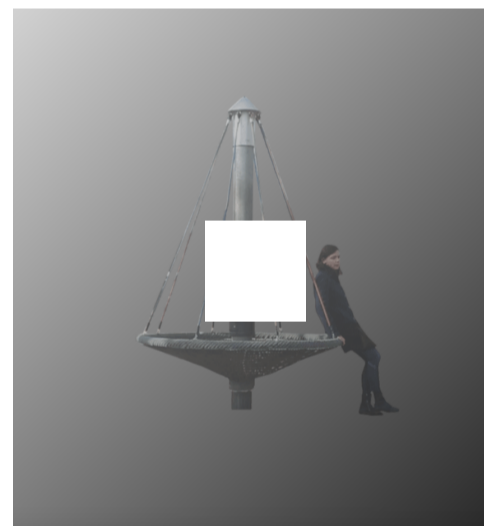
10.10.2022

### NIGHT EXPRESS : LE TRAIN DE NUIT, VERSION CONFORT

ENTRETIEN AVEC  
ELIZAVETA KRIKUN

L'Europe s'est donnée pour objectif de relancer plusieurs lignes de trains de nuit afin de réduire l'empreinte écologique du transport de

Arts visuels, Communication  
visuelle, Master Media Design



29.08.2022

### TALKING HEADS – OLIA LIALINA

EXPERIENCE OF  
EXPERIENCING  
EXPERIENCE

En conversation avec la critique d'art Jill Gasparina et l'anthropologue des cultures numérique Nicolas Nova, la net artiste Olia Lialina témoigne dans cette Talking

[personnes. On parle de relier Paris à Barcelone ou à Madrid...](#)

[Heads du changement de paradigme intervenu au cours...](#)

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