

ARCHITECTURE'S CLIMATE CRUSADE

Ann Dingli reports on a summer of climate struggle, and what architecture sees as its emerging role in the challenge



People don't seem to enjoy talking about climate change. Why would they? It touches on the inescapability of consumerism, collective waste and a historic failure to effect significant change. But this year it became impossible to ignore the climate conversation, with Greta Thunberg famously declaring that our house was on fire. Yet we knew this already; climate scientists have warned for decades about the apparent effects of a carbon-reliant way of life. It's not that we didn't hear those warnings but, seemingly, we weren't motivated enough to heed them.

Cut to April 2019, and our heads were forcibly turned by a period of general disorder in London. Many of us were compelled to think about the climate crisis as we sat in hours of traffic while a group called Extinction Rebellion protested for one of the planet's most urgent causes. The events coincided with the birth of a new architectural activism, from two separate but like-minded camps.

'We were on Waterloo Bridge during Extinction Rebellion's [demonstrations], reflecting on how XR is brilliant at raising awareness. We started talking about the industry that we work in, and how if we're going to see change it's going to have to happen within regulation and policy', said Joe Giddings. He is just one of a group of practitioners who joined together in April 2019 to form ACAN, or Architects Climate Action Network—a group of individuals within architecture and construction acting against the proclaimed 'twin crises of climate and ecological breakdown'. They are a non-hierarchical organisation focusing on industry action at citizen level. Their moment of realisation was spurred by what they saw as a missing link in the climate conversation. 'We realised that there was this gap in the market for activism within architecture', Lauren Shevills,

another member of ACAN, recalls. 'That's where we started developing this idea of what a network could be.'

Elsewhere in London, Steve Tompkins of Haworth Tompkins was having conversations with industry leaders about what could be done to 'try to widen the agency' within the profession. 'I wrote to all of the Stirling Prize winners with Caroline Cole from Colander [Associates]', he recounts, describing the genesis of Architects Declare—an initiative that identifies the prevailing crises at hand and calls for industry action. '[A] group of us met and there was consensus that a) there is a serious problem; b) none of us is doing anything like enough [to address it], and; c) it might be helpful for us to try to galvanise action from the wider profession.'

In May 2019, Architects Declare published an 11-point action plan as a framework to encourage change across the profession. Seventeen RIBA Stirling Prize-winners became founding signatories—an ensemble act driven at securing enough attention to stimulate serious transformation. 'The choice of the Stirling Prize-winners was based around our potential impact in terms of

publicity', Tompkins explains. 'It's now very centralised and non-hierarchical. It's not about the Stirling Prize-winners telling everybody else what to do, it's just a call for us all to get involved.'

By June, the RIBA had declared a climate emergency. Come August, individual practices were announcing their own intentions to join the wider debate. Next came a double-bill of climate awareness activity: the Architecture of Emergency summit, and the Global Climate Strike just one day later.

Around this activity, ACAN and Architects Declare formed just one branch of a nuanced network. The UK Green Building Council (UKGBC) and the London Energy



What's in store — protests on Store Street crescent





Instigated by the UKBGC, the crowd on Store Street 'convincingly signalled industry buy-in'

Transformation Initiative (LETI) were already pragmatically offering tools and support towards a less carbon-demanding profession. Cross-over ensued. 'We speak to LETI the whole time, we speak to UKGBC, to ACAN, and to the student group. There is very much a sense of shared purpose', Tompkins confirms. Indeed, both ACAN and Architects Declare acknowledge a proverbial strength in numbers. 'If we all agree to lobby against one thing, five different voices from powerful organisations are going to be more effective than one', Shevills points out.

The UKGBC instigated the gathering of troops on the day of the strike, rallying members of the profession in scores outside the Building Centre on Store Street. The crowd convincingly signalled industry buy-in, a trend described by Tompkins as an 'enormous groundswell of energy'. Yet amid the growing talk, what do these organisations believe to be the most urgent call to action for the profession—an industry that is apparently responsible for 40 per cent of the UK's energy-related carbon dioxide emissions?

'Make retro-fitting more attractive', Shevills asserts, while Giddings adds that effectively measuring carbon could bring about practical change. Tompkins echoes this proposal: 'One of the things we could do quite quickly is to standardise an embodied carbon and whole-life-carbon tool'.

'To paint the broader picture, economically speaking, we're going to have to rethink how we make our money', says Shevills. Moving beyond the built environment is a point that has been repeatedly made. In her keynote speech at the Architecture of Emergency event, Interrobang director and co-chief curator of the 2019 Oslo Architecture Triennale, Maria Smith, insisted that there had to be 'a movement against domination'. Her rousing cry for communal action urged industry members to 'work together to break down the next barrier—the way that we structure our society, our economy'.

'Construction can't begin to engage with the magnitude of the problem unless there's more joined-up thinking', Tompkins says. 'It's about how the global economy and global society can join to address this issue.'

ACAN's Giddings also suggests conversations about financial cost be converted to discussions on carbon costs, signalling a way forward that includes all stakeholders in the conversation. A key focus for Architects Declare is to embolden practitioners to exert pressure on the powers that be, encouraging regulatory and legislative transformation, enabling the broader construction industry—with all its distinct priorities—to fall in line.

Lara Kinnair, Merry Arnold



Voice of youth — a placard puts the issue succinctly

'It's a shift', says Tompkins, 'all of these quantum changes in practice tend to happen quite quickly once the case is unequivocally made, once there's enough goodwill and understanding. Then I think many of us feel that the change can and will happen. And if it doesn't happen quickly then all bets are off, frankly.'

When asked what success might look like, both camps profess difficulty in picturing a definite eventuality, but broadly point to an industry-wide consensus on regenerative, non-extractive design. So are people warming up to the climate discussion? 'Conversations are starting to happen', Giddings says. 'It feels like there's change in the air.' Tompkins is invigorated by the effort being taken up beyond the UK's shores: 'What's been most encouraging is the international sign up, the lack of cynicism around it'. The collective climate action drive is about raising an alarm, he says, about inviting genuine reflection on how the profession can begin to see the bigger picture. 'I think the way forward is clear.' ●

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