CLIMATE

This pamphlet is one of a series produced as part of the research project ***Architecture after Architecture: Spatial Practice in the Face of the Climate Emergency***.

Each publication introduces a topic, concept or theme crucial to the project through a range of perspectives and asks 'What does it mean in the context of climate, architecture, and spatial practice?'

Based on ongoing discussions amongst the research team and others, the pamphlets aim to be reflective as well as projective. They are preliminary in nature, written to be accessible, and usually written by one author working in collaboration with other members of our collective, **MOULD**.

Architecture after Architecture
Spatial Practice in the Face of the Climate Emergency

CLIMATE

Much more than *average weather*

Climate defines and describes ideas and experiences of human relations with/in nature, and therefore shapes ways of acting on/with the Earth and other non-human forces.

When thinking about climate, one also needs to think in relation to time. Emergency is just one way of thinking about the current time of climate, which encompasses a certain understanding of past, present, future, and their interrelation. An emergency suggests that we need immediate solutions, which will take us to a time beyond ecological, social, and economic crises.

These crises are challenging such linear and teleological forms of thinking, demanding new approaches. Can we do away with the present as a fixed point from which the future follows? And is it possible to think and act with climate in other ways? And what might this mean to architecture and the current project of solutions?

The temporality of climate

Climate is one method for understanding the relations between earth systems, including humans, and the broad trends associated with their behaviour and interrelation in certain areas. Implicit in the statistical notion of climate is a certain reading of time, founded on an absolute relationship between the observable past, the inhabited now, and the forecast future.

From Greek 'klima', meaning 'inclination', and 'klinein', meaning 'to lean'— climate described the earth divided up into zones based on their latitude.

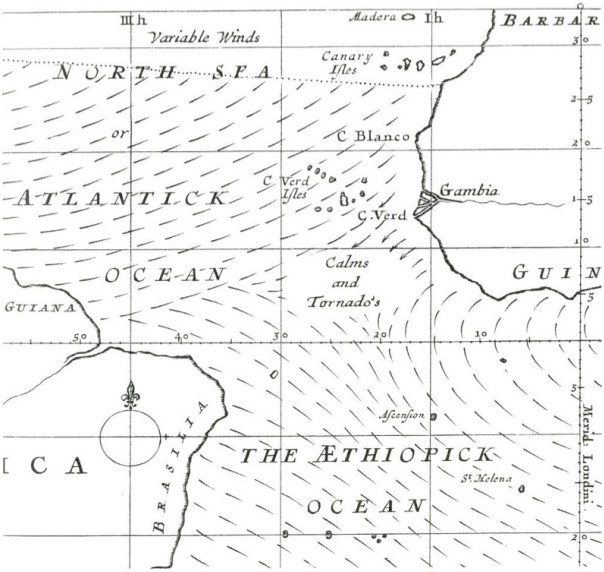

Figure 1.

Definitions of climate are based on observations, which facilitate projections: norms, patterns, and precedents are used to anticipate a future. This form of meteorology–as–prediction was refined as part of the European project of colonialism, as an attempt to bring order to the dynamic phenomena upon which its trade depended. Alongside similar emerging disciplines such as anthropology, and geography, colonial meteorology established statistical methods, and modes of representation, which both reflected and reinscribed predominant ideas about the power of (some) humans to master nature.

The acknowledgement of humans as a planetary force (hence the Anthropocene)—one that shapes climate as well as being shaped by it—is now rewriting the history of climate, as new measures and evidence emerge. Climate cannot only be understood as material background to human social relations, but rather as both constitutive of, and substantially altered by them.

In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, human relations with climate have been described in terms of greenhouse effect, inadvertent climate modification, global warming, climate change, climate variability, –crisis, –breakdown, and –emergency. Each term foregrounds a different set of priorities and ways of thinking about the temporality of climate, and of human relations with/in it. In turn, each suggests different kinds of responses to climate breakdown.

The problem with a certain reading of time

What is common to all these terms of climate is their finitude: they project scenarios of collapse, maybe even apocalypse. In so doing they put excessive focus on linear and universal causality typical of Modern frameworks of reasoning, including climate: thinking of time as a series of periods stacked onto one another, where the future follows from the past, and insodoing leaves it behind.

The projection of an ending not only disengages from the now of lived experience, paralysing us with the scale of the problem—it is also generative of solutionist responses that suggest the moment of crisis can be overcome.

Because climate is produced through the interactions that humans are part of, it is not a force outside of human relations that then can, or needs to, be defended against. It is the result of certain, currently dominant, modes of life. We need to move away from an understanding of the human as the all-knowing subject and do away with any supposedly fixed positionality 'outside' climate relations; this serves to depoliticise climate and masks violence and power, and humans' role in perpetuating them.

The presumption of urgency—the idea that things must be responded to quickly—merely allows other harmful actions to be considered acceptable, or not thought about, whilst the root of the problem remains undisturbed. This is precisely because 'emergency' brings with it the idea that you can suspend politics and

[...] the current crisis can precipitate a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility [...] Thus, our usual historical practices for visualizing times, past and future, times inaccessible to us personally [...] are thrown into a deep contradiction and confusion.

Dipesh Chakrabarty, The Climate of History

unprecedentedness [...] makes it possible to willfully forget certain previous instances or lessons related to a crisis. an epistemology of crisis involves their being solutions that can occur quickly, maintain the current state of affairs, lack any sense of realism, and further entrench power.

Kyle Powys Whyte, Against Crisis Epistemology

just get on with solving the immediate issue, in a technical sense. No! The crisis stems not from the material but the political. Or, rather, it is impossible to divorce the aspects of action/reaction that are entirely material from those that are entirely social or political. Dealing with climate means being critical of the conditions that have created and constituted climate—and dealing with those conditions, not the effects.

The language of emergency also fails on its own terms. Governments of the West have been in a state of 'emergency' for at least thirty-three years, since 1988, when NASA's James Hansen told reporters outside the US Senate Hearing to which he had just testified, that 'it is time to stop waffling'. In the intervening decades, human activity emitted more greenhouse gases than during previous several millennia of civilisation. There has been no great mobilisation, only increasing inequality and exclusion.

Emergency and crisis are escalationist and militarised terms, specifically attempting to make climate an existential security issue (for a certain powerful few, such as in the proposal to move climate change response from the IPCC into the UN security council). Governments position victims of climate change as enemies, dangers (e.g., as potential refugees), wilfully neglecting the uneven impact of climate. The climate emergency as discourse is a moment and a demand which frames the process in a certain way. Against this, the climate emergency as lived undoes these ways we think about it, exceeding the statistical and apolitical framing.

The (spatial) politics of uneven disaster

Part of the problem with the universal 'emergency' is that it reflects the way in which the term 'climate' homogenises, brings everything into one. The emergency is an act not of a whole species but of specific movements, peoples, and idea(l)s. The presentation of humanity as a homogeneous category under threat seeks to erase this unevenness.

Viewing the global ecological crisis solely through a climate lens is fraught with false solutions and spurious dilemmas.

Nityanand Jayaraman, The Perils of Climate Activism

Climate is a catch-all term for multiple phenomena. To say it is co-produced by humans is not to deny that climate change in certain moments 'becomes' real—and becomes real to different groups of people at different times, in different places. This demands we engage with climate through more complex, multiple, overlapping temporalities and spatialities.

We need to read the climate emergency not as point in time, but another way of thinking about time: a state as well as a moment, enfolding not (only) in a linear manner but in ways which are inconsistent, uneven, and patchy. The future reaches into the past and rewrites it; the past bubbles up in the present and disrupts it. We need to reject homogenising narratives. There are no norms of climate, only volatility. There is no neat progression from A to B: narrow ideas of cause and effect hold no water.

The concept of 'disaster' is useful because it can collapse the distinction between event and effect—between ruination and the resulting ruins. [...] the disaster is simultaneously happening, has happened, and will happen. [...] Talking of ecological disaster offers a way to enfold these different times of ruination.

Out of the Wood Collective, Hope Against Hope

Architecture and the project of solutions

Once again, the Global North, the creators of the problem, will see to it that they profit from the solution that they propose. A solution whose genius will, no doubt, lie deep in the heart of the "market" and involve more selling and buying, more consuming, and more profiteering by fewer and fewer people. In other words, more capitalism.

Arundhati Roy

The construction of climate as a figure of emergency distances it objectively—as something external to human life—and temporally—as something that can be overcome. But climate change is not an outside threat: it is produced through, and exists in, the practices we are trying to change.

The dominant framework within which architecture and the built environment approaches climate is that of sustainability. While many practitioners use sustainability as the basis for important work, conceptually it is based on the scientific paradigm of observing and then operating on a distant system; it presumes that anthropogenic climate change is something that has arrived at, and then disrupted a stable-state earth. Such a concept of sustainability masks the political, shielding the underlying causes of climate from scrutiny, whilst also offering a project of solutions.

The perception of finality, or a narrative of destruction, is fundamental to Modern ways of thinking and being, and capitalism's ability to sustain itself: working in combination with techno-optimism, hubris, and professing that the kinds of economic systems and technologies that generated climate change will solve it; we just need more, accelerated versions, of the same.

Such delusions, again based upon exceptionalism and power, only lead towards hubristic ideals of progress out of crisis It's not difficult here to see the parallel with architectural thinking: the architectural project and the climate project are both wedded to Modern ideals of getting 'past' a problem. Far from resolving climate change, the kind of greenwashing projects that make headlines, and even win awards—'zero-carbon' airports, super-efficient office buildings for multinationals—exploit more than mitigate climate disaster.

We need to problematise the idea of the solution because sustainability (as it is practiced under capitalism) only seeks to sustain a mode of life based on growth, accumulation, and inequality. Treating climate as a project of design—where design is (mis-)understood in its modernist guise of problem solving—is to simplify it. Problem-solving is not neutral. Problem-solving reinforces certain ways of being whilst excluding others. This design way of thinking that marries sustainability and solutionism—both representing extractivist capitalism—needs to be confronted. Climate-as-project obscures the conditions that constitute climate change, foregrounding its effects, and depoliticised causes (i.e., greenhouse gases), rather than its underlying causes. Framing climate as a technical problem with a technical solution then locks the conversation into a reductive framework from which it cannot escape. It is for this reason that the discourse around architecture and climate has remained so restricted.

Beyond solutionism

climate change demanded nothing less than a reconsideration of the very practices through which knowledge was understood to be produced in science, bureaucracy, activism, and business.

Hanna Knox, Thinking Like a Climate

If solutionism fails, this is because climate breakdown is multiple, immediate, and 'solutions' are not the way to approach it. Solutions come out of a narrow view of the problem, and only defer and displace. We must reject such terms, narrow as they are. We must ask ourselves whenever we are tempted to use the word 'sustainbility': what is it that we want to sustain?

As thinking about climate as a technical thing that you can patch increasingly cracks and crumbles into dust, the climate crises challenge the temporal dimensions and limits of architectural projects. The ground for action is shaky and unstable, and projects are never finished, but rather a process of constant learning—moving from the static view of the architectural project as object to the active view of the architectural project as a place of departure, and context for action.

Moving on from terms like emergency and crisis, responses to climate emergency cannot simply be about trying to change the future. The climate crisis challenges the temporal dimensions and limits of architectural projects understood as creating the 'new' out of the 'old', or demanding novelty. Climate should refer not to a singular event but a state of being, engaging past, present, and future in one phrase—engaging with the present, rather than a speculative future, as a space of possibility.

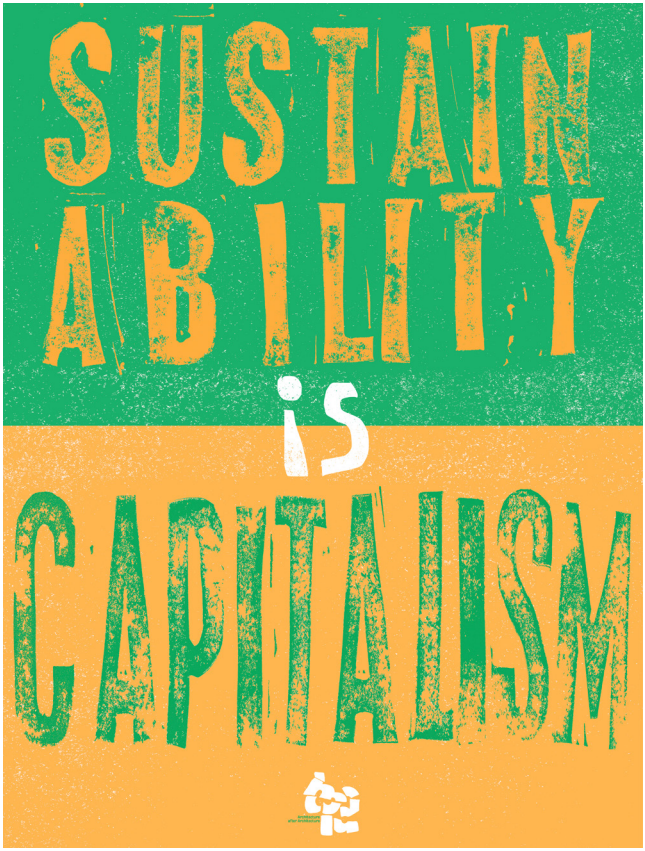

Figure 2.

One suspects that those who use the term 'sustainability' know very well that the earth cannot be sustained in one condition, or that we can sustain our current modes of living and consuming. But by controlling the terms of sustainability, power also controls the terms of the response, leading to a form of environmentalism that reflects and so perpetuates the current form of the state.

Architecture after solutions

The anthropocene is no time to set things straight [...] no time to for transcendent, definitive mappings, transparent knowledge systems, or confident epistemologies

Stacy Alaimo, Exposed

The question resulting from this, then, is: if we begin to think of climate not as an emergency—in the sense of a moment or epoch—but as an opportunity for rethinking human-planetary relations, then with what mode of being ought we be thinking and acting? What does the end of the myth of sustainability mean for a definition of architecture and spatial practice? Beyond the project of solutions, what is a spatial practice of negotiation? How do you shift this knowledge and make it useful? With what kind of time/scale/agency ought we be thinking/doing/making/producing/being? With what mode of thinking through, and acting with, time do we need to confront climate? These are not just questions to be answered but provocations that need to be addressed.

an alternative reading of the present, one which seeks to break with these crisis-ridden contemporary imaginaries, and to again see other possibilities open now [...] a time of confusion and collapse as well as potential and reorganization

Stephanie Wakefield, Anthropocene Back Loop

We need to practice in a way that is not instrumental: not about constructing certain futures out of certain pasts, but taking uncertain experimentation as a core aspect of spatial practice that necessarily undoes the myth of permanence attached to so much of architectural discourse.

What is common to many alternative readings of the climate crisis, in its relational sense, is the end of design as a teleological practice with defined ends. Instead, we need to act with both

intention (to change a situation), and openness to others, human and more-than-human. This means detaching intentionality from control.

Thinking contingently, as if things might be otherwise, moves us away from a form of design-as-problem-solving, which is concerned primarily with problem-solving for humans exclusively, or which is based on the contrast between 'design' (outside, rational) and 'parts' (materials, things). Design is a relational practice, requiring ways of thinking about place that are provisional, collaborative, and inherently political. This is not to dismiss the technological aspect of culture but trying to think with the relations between (necessary) technologies and the social practices, and forms of organisation from which they emerge and which they generate.

What if the architectural object were revealed to be something closer to a thing among other things, operating necessarily in ecological relation, apt to emerge only to decay? [...] architecture in the midst of things, undergoing continuous variation, emerging from the contingency of events across complex social, political, economic, ecological, technological, material and conceptual fields

Hélène Frichot, Creative Ecologies

Along with the realisation that humans are active agents in shaping climate should come the awareness that other things and beings beyond the human are there as our collaborators in the shaping of place and action. This is a form of relation that is multi-directional and based in humility in knowledge and action. Thinking about the time of climate in this way offers openings for ways of doing that do not attempt to solve the problem of climate, but rather engage with climate's multiple and overlapping temporalities.

Architecture after solutions does not separate cause from effect but understands both as part of the ongoing reproduction of social and spatial conditions. Solutions are replaced by conditions: it is not about mitigating the

effects, but about dealing with the causes—by challenging them and creating different conditions, out of which alternatives emerge.

Disaster, and ruination, as conditions that we inhabit now, then, and in the future, also imply the potential for a ruderal ecology of emergence. Implicit in the term 'climate breakdown', which suggests the need for reorganisation, emergence differs from emergency in that it is multiple, open-ended, and unfinished—a continual state of flux and of the re-making of relations—whereas emergency only closes down the future by distancing us from it.

Thinking of, and practicing, alternative possible presents rather than distant futures would be something akin to how quantum physicists describe indeterminacy as superposition: the idea that all possible scenarios exist at once. This understanding constitutes an important contrast to the dominant discourse within ecological politics which tells us that the world is (always) about to end—just around the corner—unless we do something (now!)

Surely it is also possible to distance sustainability from its co-opted meaning, and to reclaim its meaning as being about limits, not just minor concessions. Ultimately, a rejuvenated discourse of sustainability might help us think about forms of organisation, and how practices of experimentation, cultivation and maintenance, and repair generate new social structures, as well as forms of knowledge and collectivity.

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Anthony Powis on behalf of MOULD

http://mould.earth/
mail@mould.earth

Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London
Technische Universität Braunschweig

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