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Interviews

The Unapproachable Debate: Designers' Reflections Post-COP27

A conversation with the teams of the ZERO broadcast and What Design Can Do on their presence in Sharm El Sheikh and Cairo for COP27.

The first COP held in African soil ended with a global agreement on “loss and damage”, a mechanism that addresses the climate emergency from a financial standpoint, with no attempt to stop the imminent climate catastrophe. The two teams of creatives under the umbrella of the What Design Can Do's Creative Climate Collective initiative and the ZERO broadcast discuss the shortcomings of COP27 from the standpoint of young creatives and designers, largely excluded from the conference’s debate. Clever, overlooked design solutions remained, indeed, at the margin of the COP conversation, far too distant from the different exclusionary “Zones” implemented at COP. Its exclusivity is, however, countered by the enthusiasm of the future generations who call for a radical re-design of COPs

Interviewee	Agustina Woodgate & Catalina Mejia Moreno (ZERO), Barbara Vos & Lara Snatager (What Design Can Do)
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hoping that one day they will become more inclusive. The underlying wish is that COPs will implement brave solutions to fight climate change starting precisely from the collective re-design of our built and natural environment.

KOOZ In the past two weeks, statistics played a central role in the COP27 debate. Key numbers are the astounding total of 600 delegates affiliated with the fossil fuel industry who have attended COP27, or the 2.5 - 4.5 trillion dollars which we would need to spend every year for the next 30 years to secure the transition to a clean energy economy and keep temperature rise below 2° C, as governments might turn their back to limiting a raise in global temperatures to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Zero team, what is your opinion on these numbers? How optimistic can we be if we go back to your premise on having to go beyond net zero or zero carbon to reach negative carbon or carbon removal from the system?

AW, CMM Numeracy and statistics have always been at the centre of the Conference of the Parties. We mostly remember the 21st COP in December 2015 in Paris the conference where 195 nations adopted the Paris Agreement - an instrument based in numeracy and calculations “holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 degrees Celsius and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees above the pre-industrial levels.” This was the moment where 1.5 and 2 degrees started to be protagonists of most climate related conversations. When zero came into the climate conversation it had a similar resonance. But what does net zero actually mean, and is it possible? We know it is not, the UN has already stated it in their latest Emissions Gap Report. So, is it useful to keep thinking in these terms solely, and to focus all our climate related conversations around these? Definitely not.

Naming our radio broadcast ZERO, and what we mean by going beyond net zero or zero carbon, was to question where these numbers and calculations come from, who is involved in taking these decisions, how are these mobilised, how they are implemented, what does it mean, and for whom, amongst other questions that thinking through net zero or carbon zero imply.

> Going beyond net zero allows us to think through people, through biodiversity, through planetary interconnectedness. Therefore, focusing on carbon zero, or on carbon neutrality solely is blinding.

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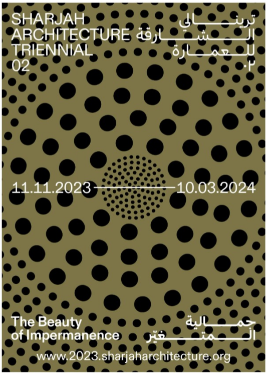
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Some of our radio interventions dwelled on this. We had some really interesting contributions from scholars and practitioners based in Cairo who referred to possible ways of thinking through carbon neutral schemes in local contexts and what it implies for cities - megacities such as Cairo and to the Egyptian context. Whilst in Sharm El Sheikh, and facing the impossibility of accessing the “Blue Zone”we had the opportunity to discuss the overpowering prevalence of Net Zero / Carbon Zero thread with scholars, activists and representatives of youth groups; some of them being very critical. For instance, we spoke with the representatives of Our Village in the “Green Zone” who see how this data is mobilised as their calls are not being listened to, nor their concerns or forms of climate action as indigenous populations who experience the effects of global warming in extreme and dramatic ways. We heard from Creatives for Climate who, through collective creativity, stand against greenwashing as a form of climate action. We talked to Giacomo Di Capua, representative of Young European leadership who reminded us of the importance of Day Zero in COP27, when the major items for discussion are being decided, and the vagueness of numeracy when it comes to financing “loss and damage”. Finally, we heard from historian and economist Roman Shemakov who insisted on thinking about carbon-less rather than carbon zero, whilst reminding us that every living being on the planet is carbon-based. So is carbon zero a possibility? Is it the only actionable target that the climate emergency needs to deal with?

Going beyond net zero allows us to think through people, through biodiversity, through planetary interconnectedness. Therefore, focusing on carbon zero, or on carbon neutrality solely is blinding. In conversation with Daniela Ibarra-Howell, chief executive officer of the Savory Institute, she reminded us that carbon is actually displaced. Is not that there is more than before, it is just that it is in the atmosphere when it should be in the ground. As with water. Water is not a limited resource, the ecosystem is designed to move it in cycles and it should be in its various states - frozen, vapour, etc., but displaced. And this is an understanding that we find much more interesting and relevant when thinking through carbon.

But what the most recent COPs have shown us, COP27 in particular (whose slogan is “together for implementation”), is that what lies at the core of all these conversations is money. It is impossible to talk about Net Zero or Carbon Zero without referring to carbon as a currency, carbon trading schemes (private vs public interests), without the famous “article 6” - mechanisms for carbon markets. And this is something that this last COP27 has more dramatically evidenced.

What the most recent COPs

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1/6 Creative Climate Collective at COP27, Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt. ← →

KOOZ Following the announcement that governments might turn their back to the 1.5-degree Celsius limit, more than 200 companies, including architecture and design giants as Autodesk, IKEA and Ramboll group, sent a joint letter to United Nations delegates showing policymakers that businesses remain committed to the Paris Agreement and the shared global goal of 1.5°C COP26. How can we ensure that the ideas and projects brought forward by young creatives are heard and implemented? What action should young architects with valuable ideas - such as those who participated in the Creative Climate Collective - take? Who should they speak to? How could we make sure that they are heard by the giants that are governing the creative and construction industry in order to shift from a "business as usual" attitude and ultimately trigger systemic and sustainable change?

BV, LS We have a design problem when it comes to addressing the climate crisis. We have good ideas, but we fail pretty miserably when we try to implement them. What you see at the COP is that the dynamics of the convention and accessibility to spaces, where critical decisions of the future of *our planet* are made, need to be reexamined. There is a big gap between decision-makers and *the others*. There is a "Blue Zone", where you can only enter with a very hard to obtain accreditation, and a “Green Zone”, which are officially for formal negotiations (Blue Zone) and informal consultations with other delegations, UN agencies and non-profit organisations (Green Zone). This distinction -does not even take into account the people who could not make it at the COP at all, along with those who are never or underrepresented, hence do not have a voice. Design, other perspectives and voices stay therefore outside the place where decisions are being made. It is, therefore, quite a loss for the regeneration of our future environment.

What we need is a change. A systemic and cultural one that is inclusive and foresees integrated plans that have a strong local commitment to implementation. This is possible by making the big changes tangible, and by giving value to local perspectives and providing tools to make such change. We can’t solely rely on big corporations and governments to commit to the necessary 1.5-degree change in temperature. So, what can we do to realise that? What gave us hope is that within the Creative Climate Collective many of the creatives are working within community-driven projects that focus on local action.

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A good example is Marwan Rasmy of the Egyptian foundation Greenish. His work revolves around local communities’ engagement and capacity to achieve sustainable local development. Greenish aims to improve the wellbeing of the MENA residents and the health of their natural environment. Or Colombian architect and co-founder of TALLER architects Julian Restrepo with his project Montes de Maria: a natural laboratory to show that peace and environmental sustainability are possible. Instead of displacing its local families for environmental protection, both local communities and NGOs and environmental authorities have joined a decade-long effort to establish socio ecological corridors through voluntary agreements to conserve the Forest and its most critically endangered fauna within private lands. These agreements can become effective models and sets of tools that can help with the complex realities of much of the developing world.

We wanted to bring these worlds together, but for that you need an official invite from a company, country or UNFCCC to get in. Therefore there is always a big gap at who gets a seat at the table to talk over our future. We have been trying to show what is possible with concrete actions to do so, but it sadly stayed outside the realm of decision-making which took place in the “Blue Zone”.

KOOZ ZERO team, in our first conversation, you talked about your interest in Cairo and the importance of staging the broadcast in this megacity, an urban centre which is in stark contrast to the exclusive environment of COP27 and Sharm El Sheik. A metropolis where one can more clearly identify the ramifications of COP conversations in the everyday lives of its citizens. Although cities are one of the biggest problems in our climate emergency, if addressed properly they could also be the biggest solution. How do you seek to continue to explore the broadcast to engage students and citizens in addressing these issues and continuing this discussion?

AW, CMM The climate crisis is a social crisis. Broadcasting from Cairo, in contrast to doing it from Sharm El Sheikh allowed us to think through the specificity of the context we were immersed into; Diana and Stephenie hinted to this in their conversation. It allowed us to think through the granular and through site-specific practices that could potentially be mobilised to different contexts and locations. The radio broadcast prompted transnational, transdisciplinary and multiscalar thinking - very spatial ways of thinking about climate. It also challenged and engaged with geopolitical thinking - through power, infrastructure, data, finance, even carbon currencies, etc. as well as through cultural embedded practices. These are all pressing issues in the climate crisis. So some of the questions that we dealt with and consider important to continue working on are how do we ground some of the conversations held in COP into site specific contexts, but also how can we nurture different ways of climate action usually overlooked and local, and how do we amplify those that COP is not considering.

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1/6

KOOZ According to Egypt's minister, the country needs up to $264 billion investment in the next seven years to achieve its adaptation and mitigation agenda, an achievement which the government is trying to pursue through the signing of specific deals with Western nations and global development banks, including a $500 million package to finance and facilitate its transition to clean energy. Only transnational, collaborative efforts will enable us to address the climate crisis and safeguard our planet for future generations to come. What Design Can Do team, which successful design proposals across those presented in the exhibition have explored cross-national or multiscalar solutions and collaborations?

BV, LS Unfortunately, the COP27 failed to commit to any meaningful reduction of greenhouse emissions. Establishing a Loss-and-Damage Fund is laudable, but that does not stop climate change.

Bringing together a group of people from Egypt, Mozambique, Ghana, South Africa, Kenya, France, Colombia, and the Netherlands, made it possible to talk about the role of design from different cultural backgrounds, and how different countries approach climate change. What bonded the group was the common ground of trying to make a change. Within the Collective they formed 4 sub groups, themed around water, materials, community and culture and media. Sharing their visions and how they worked, and the solutions they saw for local issues. Working together on these global calls make it possible for them to collaborate, and make local solutions more global. The Collective were able to collaborate and showcase their work through combining creativity, knowledge, resources and cultural backgrounds.

Whilst there is a lot of funding in the global North for climate action design, this is not necessarily the case in the global South. Funds like Creative Industry Fund NL, our partner in the Creative Climate Collective, make it easier for Dutch designers to foster global collaboration with designers who are not situated in the global North.

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KOOZ Looking back at your involvement with COP27, what are the most interesting and valuable successes as well as shortcomings, criticisms or failures of both your programme and COP27? How do you intend to further develop your project or address the planetary issues tackled during these crucial days?

AW, CMM COP27 was for us inaccessible in many ways, starting by the impossibility of attending the plenaries and conversations. Even if it had one of the biggest number of participants, because of location and costs of living it was also one of the least accessible COPs. It was also difficult to navigate it both infrastructurally and spatially. We got lost in Sharm El Sheikh, but we also got lost trying to navigate the language and documentation bureaucracy of the UN, which felt like navigating COP27. This conference is the place where big decisions are being made, where the future of the planet is being discussed and invested in - sort of decided (for good and bad), and who gets to speak? Who is being listened to? As Giacomo reminded us, even organisations had no voice during the first days of the negotiation, non governmental organisations fighting for climate for decades have not been heard.We have to be cynical about what we see and how to amplify it, even during the negotiations. This is one of the biggest criticisms; a criticism that has been voiced also in the last COPs, but this one at Sharm el Sheikh made it more evident and striking.

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Being in Cairo, however, was a totally different experience. It was rich, lively, warm, generous and open in so many ways. There was great discontent about COP27 being held in Sharm El Sheikh for obvious reasons. But we found accomplices at the periphery of COP27 in the same way we found them in Cairo, and the radio broadcast speaks to this in terms of its content, contributors, issues discussed, dialogues, voices, but of course, in terms of the radio as a medium. As a platform that prompts thinking about modes of climate action, about pedagogies, about thinking through livelihoods and about challenging all status quo. Acomradery and understanding emerged from putting a 24h broadcast together in collaboration with a Cairo-based university staff and students, who have similar (if not the same) concerns. It was joined by multiple voices and standpoints during these two days, and this is a strong reminder of how we should and need to work through and act in this current crisis. What ZERO broadcast also demonstrates is that systemic change is not only liability and actions translating in finance as this COP has been showing us; we are thinking more deeply and more structurally. There is a shift in forms of climate action, of mobilisation of global movements and international organisations. There is a new generational conscience that thinks about cities, infrastructures, agency of data and modes of action of those at the margins of the conversations that take place at COP that are finding ways of being listened to, and of being part of bigger conversations and climate action.

There is a new generational conscience that thinks about cities, infrastructures, agency of data and modes of action of those at the margins of the conversations that take place at COP that are finding ways of being listened to.

Returning to COP27, there is a light of hope that took decades to be formalised: a contentious item in the agenda which is “loss and damage.” It is contentious as it is a threat to some countries; it opens the doors to unlimited liability. Even in the last minutes of COP27 this item brought to the friction that had existed at the periphery of the conversations in previous COPs, when loss and damage were considered as a subsector of climate damage and in terms of, for instance, financing adaptation. Now it is at the centre of the agenda, as a single item bringing climate reparations and climate justice to the forefront of climate accountability and pushed forward by mainly youth members and organisations as a way of focusing on intergenerational justice.

Perhaps this is the first next step towards re-designing system change: who should be at the table when making the decisions?

BV, LS COP27 highlighted many issues - its inaccessibility and lack of young voices gave us a clear insight that it is of vital importance that conferences like COP need to be rethought. It needs to be re-designed by the people who are most often excluded from climate decision-making: young people and communities that are most affected by climate change. Perhaps this is the first next step towards re-designing system change: who should be at the table when making the decisions?

One of the biggest successes from COP27 was the opportunity to bring together this group of people from different disciplines with different cultural backgrounds who all intend to keep sharing knowledge, experience and networks, and have formed partnerships for future collaborations. Most of them made valuable connections with politicians, policymakers, companies or NGOs to continue conversations on implementations of their creative solution-based innovations and visions for the future.

Bio

ZERO team

Agustina Woodgate is an Argentinian artist, who creates art across multiple disciplines focusing on the study of systems, theories of value, power relations and radical imagination. Founder of radioee.net, visualising ecologies with tvgov.info, founding member of PUB.sandberg.nl and Tutor at Design Department at Sandberg Instituut, Amsterdam.

Catalina Mejia Moreno is a spatial practitioner, educator, and researcher interested in practices of repair and resistance; environmental, racial, and spatial justice; feminist, and decolonial/anticolonial practices and thought. She is a senior lecturer in climate studies at the Spatial Practices Programme in Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, where she leads an interdisciplinary research and exchange platform that rethinks spatial practices and pedagogies through the lens of the biodiversity and climate crisis.

What Design Can Do team

Barbara Vos works as a freelance programme developer, strategic advisor, researcher and project manager and is currently working on two projects at What Design Can Do: the Climate Action Design Program during COP27 and the Make it Circular Design Challenge. With a background in developing, producing and managing programmes and projects on sustainability and social issues for professionals, cultural institutes, sustainability platforms, television and public spaces, Barbara uses her knowledge, network and expertise to address the need to act upon the climate crisis now.

Lara Snatager develops the programmes at What Design Can Do. She studied theatre in Amsterdam, following which she became a producer for various cultural festivals and events – such as the Iranian Film Festival and Club Interbellum.

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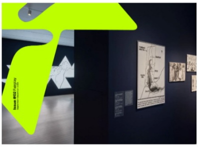

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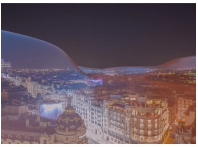

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