

## Architects take Climate Action! Archinect talks climate emergency activism with built environment groups taking a stand

By [Hannah Wood](#) Oct 5, '20 8:45 AM EST

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Illustration by [Evgenia Barinova](#) for Archinect

The first 'climate emergency' declaration by a constituency of suburban Melbourne in 2016 was an early signal that public opinion on global heating and biodiversity loss had shifted from a feeling of concern to that of crisis. Architects and built environment professionals around the world have since joined forces with their colleagues and youth groups in a global climate movement calling for urgent action and pragmatic solutions. In recent years, the visibility of these campaigns has intensified, in part due to the release of an alarming [1.5°C report from the IPCC](#), articulated by young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. Today, over [1777 local authorities across 30 nations](#) have declared a 'climate emergency', yet, according to the UN Environment Programme's latest [Global Status Report](#), building construction and operations remain the largest CO2 emitter by sector, accounting for 36% of global energy use and 39% of global energy-related CO2 emissions.

The first of our two-part series, '*Architects Take Climate Action!*', features interviews with architecture activist groups established since 2016, including [Architects Climate Action Network](#) in the UK, [Architects Advocate](#) Chicago, [Architects Declare](#) Australia, and [The Architecture Lobby's](#) Green New Deal working group based in New York, to get an insight into their campaign goals and how they have captured the imagination of the architecture profession. We dive into their decentralized 'starfish' organizations, explore how they are mobilizing online tools to harness collective agency and reflect on the construction industry's response to their first few years of campaigning for climate action.

It was the 2016 US presidential race that encouraged Chicago-based Architect Tom Jacobs and his colleagues to take a stand. "We were frustrated with the so-called 'climate hoax', which we felt had been politicized, and also knew that we architects weren't being proactive enough", he recalls. Jacobs had previously been in charge of advocacy for the AIA, an organization which, at the time, he felt was not lobbying hard enough to inspire change across the industry. Jacobs decided to change tact and initiate a nonpartisan grassroots network, Architects Advocate, in his hometown. As their team worked towards the network launch, Jacobs grew increasingly apprehensive due to his role as principal at [Krueck + Sexton Architects](#) as they were working across a spectrum of large government contracts. "Our activist stance was effectively challenging one of our biggest clients", he explains, "so the most important part was to stick to our guns and

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say, no, this is something that needs to happen. In terms of advocacy, it taught me that if it feels uncomfortable, you're probably leading."

Architects Advocate was ahead of the curve in rallying the profession to protest against the construction industry's continued inertia towards exigent ecological issues. For many architects, academics and students, the 2018-19 Extinction Rebellion protests were a catalyst for inspiring a renewed sense of urgency and mobilized new architecture climate action groups to form, including [Architects Declare](#) (AD) and the [Architects Climate Action Network](#) (ACAN). These networks gather both individual voices and architecture firms to challenge the construction industry and decision-makers to do more to safeguard against global heating, whilst encouraging architects to embody climate principles in their own practice.

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*"If it feels uncomfortable, you're probably leading." Tom Jacobs, Architects Advocate Chicago*

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Architects protest at the Extinction Rebellion march in London, 2019 © ACAN, Joe Giddings

"Our main catalyst for initiating ACAN was the IPCC's [1.5°C report](#), which alarmed us due to the scale and speed of what needs to be done", founding member Joe Giddings explains. "The findings from the report were on my mind when I joined the [Extinction Rebellion](#) protests on Waterloo Bridge in London last year. We [ACAN's founders] were talking about how Extinction Rebellion was great at raising awareness about the scale of the issue, yet the demands they were making were very broad. The building industry would need specific changes, such as regulation and awareness around the specific pollution that we create." Similar to Architects Advocate, the ACAN founding group felt that the construction sector was not acting fast enough to mitigate global heating in the timeframe the IPCC report set out. "There were other groups active in the UK before we got started", says Giddings, "but change wasn't happening at the speed of what seems to be required". The ACAN network, based in London, UK, now has over 200 active members working on targeted political campaigns, open-source knowledge sharing and inter-city public engagement.

While ACAN targets individual architects, in May 2019, drawing inspiration from [Culture Declares](#), 17 UK [RIBA Stirling Prize](#) winning studios joined forces to establish an online climate change declaration aimed at architecture firms. To join [Architects Declare](#) (AD), architecture practices sign up to 11 declaration points online, to show their commitment to take action on the climate emergency and global biodiversity loss. The declaration advocates for a faster transition towards regenerative design practices, the use of low embodied carbon materials and closer collaboration with engineers, contractors and clients to reduce construction waste, among other measures. The AD international network now encompasses 5000 signatory practices across 23 nations. [US Architects Declare](#), formed earlier this year, currently has 250 signatory firms, including [Interboro Partners](#) in Brooklyn and Detroit, [MASS Design Group](#) in Boston and [el dorado](#) in Kansas and Portland.

The AIA's [public stand on the climate emergency](#) and endorsement of the [Green New Deal](#) (GND) framework in 2019—framed by former AIA president Carl Elefante in this September's [CarbonPositive RESET!](#) conference as 'the big move'—brought climate action into focus for its network of 95,000+ architects across the States. The move was welcomed by the Architects Advocate network as it introduced climate action conversations into mainstream architectural discourse. At the time, [The Architecture Lobby](#) (T-A-L), an international organization of architectural workers, also released a [statement in support of the GND](#). "We strongly identify with the aspirations of the GND because it touches on the root of architecture's link to climate and to labor", says the group. "Our discipline could and should sustainably serve all members of society in ways it simply is not equipped to right now."

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*Our discipline could and should sustainably serve all*

*members of society in ways it is simply not equipped to right now” The Architecture Lobby Green New Deal Working Group, New York*

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A year prior, T-A-L organized a [‘think-in’ in parallel with the 2018 AIA Conference](#) on the topic of infrastructure to highlight key social, labor and climate issues that they felt were impacting the profession yet had been overlooked in the main event program. “We were thinking about how climate was related to architectural education and practice, beyond the development and implementation of more efficient building systems”, they explain. This action began to solidify into a T-A-L campaign after the introduction of [H.Res.109](#) in Congress. “The resolution inspired us to form the GND working group to start thinking specifically about how architects can be actively working toward a more sustainable and equitable future for all”. T-A-L, whose members stem from a variety of design fields, including user experience (UX) designers, interns, historians and writers, have since directed their focus towards a “just transition to a GND” and the “structural issues surrounding its intersection with labor”.



Architects Advocate take a stand on the climate emergency during the March for Science in Chicago © Architects Advocate

[Architects Declare Australia](#) co-founder Ranald Boydell also recognizes 2019 as a tipping point as he witnessed construction industry perspectives towards climate action begin to shift. “2019 was timely in terms of other high profile events”, he recalls, “including [new legislation](#) passed by the UK government mandating that net emissions of greenhouse gases were to be reduced and the release of the [IPBES Global Assessment report](#) on biodiversity loss, both of which generated momentum for action. While AD Australia is built on the same structure as the initial [AD] network, it has unique challenges and opportunities based on its membership and national context, which faced devastating bushfires last summer”.

How to grow the number of signatory practices whilst keeping to the principles of the original declaration presented a significant challenge for Boydell and his team. “Allowing only firms with demonstrated experience to sign would have shown unquestionable credentials but severely restricted numbers, while, conversely, allowing anyone to sign risked the whole exercise being seen as green-washing”, he explains. “In the end we identified that, as an informal association, it was beyond our role or capacity to certify whether an individual signatory was ‘qualified’ in some specific way, and that ultimately each practice would have to let their work speak for itself.”

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*A revolution does not need the majority on board, but just a substantial and active minority” Ranald Boydell, Architects Declare Australia*

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The AD Australia team has organized into working groups around six thematic areas: regenerative design, technical targets and tools, advocacy, research, action plan templates and events. In congruence with the AD international network, cultivating environmental biodiversity takes center stage, with signatory practices opting to select brownfield over greenfield sites, to specify natural, non-toxic materials, and to consider the circular economy and regenerative design principles in their projects. AD Australia’s long-term ambition is for 5% of all registered architects in the country to sign up to the declaration points. “A revolution does not need the majority on board but just a substantial and active minority”, articulates Boydell.



Architects Climate Action Network gather in London, UK, during 2019 © ACAN, Keith van Loen

Central to the architecture climate action groups that have emerged since 2016 is an impetus to establish and grow their online networks. The initial step for Jacobs and his team in Chicago was to compile an email list of colleagues they knew were interested in pushing for change in the national building and energy codes. Architects Advocate could then mobilize this network through targeted email campaigns that linked events in the news to concrete actions. For example, when the National Resources Defence Council (NRDC)—a US-based environmental advocacy group who has sued the current administration over 100 times, winning 90 of those suits—was working on legislation to reduce the use of planet-warming hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), Architects Advocate was poised to respond.

"We were familiar with the HFC issue from Paul Hawkin's book, [Drawdown](#), so when NRDC crafted their legislation and needed to collect public support, which makes all the difference in debates on Capitol Hill, we distributed it among our network and overnight gained a huge amount of signatures. It was so exciting to see how the group was developing and that architects were contributing to the issue in a meaningful way." In April this year, the federal court [ruled to reinstate limits](#) on how manufacturers can use HFCs, a significant win for climate action groups in the general trend towards environmental deregulation in the US.

The emergence of Greta Thunberg as an international figure in the global climate movement in 2019 inspired the Architects Advocate's network, which had by then grown to over 900 firms and 2500 individuals across the US, to join her in direct action. "The whole of last year we put our focus into trying to support Greta, and launched the campaign 'Stand with Greta'", says Jacobs. "We were able to rally over 200 practicing architects to join in the protest at the Illinois Institute of Technology, and faculty came along with their students. I'm really proud of how we were able to broaden our impact and encourage people at all stages of their architectural careers to join us, as it's their world as much as ours. I feel there is now momentum in the climate debate like we've never experienced before. It seems like the terms of the discussion are finally falling into place".

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*It was so exciting to see how the network was developing and that architects were contributing to the issue in a meaningful way." Tom Jacobs, Architects Advocate Chicago*

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Tom Jacobs gives a lecture on the climate crisis at IIT in Chicago, 4 days before the 2019 Global Climate Strike © Architects Advocate

When it came to expanding the Architects Advocate network further, Jacobs' former role at AIA Chicago influenced him to steer the group in a different direction. "As the AIA had a hierarchical structure, I used to spend an enormous amount of time in meetings, all of which required significant follow up", he recalls. "After a few years, I realized we had very little to show for it: all this talk, all these meetings, but what was tangible? The honest answer was, very little." Instead, Jacobs and his team opted for what the renowned organizational thinker Ori Brafman terms a 'starfish' organization in his 2006 book '[Starfish and the Spider](#)'. A 'starfish' is led by a shared vision rather than a centralized hierarchy, which offers a distinctive set of capabilities. Brafman writes, "decentralized organizations are very amorphous and fluid. Because power and knowledge are distributed, individual units quickly respond to a multitude of internal and external forces—they are constantly spreading, growing, shrinking, mutating, dying off, and reemerging."

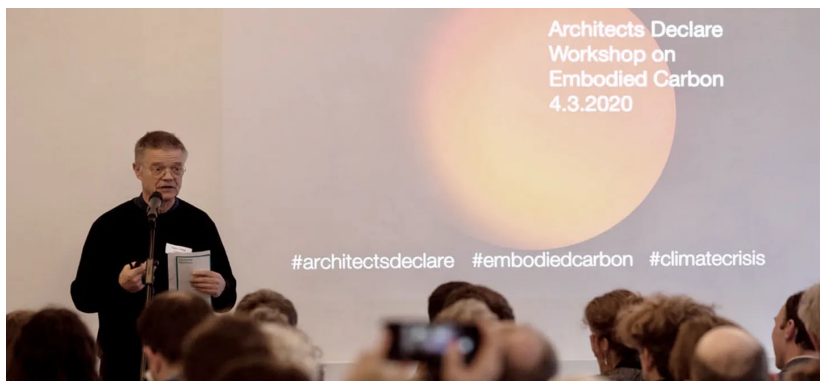
Brafman suggests that while there are examples of historic 'starfish' networks, they have developed a unique significance and influence since the emergence of global online connectivity. Arguably, most architecture climate action groups fit the 'starfish' model to some extent, which is perhaps unsurprising as this structure enables organizations to evolve quickly and maintain a high tolerance for innovation, radical change and creative thinking. There is also a history of 'starfish-like' environmental campaign groups, such as the [Environmental Markets Network](#), a bipartisan coalition of business executives who interact with US congressmen and senators to influence the adoption of binding global warming targets and emissions caps.

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*Decentralized organizations are very amorphous and fluid. Because power and knowledge are distributed, individual units quickly respond to a multitude of internal and external forces—they are constantly spreading, growing, shrinking, mutating, dying off, and reemerging." Ori Brafman, from the Spider and the Starfish (2006)*

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Architects Advocate embodies the principles of a 'starfish' network through its facilitation of ideas to proliferate beyond the organizational reach of Jacobs and his team. "When we thought that everybody got the main rules and values of Architects Advocate, we decided to let it go", Jacobs explains. "So if somebody is interested in organizing something in their city, or even in their country, we're happy to give them everything we know, our logo, or whatever they want to use to set that up." Brafman also suggests that 'starfish' organizations often have a catalyst figure, or group, who subsequently fade into the background as they evolve and grow. This phenomenon can also be seen in the development of ACAN and AD as their founding groups have facilitated ideas to expand beyond the organization's direct reach, arguably strengthening the influence of their networks as a whole.



Architects Declare workshop on reducing embodied carbon in building design, March 2020 © AD, Richard Battye

In an unexpected turn of events, this organizational structure has ensured that architecture climate action networks have continued to gain momentum this year as COVID-19 brought about lockdowns in cities around the world. As many architecture firms closed their doors, T-A-L's GND working group switched focus from organizing Earth Day strikes to hosting a series of online events, such as '[Earth Week](#)', encouraging inter-city chapter collaborations. Meanwhile, national AD steering groups joined forces to initiate unified action through a series of online meetings, held every 2-3 months. The UK's AD network has been particularly active during the lockdown and two working groups have emerged: one focussed upon developing a best practice guide based on the declaration points; and the other working to identify and respond to climate-related consultations.

This July, the UK's AD network (as part of the steering group of Construction Declares) teamed up with ACAN and the London Energy Transformation Initiative (LETI—more to follow in *Part II*) to pen an [open letter](#) to the UK Prime Minister calling upon the government to 'establish a supportive framework to enable immediate action' on the climate emergency. Their suggested changes included VAT reforms to promote refurbishment

over new-build, the reinstatement and reinvention of the Zero Carbon Buildings Programme and fiscal measures to discourage the use of harmful materials in construction. The group also called for an 80% carbon emissions reduction by 2030 (absolute zero carbon by 2040), a 'Future Generations Act' and reforms to the 'Companies Act', among other requests. Unimpressed by the [Government's response](#), the group replied with a [further letter](#), urging that "the government's policies are falling short of what is required to prevent irreversible climate change". These actions led to AD securing the prestigious UK [AJ100 Sustainability Initiative of the Year](#) award last month.

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*AD is a space where a practice's commitment to climate action has been recognized, and they are putting themselves up for industry scrutiny by having their name on the list" Jacqueline Wheeler, Architects Declare*

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Prior to lockdown, AD hosted a conference for 350 built environment professionals from their UK network of firms at Battersea Arts Centre in London, UK, attended by high-profile speakers including the award-winning economist Kate Raworth. The UK AD steering group facilitated attendee participation by applying techniques such as 'slido', in which a coordinator asks a question to the room and participants register their answers by moving around the space. "We've found that after AD events, practitioners go off and speak to their connections, either politically or in the construction industry about the climate emergency. That is where the real change happens", explains Jacqueline Wheeler, communications manager for signatory firm Haworth Tompkins, the base for the coordination of AD International.

"As our network members are influencing change through their practices and projects, the impact of AD can be challenging to quantify", she continues. "Everyone has their own ideas in terms of construction and activism, and what works and what doesn't work in different contexts. AD is a place where a practice's commitment to climate action has been recognized and they are putting themselves up for industry scrutiny by having their name on the list." A recent [AJ survey](#) revealed that of the 75% of Britain's largest architecture companies signed up to AD, 52% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that it had changed the way their practice worked. The survey also noted that 18% of respondents admitted that their firm had either frequently or very frequently broken an AD pledge.

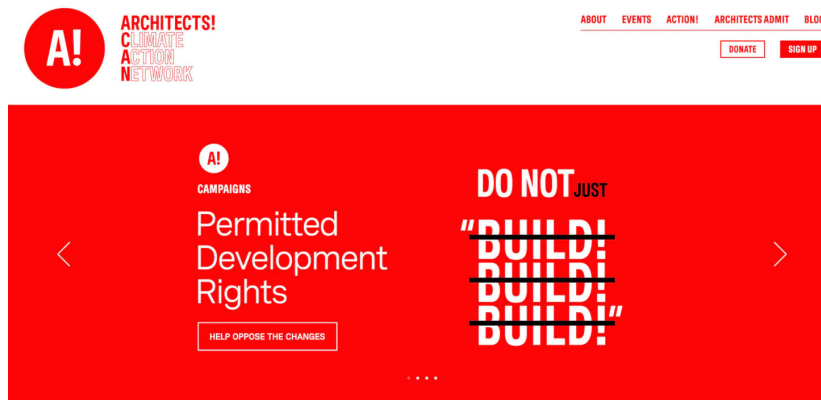


Architects Declare's first global meeting held online during the COVID-19 lockdown © AD

ACAN's online network has also been growing during the lockdown and their homepage now includes a [climate confession](#) feature called 'Architects Admit' for practitioners to come clean about their environmental failings. ACAN members have organized themselves into a 20-strong coordinator's group and separate campaign [working groups](#), themed around issues such as embodied carbon, retrofit, circular economy and biodiversity. Working groups come together in an online [open meeting](#) held once a month to develop creative campaigns, such as to contest UK legislation which restricts the use of structural timber in buildings of a certain height. "We believe the sweeping ban has mistakenly captured cross-laminated timber (CLT) for tall buildings, which will have a significant impact on the uptake of CLT at scale", explains Giddings. Other recent ACAN initiatives include lobbying the UK's Architects Registration Board to condone architects taking direct protest action and a [climate curriculum campaign](#), to ensure that the next generation of architects are clued up on how to integrate climate design principles into their projects.

All ACAN campaigns aim to address the three parallel issues of construction industry decarbonization, ecological regeneration and cultural transformation. "The way we have formed our campaign groups has been inspired by the work of Marshall Ganz, who trained and mobilized Obama's campaign volunteers by using narrative and storytelling", says Giddings. "We're training ourselves to develop a campaigning skillset to call for specific changes." Members of ACAN have joined the steering board of AD, and recently teamed up with LETI for their 'Energy Use in Buildings' campaign, in the knowledge that architecture climate action networks have a greater impact when working together. "We recognize the need for other groups doing

something slightly different”, says Giddings. “AD are rallying practices at the business level, whereas ACAN is more about individuals coming together outside of practice. There’s a recognition from them that we can be more radical and nimble in how we move while we recognize that we can’t get architecture practices to come together in the way that they can.”



Architects Climate Action Network call for action on their homepage, September 2020 © ACAN

This collaborative ethos also occurs within the architecture climate action networks themselves—AD Australia steering group have developed close professional relationships with AD Canada and AD New Zealand to share ideas and research. The ambitions of the architecture climate action networks are also spreading across into other construction industry disciplines: when the AD International organizing team receives an application to join from a country or profession which is not covered already, they forward details to the applicant to initiate their own declaration. Recent declarations include Building Service Engineers Declare, Contractors Declare and Project Managers Declare.

Over in the States, T-A-L's GND working group is partnering with a range of institutions, such as The University of Pennsylvania's McHarg Center (they co-sponsored and participated in [Designing A Green New Deal](#) symposium in September 2019, also featured in *Part II*) and Columbia University (they co-organized the [The Green New Deal: A Public Assembly](#) in November 2019). The group's ambition for these events is to bring communities, academics and policy-makers together to identify new paths forward for climate action. “If we do not rapidly change the questions we are asking to start confronting the climate crisis at its source—the carbon-intensive extraction and exploitation of labor, materials, and communities—then we will fail, and we will all be severely impacted”, they implore. T-A-L's GND working group have an ongoing national campaign focussed on the [GND](#), in parallel to their ongoing work on unionization and co-op networks.

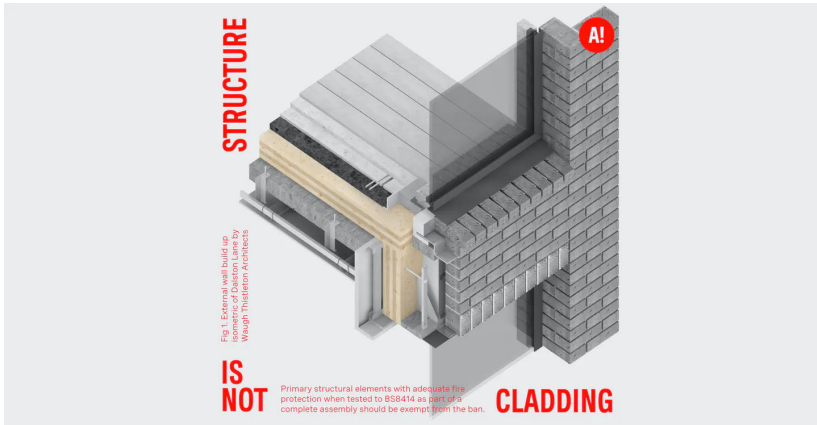
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*Being part of a global grassroots network which grew so quickly was hugely motivational, and encouraged me to push harder in my own practice to do better with sustainable design across all of my projects” Ranald Boydell, Architects Declare Australia*

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Reflecting on the past few years, Giddings shares that one of the most rewarding aspects of co-founding ACAN has been to witness how committed their members have been to campaigns. “It’s been so inspiring to see people get stuck in and give so much of their time outside of work—we all know how much architects work anyway!—to write letters to MPs, to read reports, and feed back notes to their working groups. I think our power is in that collective agency.” Jacobs concurs, “when we started, there was some discomfort and uncertainty, but when people started to join, they were so inspired. It’s the simple interactions of people talking to each other and caring about each other which has become even more evident during COVID-19. I hope soon people start waking up to the fact that the effects of the coronavirus will be remembered as mild compared to the impending damage of the climate emergency”.

Wheeler shares that managing the expectations of some signatory practices has been a challenge for the UK AD steering group. “We set out to be a platform, yet we were expected to have all the answers. We had calls online for AD to ‘name and shame’ practices who were perceived to not live up to expectations and eject them from the list. But who should evaluate that, and by what parameters? We saw ourselves as facilitators, not regulators.” Boydell adds that his experience in initiating AD Australia has been both encouraging and disheartening in equal measure. “Being part of a global grassroots network which grew so quickly was hugely motivational, and encouraged me to push harder in my own practice. The biggest challenge has been to try and find ways to communicate the urgency to get to net-zero as quickly as possible, rather than just doing better.”



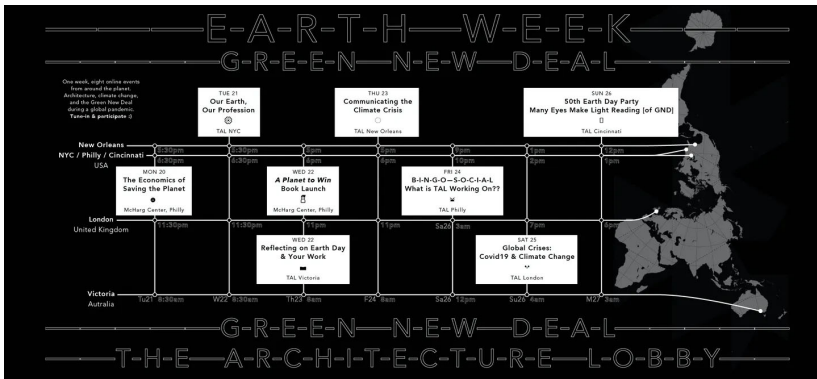
Poster from ACAN's 2019 campaign to oppose new UK legislation to restrict the use of structural timber in tall buildings © ACAN

The response architecture climate action groups have mobilized within the profession since 2016 is astounding, especially given the unexpected challenges presented by COVID-19 and their limited access to physical and financial resources. What advice would they offer to built environment professionals and students wanting to get involved but are not sure where to start? “Be bold and don’t be afraid of calling for change within your practice”, says Giddings. “There is a lot of inertia in the construction industry, and most of that lies within architecture practices themselves as they continue to do the things they have always done. If you are working within a firm and want to do something, start organizing. And join ACAN!”

Boydell agrees that change often begins with an individual encouraging their firm to take action. “Sign on to AD, or a similar scheme, to make a public demonstration of your commitment”, he says. “Then talk: start the discussion with your staff, clients, regular consultants and contractors. Share information, organize workshops and meet with your local MP. Pick some actions you can take on in your projects, for example the [RIBA 2030 Climate Challenge](#), and just see what you can achieve. You don’t even need to have the client’s agreement, provided that you remain within your project brief and budget.” “Be critical of how your practice contributes to the ongoing extraction of materials and exploitation of labor, both in production, on-site and in the office”, add T-A-L’s GND working group, “don’t take on projects which reinforce existing social and economic disparity”.

*Be bold and don’t be afraid of calling for change within your practice” Joe Giddings, ACAN*

For Jacobs, the most powerful thing a practitioner or student can do is to change their mindset towards the climate crisis. “I was at a Paul Hawken lecture last year and a member of the audience asked him how to discuss the global heating issue with climate deniers. Hawken said, ‘you have to convince yourself first’. But of course, everyone in the audience was already committed. Then it dawned on me that what he was talking about was how not to despair. There’s not enough guidance around people’s emotional resilience. My strong feeling is that in the next five years, Architects Advocate will move into the territory of helping people stay sane, positive, and to not get overwhelmed by the task in front of us.”



Event program from T-A-L's Earth Week held online during April 2020 © T-A-L GND working group

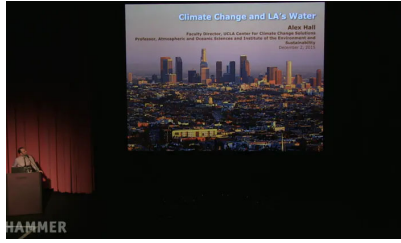
In ‘Architects Take Climate Action!’ Part II, which will go live next week, Architect speaks to organizations and practices that are actioning climate emergency principles through their projects. Matthew Barnett Howland and Dido Milne from [CSK Architects](#), a UK AD signatory practice, discuss strategies for small-sized firms; [Anthropocene Architecture School](#) founder Scott McAulay explains how he is pushing for change in architectural education; Clara Bagenal George from the [London Energy Transformation Initiative](#) speaks on

how their group is helping to define policy and offer guidance to architects; and [Billy Fleming](#) from the [McHarg Center](#) at the [Stuart Weitzman School of Design](#) speaks about the work his team is doing to launch sustainable startups in Philadelphia.

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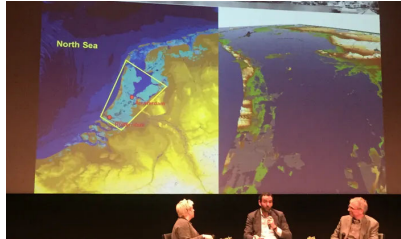
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Hannah is an architect and writer based in Tanzania, East Africa. Her monthly feature column for Archinect, 'Architecture Futures', explores the technological developments currently shaping the architecture profession within wider cultural and political discussions by bringing together critical ...

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