### Jon Goodbun

## On the Possibility of an **Ecological Dialogue**

Dr Jon Goodbun joins Making Futures School as part of the Resource Track. Jon has a background in architectural theory, design research and practice, which over the last two decades has focused ever more on environmental and ecological research and practice, and what this means for how we think about space. As an educator, he has helped set up two environmental architecture masters courses at the University of Westminster and the Royal College of Art. In this essay, he outlines concepts which might help us to use dialogue to give form to an environmental architecture pedagogy and practice, drawing on recent experiences with the Extinction Rebellion movement, which uses peaceful civil disobedience to protest the lack of governmental action against climate change.

recognition that the effects of environmental change will be played out through class, gender, race and neo-colonial structures, articulates an essential socialisation and politicisation of what is at stake in thinking through our responses to ecological crisis.

However, any demand for environmental justice must be accompanied by a certain mourning, as there will be - in a basic sense - no justice. There will be no reckoning, no making good. There are clear culprits - individuals, classes and corporations - responsible for the production of the uneven relations of scarcity and power which are absolutely structural to the operational behaviour of capitalism, and we should demand some kind of justice in navigating towards futures beyond this economic form. It is just that a simple restitution is generally impossible, for obvious reasons.

There is another scale of ecological thought which suggests that the very concept of environmental justice, the very idea of a reckoning, is not just ultimately impossible, but is itself an environmental problem. The ecological anthropologist Gregory Bateson identified an "epistemological error" that tends to permeate through systems in the manner of "an ecology of weeds". When goals are set by an instrumental conscious purpose based upon a necessarily partial viewpoint, and unmediated by a wider eco-systemic awareness, all kinds of pathologies play out. In his account, the various myths, stories, rituals, religious practices and the like found in non-capitalist and pre-capitalist societies provided a kind of meta-aesthetic learning environment for thought, which was in some way formally isomorphic with the communicational relations within the ecosystems that were the environment for human action. These myths and rituals acted as a dampening force, regulating the exponential amplifying potential that unmediated conscious purpose and its power structures can have upon wider ecosystems. Under the fragmenting force of capitalist practices and divi-

The call for environmental justice, and the sions of labour, many of these pre-capitalist meta-aesthetic structures were destroyed.

> Today, law, in its modern separation from wider meta-aesthetic form, is limited in its ecological imaginary (it can think about environments, but not environmentally). This means that when we use it out-of-context, in for example simplistically "choosing sides" to shape apparently progressive socio-ecological priorities and goals, we risk unleashing new waves of unforeseen environmental violence and pathology. Complex ecological systems are, in their essential logos - their communicational structures and content - beyond good and evil, and we still don't really have the tools and concepts for managing our conscious purpose in this condition.

How then, do we proceed? The situation is not as completely hopeless as it may seem. Perhaps it is in observing the very relation between the demand for environmental justice and the mourning of its impossibility - within that double bind - that we can find the route to ecological wisdom, a route to a more aesthetic, what is in fact even, if carefully defined, a more sacred sense of ecological justice. This then, is not a lament about the pointlessness of struggle, but rather a call for multiple levels of activism and a new kind of environmental dialogue.

Recent ecocide law and environmental justice activism has had a significant engagement with at least the first half of this double-bind - the impossibility of any simple justice - and has developed an important and still evolving conception of a more systemic restorative or regenerative justice, typically developed through dialogue between all of the actors involved. This dialogue is perhaps key to evolving a new ecological language. The physicist David Bohm, in his later work on the possibility of a verb-based process language - the rheomode - and in his various engagements with non-western and indigenous forms of science - developed an understanding of dialogue as a conversational form grounded in active lis-

tening. Noting that "discussion" shares a common root to percussion and concussion, and indeed means to break things up for competitive analysis, the root meaning of "dialogue" through (dia-) the logos - suggests, according to Bohm, a "stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us" and can facilitate a more collective wisdom beyond the fragmentation of argumentative discussion.

A version of Bohmian dialogue has been adopted as the organisational form of the Extinction Rebellion movement, and furthermore has been presented as an anarcho-autonomist alternative to both representational and plebiscite democratic forms. As a practice which can bring together the multiple voices through which environments articulate themselves, dialogue does have a meta-aesthetic potential. There are a series of concepts which might help us to use dialogue to elaborate an environmental architecture pedagogy and practice. Bateson developed research methods of "double-description" and "metalogues", arguing that perceiving the patterns which connect living systems - essential for not breaking those relations - requires working with multiple views of the world. This method has been extended in recent years by radical anthropologists such as Eduardo de Viveiros de Castro and Eduardo Kuhn, through various multi-perspectivist approaches. Such methods typically draw upon Bateson's and C. S. Pierce's conception of abductive reasoning, a method which constructs a semiotic structure out of orders of relations-between-relations, and can be worked on, through Bateson's famous abductive provocation: "What is the pattern that connects the crab to the lobster, the orchid to the primrose, both of them to me, and me to you?"

This abductive challenge demands an aesthetic reasoning. It can only be approached through a perception of scales of relations. Clearly, aesthetics - often seen as a distraction from environmental concerns, does not mean a design style or anything like that in the sense used above, but rather the study of structures of feeling and perception: How do we perceive what we perceive? How do we empathise with, or feel alienated from (which in fact is the same thing), the patterns and processes which connect all living and mental systems? Aesthetics - which is "in" both subject and object as perception and form, is always an ecological aesthetic. Can we find an abductive reasoning in the pattern which connects the need to demand environmental justice, and the recognition of its impossibility? Can we really perceive the form of the scales of our environmental crisis? The futures of our more-than-purposive environmental dialogues depend upon it.





logical Dialogues" for the Making

Futures school in Berlin. We thought that it would be interesting to revisit that text two years later ... a lot has happened!

It seems to me that many of the proiect and, with their defeats, it had seemed JG themes of that text have been amplified in like the GND momentum would also wane. the past year. The emotional curve of the year This has not been the case, but there really has been intense. We have seen terrible enhave been times over the past year when the vironmental events - over three billion beings situation has felt completely hopeless. burnt alive in Australia, and an acceleration Then of course there has been of the burning of the Amazon. We've seen the coronavirus pandemic. Epidemiologthe increasing collapse of the Greenland ice ical researchers have long warned us that sheets and warming of polar regions, and the the speed and scale of land use changes thawing of the Siberian permafrost. Both of across the planet - driven by capitalist dethese are happening at rates exceeding our velopment and resource extraction - mean previous worst case scenarios, and both are that new interfaces between previously disinitiating new positive - i.e. amplifying - feed- connected ecosystems are being created, back loops. The list goes on and on. at the same time as the bio-complexity with-At the same time many of the causes in those same systems is collapsing. These for hope have suffered serious setbacks. In conditions are opening up new vectors for the UK we had the defeat of Jeremy Corbyn's the transmission of diseases.

# "There isn't one GREN new DEXL"

JON GOODB  $\bigvee$  N discusses the deals, dialogues and semiotics required for a 5  $\bigvee$  R VIN  $\land$  BLE planetary future

In 2019 you wrote a text on "Eco- leadership of the Labour Party in late-2019. In the USA. Bernie Sanders' supporters built an I noted that environmental crises will always amazing grassroots campaign which was too much for the Democrat party establishment to countenance. Both Corbyn and Sanders had embraced the Green New Deal (GND)

In the "Ecological Dialogues" text, play out through class, patriarchal and colonial structures, a fact that couldn't have been made more visible than by the global spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and the uneven distribution of the disease that it causes: Covid-19. In terms of their environmental architectures, the virus and the disease are two separate questions actually, one to do with managing the spread of the virus, and the other dealing with the effects of the disease that the virus causes. The spread of the virus reveals the differential flows of connectivity and exclusion around the planet, and managing the spread of it has introduced a new series of spatial conditions and behaviours. But the uneven impact of the disease reveals a very different set of environmental architectures. We now see clearly that poverty, bad housing, poor working conditions, high stress and high environmental pollution levels are effectively pre-existing medical conditions. Covid-19 nas revealed how the normally obscured social relations within our environmental archi-1. tectures act as a discriminating exposure infrastructure for pathogens and pathologies of all kinds. Predictably, those areas with the worst inequality, poverty and inaccessible 2. healthcare have been hit hardest.

ΜF You mentioned the Green New Deal.. JG Yeah, this is really important for architects, urbanists and designers. It is es- 3. sential that we understand the discussion so far, as there are specific contributions that we can and must make.

So, what is the Green New Deal? MΕ JC Well, one of the interesting things about the GND is that it is really a dialogue. There isn't one GND, but a growing series of reports, papers, legislative proposals and grassroots demands of all kinds, framed in different ways in different places by different actors

But there are a shared set of key propositions. With the recognition of the multi-scalar ecological crisis that we are now in - and which Covid-19 is just one expression of - comes the recognition that, for example, we urgently need to decarbonise our economies. But as the anarchist social ecologist Murray Bookchin recognised decades ago, a wind farm owned by a multinational power company is not an alternative technology.<sup>1</sup> So, in its most basic sense a GND is the project of a just transition that creates new meaningful jobs that are ecologically regen- MFerative to replace old destructive industries, and which is grounded in democratic local ownership and control.

The idea of a Green New Deal can be traced back to the UK in 2008 and a paper published by the New Economics Foun- JG dation in response to the financial crisis. The paper was written by the Green New Deal group, which consisted of politicians, economists and others, and continues to produce new work to this day, including the unsuccessful introduction of a GND bill to the UK Parliament in 2019. Elsewhere the UN Environment Programme published a Global Green New Deal report in 2009 and in 2010 the US Green Party adopted a similar programme and language. In 2019, also in the USA, the Green New Deal Resolution was (again unsuccessfully) put to the US House of Representatives by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and to the Senate by Senator Ed Markey, a platform that was later adopted by the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign. Since then think tanks, such as UK-based Common Wealth, have added useful material, as have a number of writers and activists, such as Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Thea Riofrancos and others.<sup>2</sup>

- e Murray Bookchin, Post-Scarcity Anarchism (Monti ack Bose Books, 1986). Books, 1986). mple Anne Pettifor, The Case for a Green New
- Verso, 2019), Kate Aonoff Alvera Bat iel Aldana Chen and Thea Riofrancos. A Planet to Win – Why we need a Green New Deal (London: Verso, 2019) sky and Robert Pollin with C.J. Polychr nate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal (London: o, 2020), Jeremy Rifkin, The Green New Deal (New York: S tin's Press, 2019), Naomi Klein, On Fire – The Burning Case for a Green New Deal (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2019) and a growing range of reports by Common Wealth, available online: www.common-wealth.co.uk/pro-ject-streams/green-new-deal (Last accessed 01/04/2021).

Almost all of the Green New Deal papers have three main components: Green public works: a sustainable transition, decarbonisation and job creation programme organised around an environmental justice agenda

A new or reformed democratic. financial, legal and institutional infrastructure for delivering and achieving a just transition. An Environmental Justice Commission with a global remit.3

As such, this is more than a reformist project, it is a transitional programme. And beyond these large-scale top-down approaches, there is a web of increasingly radical municipal local community, town and city based demands emerging which are using the GND as an organising attractor. We need as many GNDs as there are communities to organise around, in relation to existing political structures. And at the same time there needs to be a GND meta-dialogue which can generate new political structures entirely.4

Clearly this is a dialogue that architects, landscapers, urbanists, designers and artists can contribute to. I am not so much thinking of the opportunistic possibilities for mainstream practice, but rather a quite different set of engagements and relationships that can come from working with activists and communities, as well as scientists and researchers.

In your original text you refer to the importance of dialogues as "key to evolving a new ecological language" and elsewhere have described the GND as the Green New Dialogue. Why is this important?

There are many questions that must be raised concerning the GND project as it stands. The adoption of the New Deal political imaginary from 1930s USA might resonate there, and in the UK and Europe, but can be more problematic elsewhere in the world. So, switching "Deal" with "Dialogue" was, in part, a response to that. Earlier this year I ran some exercises with students where we tested different base imaginaries: Green New Harambee (a term from east Africa meaning "all pull together") was suggested by a student from that region; or Green New Ayni (an Andean indigenous term for reciprocal relations and obligations) was suggested by students working with communities there.

But there are bigger issues than the name. For example, without the emergence of international worker solidarity dialogues capable of transforming global supply chains, the large-scale construction of a new green infrastructure led by the world's richest nations would actually reinforce an extractivist flow of mineral resources from the global

> e are most clearly laid out in this form in the excellent rrint for Europe's Just Transition", December 2019, put rd by the GND for Europe Group convened by DiEM25 Democracy in Europe Movement initiated by by Yannis foldowning the conversion of the formation of the formation foldowning the conversion of the formation ifakie) Av ine: https://report.gnd rint-for-Eu tion-2nd-Ed.pdf (Last accessed 01/04/2021 ere is much to learn from the radical m unicipalism mov ent in this regard. See for example the o tween Kali Akuno of Cooperation Jackson and Sarah Lazar We have to make sure the "Green New Deal" doesn't becom Green Capitalism", Cooperation Jackson, December 13 2018 online. Available at: https://cooperationjackson.org/blog/ greennewdealtojusttransition (last accessed 0)/04/2021).

south. Lithium. cobalt. copper and other materials are all essential for decarbonising green technologies but their mining relies on some of the most environmentally violent practices on the planet, often involving the exploitation and desecration of indigenous lands and peoples. In short, many of the more limited GNDs continue to articulate themselves through Westphalian geopolitical frameworks and risk unleashing a Green New Colonialism. In response, there continues to be a necessary and productive critique from both the radical left and green parties, identifying how nationalist GNDs will inevitably be co-opted as a green capitalism that will be structurally incapable of responding to the need for global climate justice, and which would tend towards an undemocratic and unjust techno-solutionism.

#### $\Im$ 's there also a problem with the temporality of the Green New Deal, the 'newness'?

JG Yes. Thinking about the labour of maintenance and care is so important here valuing existing, often invisible care work better, and expanding and reorganising our communities around new ecologies of care at all scales. This really is essential, isn't it? Shifting the basic value prepositions upon which our social and economic relations and therefore ecological relations are grounded.5 Bevond reinforcing and valuing the circular temporalities inherent to economies of care. repair and maintenance, we must also acknowledge that there are serious problems in the linear temporal projections inherent to the more conventional methodologies that many GND plans might otherwise be expected to work through. The challenges now facing us

> non Mattern, 'Maintenance and Care', *Places* November 2018, online. Available at: placesjournal.org/article/maintenance-and-ca ssed 11.03.21)



are immense, and the enfolded scales of the environmental crises are such that it is now naive to imagine that we can somehow design or plan "solutions". It isn't that the questions that we are facing don't contain those aspects – they do. But thinking only in terms of linear problems and solutions is itself a part of the meta-problem around human consciousness and purpose within complex ecological systems – namely that complexity cannot be simplistically controlled, and attempting to do so through violence and domination will either collapse those systems or return to us in unexpected ways. We can steer a boat, but we can't steer an ocean.

So on the one hand, it is clear that the planetary metabolic rifts that global cap- are now seeing unfolding around the planitalism is now driving require urgent changes and, moreover, demand responses that enfold environmental justice within some kind of planetary political project of so-recognise the limits of our ability to perceive cio-ecological planning of the kind suggest- and predict and the need to maintain space ed by the Green New Deals. But there are, for a complexity that can't be managed.

nonetheless, problems with our very conceptions and models of justice and planning that need to be addressed at the same time as they must be pursued.

So we are in a double bind... ΛΛF

JC Exactly! And much like the double bind I described in "Ecological Dialogues" that connects our need to demand justice even whilst recognising its ultimate impossibility, we are caught within a similar double bind regarding planning. However, in both cases, working with the double bind contains the clues of another way of being. On the one hand, the scale, speed and complexity of the environmental changes that we et suggest that we need coherent planned responses at a global scale. But the very complexity of the problem demands that we

Now do we work with complexity? Or complexity-in-crisis, even?

JC That's a big question, but there are a couple of things I would say. Firstly, we need to be as open as we can, to test as many experimental socio-ecological formations as we can and to nurture as many enclaves of socio-ecological otherness as we can. I am often asked by students and colleagues, "should we support permaculture? Or cradle to cradle? Or agroforestry? Or rewilding? Or this? Or that?" I tend to say "Yes, all of them!" One of the few things that we can be certain of, is that the environment of the last half a million years which provided the relatively stable context for human societies to evolve, is now changing faster than we are. We just don't know what experiments are going to be robust enough in these shifting contexts but do know that we need to respond with "requisite variety", to repeat an old cybernetics term.

Secondly, we need to view all projects as ongoing experiments and to design in ways which are constantly co-evolving. This demands a different temporality of design, a different kind of newness which is always incomplete. Finally, and this returns to the idea of ecological aesthetics raised in "Ecological Dialogues", we need to find a way to make available to ourselves a new kind of ecological intelligence. We must construct meta or mythic ecological learning environments for abductive thought, and tell modern stories of autonomous non-human complexi- MF ties, ambiguity, uncertainty and so on.

The most important interventions JG in this direction have been the supportive criticism of the GND from indigenous communities across the Americas and beyond. The fact that Ocasio-Cortez was already recognised by these communities as a Water Protector, through her activist work in opposition to the construction of an oil pipeline at Standing Rock in 2016-17, which preceded her standing for election to Congress, facilitated this.

Following the Oc asio-Cortez/Markey GND resolution in 2019, the Indigenous Environmental Network called for any GND to work within the principles of Just Transition, they cautioned against using the language of "stakeholders" rather than "rights holders", NSIE ANDERER and they strongly criticised the adoption of REDD+ (a re-forestation programme for offsetting carbon) and the use of a language of zero-emissions, which they argue is always ultimately the language of a carbon-trading green capitalism.6 Meanwhile revolutionary indigenous activists The Red Nation published their response the Red Deal, stating that:

> at: https://www.ienearth.org/ talking-points-on-the ı-new-deal-gn

"It's not the Red New Deal as it is the same 'Old Deal' the fulfilment of treaty rights, [and] land restoration, ... ours is the oldest class struggle in the Americas: centuries long resistance for a world in which many worlds fit... The Red Deal is not a counter program to the GND. It

is a call for action beyond the scope of the US colonial state."7

This statement from The Red Nation. with its repetition of the old Zapatista call for a "world in which many worlds fit" is, I believe, incredibly important. The many worlds model is not simply a demand - it is an organisational and epistemological imperative for any GND alliance and dialogue, and furthermore a formal necessity for the kind of multi-dimensional "intelligence space" required for any kind of ecological planning along the lines that I have tried to suggest above. A many worlds approach to the GND must promote a radical multiplicity of voices, a polyphonic dialogue of experiments and enclaves, and not adopt a single planetary planning perspective - although that would also be one of the voices that needs to be heard too.

#### What do you mean by planning? 7 hat covers a lot..

Let us differentiate some different concepts and uses of the term planning here. Planning has many aspects but in general we can say that it involves prediction, scenario and world building, and the imagining of potential futures, as well as a sober assessment of the relational implications of existing developments. For example, if you

> See The Red Nation, The Red Deal: Part One, (2019), p.11 wailable online: http://therednation.org/wp-content/up-oads/2020/04/Red-Deal\_Part-I\_End-The-Occupation-1.pdf

an ocean. want to build X number of houses, you will

"We can steer

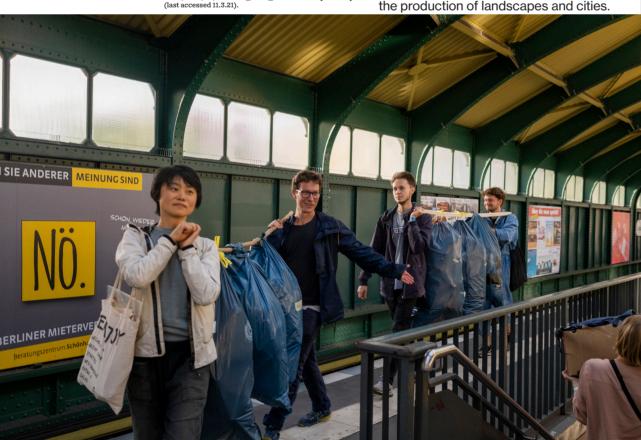
a boat, but we can't steer

need Y number of schools, hospitals etc. Under capitalism, planning has

a paradoxical character in both an actual and ideological sense. The ideology of capitalism is that it functions most effectively through an economy which is explicitly unplanned. But of course, this is not exactly true. Companies and corporations have internal plans: business plans aimed at maximising profits for investors. The markets within which these companies operate are also planned to some degree, through regulations and distortions shaped by national and local governments.

Any radical GND will need to both defend and redefine planning. At a certain level of abstraction, planning expresses a poten tial relation between the actual and the possible. This relation, between what is and what might be, is a very peculiar and delicate thing, and the concept of form, in an abstract sense. is somehow about this relation.

Of course, architects, urbanists, landscapers and designers also form plans of various kinds and this presents both problems and opportunities. The intellectual labour of planning and the location of design knowledge is separated from the physical labour of production and maintenance. Any radical GND must be a reorganisation of that knowledge, and a reorganisation of the division of labour and the space of imagination in the production of landscapes and cities.



trash parade through Berlin (see p.86), Making Futures school,



ΛΛF changes the epistemological structure of the GND?

JC Yes, and more than that. I mentioned earlier that we need to build new internationalist worker solidarities along and across supply chains. In many instances, these supply chains start in extractivist sites on indigenous territories in the global south. A radical global GND - one that has moved beyond a reformist solutions-based agenda into a full counter-hegemonic project - will potential to bring together workers in the global south with workers around the world. movements there - and for other reasons, too complicated to go into here. Might new be able to breathe a revolutionary fire into the pre-capitalist land-based traditions of Europe? I don't know. But we should never vatives. They're still potent and they contain a lot of ecological information and wisdom in their patterns.

ΜF re-radicalisation of planning? JG

So you think that the intervention by amongst other things, a language project, indigenous environmental activists a semiotic project. In the utopian period of modernism, this was conceived as the pos-

sibility of developing a unifying planetary lanquage of formal abstraction – of the relation between the actual and the possible. This was grounded in our shared bodies, shared spatial awareness and an exploration of "form" in both the arts and sciences that did not simply mimic the natural and social worlds but rather sought to reveal the hidden laws which underlie the appearance of things. Postmodernism, if it meant anything, was the recognineed the capacity to both block existing re- tion that both humanity and modernity, and source flows as a part of the struggle and the extra-human worlds of living matter within must articulate new forms of territoriality which both are enfolded, are more complex beyond the nation state. The GND has the than any narrowly conceived modernist languages could give expression to.

A world in which many worlds fit This is really important. Both practically, but is a world based upon dialogue which, as as you say, also in terms of bringing anoth- I highlighted in "Ecological Dialogue", does er epistemology, another cosmology, into not mean discussion between two people as play. As we have seen repeatedly around somehow our instinctive mis-translation sugthe world, indigenous activists have had gests, but actually means through the word. no problem activating what we might call It suggests that conversations can take on pan-psychic, or perhaps eco-psychic, ac- a semi-autonomous character. A many worlds tors. For example, demands for legal sta- dialogue must include both the linear structus for rivers or Pachamama have been tured fragments of prose discussion, where achieved. Green movements in Europe and one thing happens after another in a time North America have similar roots, but they based sequence of fragments, allowing a narfrequently end up taking a conservative or rative or argument composed out of parts in even a fascist character in these regions, an order, but also the poetic, metaphorical as they have separated from the workers' patterns that connect across time and space without breaking things up, and which provides an extended learning environment for solidarities of a global Green New Dialogue thought. I think that these two modalities are present both in human intelligence but also in an extra-human ecological semiotics.

To conclude, we are at an historical casually abandon these stories to conser- moment which demands that we both defend the possibility of radical democratic socio-ecological planning, but must also transform it. Planning to date has had a rationalist, prose character that has unfolded through a series  $\mathcal{S}$ o what is at stake here is the claim of purposive plans trying to dominate a future that a radical global GND must have that will always exceed them. Maybe human an ecological semiotic-aesthetic di- rationality alone is no longer a sufficient frammension, as a necessary part of its ing for planning? In addition to the rationality of prose planning, a world in which many worlds Exactly. The project of modernity – fit demands a global Green New Dialogue and within which we are now adrift - has been, a meta-modern poetics of planning. 🍩

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