

ARCHITECTURE AND ENVIRONMENTALISM BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

INTERVIEW WITH DR. JON GOODBUN - THOMAS LEMON

Dr Jon Goodbun is now based in Athens, Greece where he runs Rheomode, a small experimental studio working at the intersection of architecture, technology, art and ecological pedagogy. He contributes to the MA Environmental Architecture and the cross-college PhD programme at the Royal College of Art in London and runs a research seminar at the Bartlett School of Architecture. He has published widely on questions of architecture, urbanism, environmental design and systems thinking, and is currently working on a book called 'The Ecological Calculus', which builds on his doctoral thesis 'Critical Urban Ecologies: The Architecture of the Extended Mind'.

Jon is a family friend and I hadn't had a chance to speak with him since starting my architecture degree. Considering his unique academic position, I spoke to him in April, as I wanted to hear what he had to say about the role of the architect during and beyond the multifaceted crisis we are all experiencing.

Thomas Lemon: Hi Jon, thanks for taking the time to speak to me. I'll start with a broader question. How do you think architects will need to adapt in the economic aftermath of this global pandemic?

Jon Goodbun: The key fact to remember here is that this pandemic, terrible as it is, is not the biggest problem that we are facing right now: our biggest problem remains global heating, the climate crisis, and the broader collapse and degradation of ecosystems around the planet. In fact, the pandemic is better understood as one of the effects produced by the destabilisation and reduction of diversity and complexity of the planetary ecosystem. And in all of these cases, we need to think about our responses to these problems in terms of social and ecological justice. These are not simply technical problems – and treating them as just technical or design problems is, in fact, a part of the bigger problem.

Yes of course architects have an important role to play but equally, most of the decisions about building happen long before architects are involved... the site, the client, the budget, the programme of use, just the entire logic driving building development, which is in almost every case, directly or indirectly, capital accumulation. Almost every major decision has been made before architects are appointed and whilst on occasion these decisions can be investigated and shifted, on the whole, the very division of labour that separates the design of buildings from the making of buildings, and the decisions about buildings, urban space, and planetary space from the communities (indeed not just human communities) and users of those buildings, needs to be questioned.

TL: Your research has centered on scarcity, as a concept. How does this factor into the exploitative nature of our economy and industry?

JG: A few years ago I was a part of a design research project that looked at questions of scarcity in relation to architecture and design. We produced a couple of publications which I think have stood the test of time quite well so far – a special issue of Architectural Design journal entitled 'Scarcity: Architecture in an age of depleting resources', published in 2012, and then a small book called 'The Design of Scarcity' published in 2014 by Strelka.

The question of scarcity has multiple dimensions. It is a question of actual resource scarcities, literal limits to the quantities of given minerals on the planet. But it also enables us to understand how most scarcities are actually socially produced – in fact deliberately socially produced – to enable markets to function, and geopolitical power to be deployed. So whilst circular economy thinking can help to manage the first kind of scarcity, only social and political change can really affect the second, and a shift to a more ecologically sensitive and socially useful production, which doesn't externalise all sorts of costs and resources.

There is still, in general, a flow of violently extracted resources from the so-called global south to the economically dominant centres of power, and a flow of waste in the opposite direction. These relations are central to how global capitalism is currently working, whilst there are some interesting shifts being signalled – for example, Holland saying that they will try to use this moment to reorganise their economy on a more circular basis, what we are generally seeing is those in power using the crisis in a disaster capitalist mode, and reinforcing existing patterns. Architects, in general, are peripheral to all of this... construction sites and

development plans are in general more likely to stop or delay rather than become 'better', and architects will work with whatever systems they are told to work with, although they can play a progressive role in at least imagining and visualising other modes of existence and other forms of spatial development.

TL: In the path out of this pandemic, supply-chain restrictions may force architects' hands in returning to locally-sourced materials and production methods. Could this form part of a solution to the current model?

JG: Exactly what 'local' resources are in a context of global capitalism is complicated. One of the things that COVID-19 has shown is the lack of robustness within existing just in time commodity flows. One of the things that we know from cybernetics and systems theory is that highly efficient systems have very low flexibility in any kind of deep sense. And one of the things that we know from climate studies is that we are now entering a period of extreme instability – so in a basic sense, we need to start encouraging 'inefficient' economies and systems... we need to start building in lots of spare capacity and redundancy... especially into whatever we define to be core and essential services and systems. And yes, whilst there are all kinds of reasons that it makes sense to use 'local' materials in many contexts, it is just as important for workers - including architects - along existing global commodity supply chains to be forming new solidarities and new forms of collective awareness at this moment. There is a proposal that I sketched out for Derailed last year – in the context of some Environmental Architecture research work at the RCA – to take Andean lithium workers and community activists that we are working with, in Chile, on a long-distance train and boat journey following the lithium through the port at Antofagasta and through China and beyond, meeting with and picking up the various other lithium workers along the journey. (Derailed Lab is an occasional nomadic teaching and research vehicle, which uses long-distance train rides to take 'geopolitical sections' across the planet.)

TL: One positive from this period of extreme instability has been the sharp reduction of pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. Is this the first real example of the possibilities of a coordinated global climate effort?

JG: Yes, it's very interesting to see what the effects have been, and the crisis certainly demonstrates that quick changes to economies, and the damage that they do, can happen. However, one of the things that is so concerning actually, is that even the level of shutting down of production that the pandemic has resulted in is still producing nowhere near the level of emissions reduction needed in for example just meeting the Paris Agreement. So yes, there is an interesting raising of awareness of how quickly some systems can start to repair themselves, and also it reveals just how easily we can change economic systems if the urgency is there... but equally, it shows the scale of the changes required to meet the demands that the environmental crisis – which incidentally will make COVID look like a mild cold – actually requires.

TL: Do you think we will continue to see reduced emissions in the aftermath of COVID-19?

JG: What we are facing now is the most phenomenal political struggle... it should be clear to anyone who can think that we simply cannot allow things to return to the previous normal.

Will that happen? – unlikely... already we are seeing the most criminal forces within capitalism use this crisis to actually reinforce themselves, by for example removing existing environmental legislation as is happening in the US and China, and no doubt soon in Australia and elsewhere, in order to facilitate 'recovery'! And by creating vast new quantities of public money and handing it over to large corporations, as we have already seen.

At the same time, the media is and will prepare populations for a new wave of 'austerity' whilst rebooting fossil fuel and extractive industries, and new forms of surveillance and control. Any crisis always amplifies existing inequalities – and COVID will hit unevenly – affecting the poorest and most vulnerable hardest, and that is because, in an epidemiological sense, poverty is an existing pre-condition that through pollution, poor nutrition, stress, etc means that the poorest sections of society, both within every country, but also globally, will suffer and die in the largest numbers... and that is what we are seeing.

We see that in construction... architects and the cognitive disciplines shift to working from home, while builders – in London for example – are expected to continue working.

TL: Does this pandemic show us that simply doing less might be a more effective response?

JG: Yes – well, doing less damage, rather than just doing less. But even doing less doesn't really help... it just delays at best the same damage. We need to do differently, and very differently, at that. One of the problems of

contemporary capitalist development is that it makes us all poorer by depleting and destroying environments... yes it adds commodities to the world, by these are generally designed to quickly fail or become redundant, which is a part of the design of scarcity actually – whilst environments are permanently depleted. So the degrowth movement – I don't like the name 'degrowth', it is confusing – but the growing body of ideas associated with that is certainly interesting, and actually is about a different kind of growth, driven by different imperatives...but it barely scratches the surface of the scale of changes that we need to see.

TL: Large-scale 'green' projects are often a lot less sustainable than they seem. Is there space for environmentalism in commercial architecture?

JG: Of course, by definition, the mainstream environmentally conscious architecture is barely anything of the kind, simply because it reproduces capitalist development models. But that doesn't mean that there isn't work for environmental architects to do... and this falls into a few categories... firstly there is a kind of environmental forensic work that needs to be done – using architectural, spatial and other analysis to reveal the uneven development and inequalities, and violence and damage that existing extractives capitalist production wreaks upon the planet, people and the broader web of life... that is the kind of thing that we are involved in on the MA Environmental Architecture course that we set up at the RCA in London recently. And then there is just trying to make the design and construction that does happen, and that could happen, more sophisticated in terms of its environmental design, using passive and clean technologies where possible and so on. The MSc in Architecture and Environmental Design that I helped to set up at the University of Westminster is oriented in that direction.

TL: Thanks again for your time. For those of us in architecture who are interested in environmentalism, who are some architects/theorists we can learn from?

JG: Well the movement is certainly going to miss the radical architect Michael Sorkin who died as a result of COVID-19 in New York recently. His mixture of political, social and environmental engagement was a wonderful example of how architects can engage with the world.

In terms of understanding some of the key principles behind environmental design thinking, I was fortunate a decade or so ago to be the teaching assistant of Ezio Manzini, the important environmental service design theorist, and the industrial chemist Michael Braungart, one of the co-authors of Cradle to Cradle, an incredibly significant book that really launched the whole circular economy concept. There is much that we can all learn from in both of their respective projects still today. And I often recommend Fritjof Capra as an introduction to ecological systems thinking in general.

More broadly there are many wonderful teachers and voices that we can learn from. There are incredible bodies of knowledge contained within Indigenous cultures around the planet, and those voices must be allowed to speak loudly. There are also fantastic insights contained within the anarchist and green left movements – the reading of Marx and Engels as ecological thinkers going on at the moment is incredibly powerful and useful, as is the continuing relevance of anarchist and social ecology theorists such as that of Murray Bookchin and Colin Ward, who have influenced the contemporary Permaculture movement. The whole engagement of feminist theory with ecological thought and science more generally – Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Anna Tsing and so on – is absolutely essential. In my own work, I have found the work of the ecological anthropologist Gregory Bateson incredibly useful for thinking about the way that ecological systems broadly conceived – in which I would include both the living biological web of life on this planet, as well as our social and technical systems – are always cognitive and semiotic systems in various ways. This allowed him to propose the powerful thesis that when we damage ecological systems, we are actually damaging our own minds.

And of course, someone like Naomi Klein is absolutely essential for understanding what is happening at the moment – both in terms of her absolutely key theorisation of what she termed 'disaster capitalism' – which describes the way that whole sections of the most criminal sectors of corporate capitalism have set themselves up to exploit exactly the kind of crisis now unfolding and to use them to funnel vast quantities of public wealth and democratic power into private hands. (So, for example, the COVID-19 finance deal that Trump recently pushed through, is rightly being described as the biggest theft in global history, with 90 percent of its funds going straight to the very richest.) But I'm also thinking of Klein's work as a part of the emerging discourse around a Green New Deal (GND). This is perhaps the most important discussion going on right now, and one that architecture and design students absolutely must be keeping up with and participating in.

The GND discourse asks what kind of reorganisation is required to rapidly transition our current national and

global economies onto a footing that both mitigates against increasing the unfolding environmental crisis, whilst dealing with questions of climate and social justice. Unfortunately, two of the main politicians who had embraced Green New Deal ideas – Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, and Bernie Sanders in the US – have both recently been defeated and so, right now, it can feel like the future is indeed bleak (and it is interesting that groups such as Extinction Rebellion have spent so much of their effort dealing with the sense of ecological grief and mourning that we all increasingly feel). But still, the GND discourse is still a massive step forward, and a vital and vibrant area of discussion, although one that needs to widen its references and to find multiple new articulations, beyond the political imaginary of depression-era USA (i.e. the original New Deal). This is something that I am writing about at the moment.

Beyond all of that, I'd just recommend just getting involved in actually understanding how biological systems work through growing food – and watching these processes carefully, and exploring how environmental technologies work by building DIY heaters, coolers and the like. These kinds of practices and trainings are just as important as the theoretical and activist work.