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May/June 2020 NZ \$11.90



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# Environmental emergencies



**Lynda  
Simmons**

ON JUST STOPPING

## IN NO LESS THAN THREE

editorials in under a year, Chris Barton has repeatedly flagged his concern around the lack of any real response from the architectural community addressing climate emergency. While addressing the negative effects of demolition and construction on our planet's health, he has dismissed the usual arguments for 'progress' to instead focus on pure environmental responsibility ('On Longevity', Issue 4, July/August 2019), as well as critiquing the effectiveness of the Architects Declare movement<sup>1</sup> ('On Declarations', Issue 6, November/December 2019).

A third recent editorial addressed the same topic ('On Complacency' March/April 2020, Issue 2), this time in a slightly less diplomatic tone. After several attempts to prompt some kind of leadership or vision from the profession, what I hear now is exasperation that, despite a global environmental emergency – and the (large) role architects play in this – not a lot appears to change for the daily practice of architects.

As an individual, I have found it hard to respond to his provocation,

continuing to feel completely ill-equipped to combat the sickness of our environment through my small practice of architecture. But, perhaps it is not individual responses that Barton is after – his challenge is to the profession as a whole to make change at a significant policy level. An equivalent, if you like, to the recent legislative change banning single-use plastic bags in New Zealand. It took a simple directive from the top (thank you, Jacinda) to shift the habitual behaviour of a nation, and all the fretting, pre-planning and guilt (as we headed home with yet another plastic bag from the supermarket) evaporated, seemingly, overnight. Change proved to be simple: just stop. Just stop doing the thing that causes harm.

Architects Declare has brought a welcome focus to the destructive carbon emissions of the construction industry (approximately 40 per cent of global contribution), but does signing this document actually change daily practice?<sup>2</sup> The signatories all promise to revise their practice around those things that cause harm – reduce construction waste, use low-embodied carbon materials, design to reduce mass, use whole-life carbon assessment, design for a circular economy, focus on ethical sourcing of materials, and more.<sup>3</sup>

The effort and goodwill behind such individual practices are to be commended but, in the same way that the odd plastic bag still made it home when caught short, industry, client and time pressures mean that achieving carbon-neutral buildings can be a slippery target. We need broader collective action rather than individualised and, perhaps, we need movement from the top to jolt us into new behaviours.

Here, 'the top' goes beyond even

our institute because it becomes clear very quickly that environmental imbalance is not an isolated, measurable item related only to our carbon-producing activities but that it has a direct relationship to social and economic inequity. The (national and global) pursuit of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth in the name of 'progress' has created an accumulation of wealth for some and much less for many and, for any real positive impact on our flailing environment to occur, a redistribution of resources is needed.

As stated on the Architecture Education Declares website, "... it is now clear that ecological breakdown and global inequality are intimately linked; they are related symptoms of the same process."<sup>4</sup>

The American Green New Deal (GND) is an example where environmental, social and economic legislation is linked, proposing a radical shift in American climate policy.<sup>5</sup> An architectural advocacy group that supports the GND is The Architecture Lobby, which also draws a clear connection between equity (especially through the wellbeing of the architectural workforce)<sup>6</sup> and the environment;

"We must redefine sustainability to acknowledge the economic, social, racial, and class-based dimensions of the climate crisis."<sup>7</sup>

In New Zealand, it has been to our environment's peril that the knowledge of indigenous leaders has been consistently overlooked, despite the first legislative attempts of the Resource Management Act. A recent 2020 New Zealand Festival of the Arts event, *Talanoa Mau*, exposed the wealth of expertise that is not being included when considering legislative solutions for protecting our part of the globe.<sup>8</sup>

We have recently lost a hero who

Portrait  
illustration  
by Julia  
Gessler.

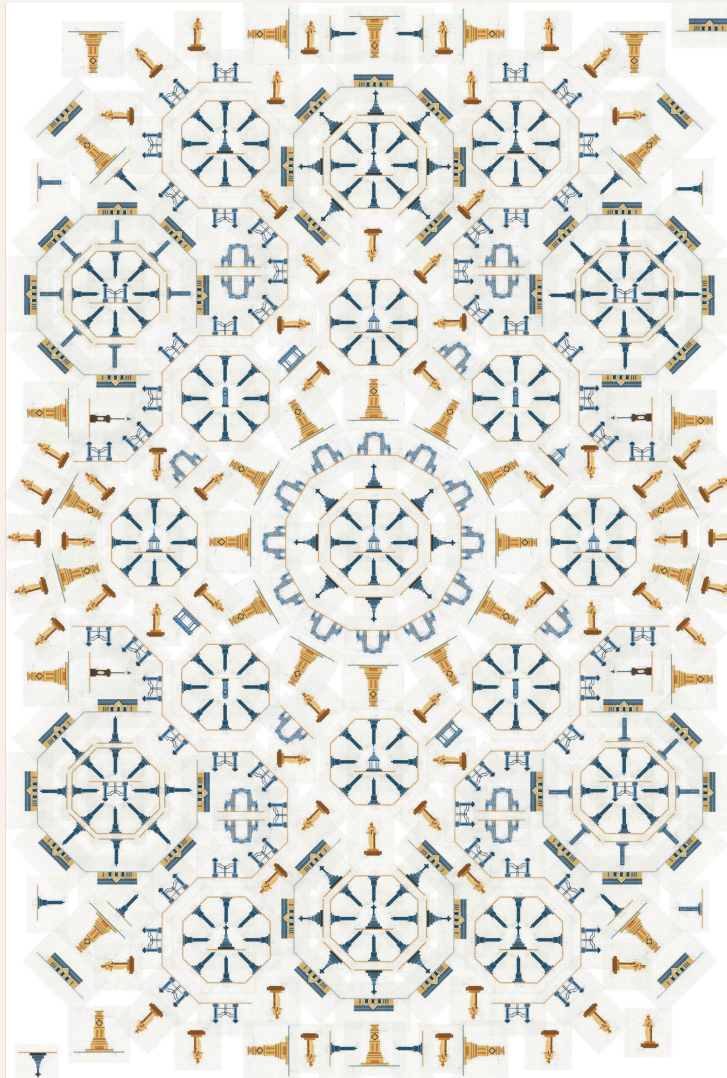
also consistently made such connections. Jeanette Fitzsimons (1945–2020) was a lecturer, environmentalist and politician,<sup>9</sup> whose constant message during her time as a Member of Parliament was that economics is never separable from the environment.

Fitzsimons repeatedly reminded the country that the relentless pursuit of economic growth, measured through the clumsy economic tool of GDP,<sup>10</sup> is at the expense of our societies and our biodiversity loss and, as she left Parliament in 2010, she lamented; “I have sat here for 13 years, weeping at the tragedy of so many people wasting the precious gift of life chasing the mirage of a bigger GDP.”<sup>11</sup>

Even (especially) children are acutely aware that continual growth and consumption – the very foundations of our capitalised culture – means more pollution, more waste, and more loss of the kind that matters. And, yet, we are constantly encouraged to grow at all costs, to produce more, and work harder.

An environmental emergency of another kind is upon us, with the Covid-19 pandemic changing our lives completely. At a collective (global) scale, the virus has literally forced humans to stop. We are no longer doing the harm that we have been continuously doing for so long. While these are fearful times of potentially huge and tragic loss, pollution is already reducing and there is a hint of a reversal of climate destruction. Let’s hope for a new normal to be founded as soon as possible and that it is one which interweaves social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Keep safe. ①



#### ABOVE

Morgan Allen, ‘Dissolved Monument’ from ‘Set in Stone – intentional memory in architecture’, (2020) MArch (Prof) thesis.

Cross-stitch and digital collage (original 420x594mm).

Allen’s thesis records and critiques New Zealand monuments, noticing the bias in who they memorialise and who is omitted from our national stories set in stone. Her design proposal is for

a new (non-typical) monument, although one that does not celebrate human endeavour. Hers is in recognition of the end of the Anthropocene, highlighting that we are mid-way through the period of decline for humans on this planet.

The thesis programme at the University of Auckland School of Architecture and Planning is a full-year design-by-research project. Students select their own field of study and set their own brief.

#### REFERENCES

- 1 Architects Declare New Zealand was established in August 2019 and has just over 100 signatories. It followed the original UK version in May 2019, when 17 (awarded) British architects created a public declaration regarding the role architecture plays in biodiversity loss and the climate crisis. The UK version has almost 1000 signatories.
- 2 Architects Declare co-founder Siân Taylor recently addressed this in an ArchitectureNow article, 12 March 2020: [architecturenow.co.nz/articles/beyond-declarations-sian-taylor/](https://architecturenow.co.nz/articles/beyond-declarations-sian-taylor/)
- 3 Matthew Barnett Howland, RIBA], ‘Climate emergency: we spoke, now we must act.’ (CSK).
- 4 Architecture Education Declares. [architectureeducationdeclares.com/](https://architectureeducationdeclares.com/)
- 5 The GND takes its name from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programmes that responded to the Great Depression in the 1930s, and layers Roosevelt’s approach to social and economic recovery projects with climate change policy.
- 6 Just Design – practices who support the wellbeing of the whole team.
- 7 [architecture-lobby.org/project/t-a-1-statement-on-the-green-new-deal/](https://architecture-lobby.org/project/t-a-1-statement-on-the-green-new-deal/)
- 8 *Talanoa Mau* was a two-day discussion created by Lemi Ponifasio, co-curator for the 2020 New Zealand Festival of the Arts. [festival.nz/events/talanoa-mau/](https://festival.nz/events/talanoa-mau/)
- 9 Fitzsimons was an environmental studies lecturer at The School of Architecture and Planning, the University of Auckland, from 1980–1992. She worked in politics from 1977 and was an MP from 1996–2010.
- 10 In a parliamentary speech of 2003, Fitzsimons stated that the “GDP is both too narrow and too generalised to measure anything useful...” See also the work of Dame Marilyn Waring: Waring, Marilyn. *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*, Harper & Row (1988).
- 11 Newshub, Anna Bracewell-Worrall 06/03/2020: ‘Jeanette Fitzsimons remembered for her dedication to the environment’.