



Tishman Environment
and Design Center



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The New School Stands in Solidarity with Puerto Rico for Earth Week 2018

By Amanda Sachs

The Tishman Environment and Design Center at the New School celebrated its Annual Earth Week(s) by organizing and hosting events that embody the center's justice-focused mission and values. On Thursday, April 18th, the Tishman Environment and Design Center hosted "From Brooklyn to Puerto

Rico: A Just Recovery” with featured speaker Elizabeth Yeampierre—Executive Director of [UPROSE](#), Brooklyn's oldest Latino community-based organization, and co-chair of the [Climate Justice Alliance](#). Elizabeth Yeampierre addressed the New School community about environmental racism and the threat of disaster capitalism—exploiting emergency relief for profit, recently exhibited during Hurricane Maria which severely damaged Puerto Rico and several other Caribbean island nations. Disaster capitalism is often disguised as benevolent ‘redevelopment’ or ‘foreign investment.’ Elizabeth drove the audience straight to the intersection “between racial injustice and climate change.” Elizabeth emphasized the impotence of traditional environmentalism to address human problems because “sustainability does not always mean justice.” She described how despite their intentions, some non-profits, philanthropists, and big green companies can act as disaster capitalists. Post-Hurricane Maria, some funders have been condescendingly speaking for Puerto Ricans and making recovery and leadership decisions without a single Puerto Rican at the table. “Funders are playing a role in deepening our colonization,” and there is an urgency to change this norm; just recovery is

dependent upon community ownership and participatory decision-making. Elizabeth explained how Hurricane Maria exacerbated pre-existing exploitation and injustices imposed on Puerto Rico by the federal government and that the United States' paternal relationship to the territory of Puerto Rico has created issues of strategic dependency, extraction, and debt—all of which are a part of colonial relationships. She told stories of Puerto Rican communities rebuilding, and feeding and healing one another. With each disaster, it becomes more apparent that money and resources must be moved to the frontlines in order to address the immediate and long-term needs of communities post-disaster in the ways that they deem most important. Following Elizabeth's talk, she was joined on stage by Michelle DePass—former Dean of the Milano School and Director of the Tishman Center and current president and CEO of Meyer Memorial Trust. Michelle has spent much of her career in creating relationships between resource providers and frontline communities and organizations. Michelle asked that Elizabeth tell the audience about Puerto Rican activists on the mainland and Elizabeth responded with names of Puerto Rican organizations and leaders of African and Indigenous descent working on

farming, healing, seed-saving, community solar, and participatory rebuilding. Michelle then asked what students and professors could be doing to help the situation in Puerto Rico. Elizabeth replied that Our Power PR NYC hosted by UPROSE is a coalition with groups around New York City that need help with research and making sure resources are being received by displaced Puerto Ricans in New York City. She stressed that students can often “treat communities like clients” whereas the communities are well-aware of their situation and needs but could use technical assistance, research, and resources. The conversation was then opened to audience members who asked questions about media coverage of Puerto Rico, how unity and support have grown, and renewable energy interjections. “Every country is dealing with the fact that even the solutions are solutions that minoritize us and put us as passive recipients of somebody’s good intentions,” Elizabeth said. With the climate change action movement’s expansion, the trajectory towards de-carbonization must emphasize justice so that it does not merely repeat the history of exploitation and extraction that created the issue of climate change in the first place.

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