



TISHMAN CENTER · SEPTEMBER 24, 2019

[Cross-Post] “Our House is on Fire”: Faculty at The New School on our Climate Emergency



Cross-posted from Medium

*Watch Greta Thunberg's speech to the UN from September 23.

On Friday an estimated 4 million people across 163 countries took to the streets in the largest climate protest in history, demanding bolder and faster action on climate change. Today, world leaders will convene at the U.N. Climate Action summit in NYC to announce plans and commitments to act in line with the 1.5C warming goal. Greta Thunberg, who participated in the climate strike in New York on Friday, had a message for the world leaders coming to New York:

"We have not taken to the streets sacrificing our education for the adults and politicians to take selfies

with us and tell us that they really really admire what we do. We are doing this to wake the leaders up. We are doing this to get them to act. We deserve a safe future and we demand a safe future. Is that really too much to ask?"

While I doubt if her question will be answered in the climate action summit it is obvious that the fight against climate change has reached new heights, reflecting a growing frustration of the slow reaction to this challenge. As scientists tell us with greater certainty that "the window of opportunity — the period when significant change can be made, for limiting climate change within tolerable boundaries — is rapidly narrowing," the need to do more, much more, to fight climate change becomes clearer than ever.

This is also true for us at the New School. While the university has already committed to a comprehensive climate change plan and is working to build a culture of campus sustainability as part of its overall commitment to sustainability and social justice, we need to up our game. **This is why my colleague Jean Gardner and I have initiated together with The New School Tishman Design and Environment Center (TEDC) a call for the university to declare a climate emergency.**

We believe that given The New School’s legacy — fighting to address climate change through the lens of climate justice — we should be in the vanguard of the international movement fighting climate change. To do so we need first and foremost to acknowledge that we are in a state of emergency that requires our immediate response. Therefore we call on The New School to declare a climate emergency, and then to follow with concrete actions that will empower our community to be part of the global effort to fight this crisis. **More than 600 members of the New School have signed the call so far (those in the New School community who wants to join the call can sign it [here](#)).**

Accepting that “[our house is on fire](#)” we have a choice to make — are we firefighters or just bystanders, who just stand there and wait for someone else to put out the fire. However, even if we want to be firefighters, what does it actually mean? How should we respond to this crisis as individuals and educators? We decided to reach out to some of our colleagues at The New School who work with TEDC and hear their thoughts about it.

**—Raz Godelnik, Assistant Professor
of Strategic Design and Management
at Parsons School of Design**

JEAN GARDNER

Associate Professor of Social-
Ecological History and Design
School of Constructed Environments
Parsons School of Design

Q: *What changes have you made to your own life to tackle the climate emergency?*

Gardner: They say that one person cannot make a difference in our Climate Emergency. Then Greta Thunberg changed her life by sitting in front of the Swedish Parliament, August 2018 — alone. On Friday, just over a year later, an estimated 4,000,000 people marched with her worldwide, 300,000 in New York City. The change I have made is musing, talking, and writing about what the poet Rainer Maria Rilke called “mixing death into life” — a taboo today. To do this, I gave up teaching a favorite seminar in order to develop an experiential, teaching module on *Embodying Resilience — Preparing for Disaster*. Scores of students have now participated in the module. They, and I along with them, have faced our fear of death and joined the South African leader Nelson Mandela in saying: *“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The*

brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."

Q: *What do you do to avoid climate anxiety and hopelessness?*

Gardner: I listen to the sounds of life — people expressing their pain and joy, leaves in rhythmic movement as the wind picks up, birds calling and responding to each other and to me.

- I watch the moon and sun dance their life-giving movements.
- I smell the seasons, the spring blossoms of honeysuckle, the summer peonies, the autumn leaves, the winter cold.
- I taste local harvest vegetables and fruits — the juice of spring strawberries, summer watermelons, fall tomatoes, winter root vegetables.
- I feel the primal forces of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water move through me as I participate in the Living Earth as it breathes.

Q: *What collective action are you leading to galvanize your peers?*

Gardner: The collective action of transforming the fossil-fueled death of our Home — The Earth — into aligning with the Patterns of the Biosphere. How? By talking, teaching, writing, organizing and just being with the possibility that Rilke expressed:

*Earth, isn't this what you want
Invisibly to arise within each of us?
Is it not your dream to enter us so
wholly

there's nothing left outside us to see?

What, if not transformation,

is your deepest purpose?*

"I try to remind my peers about the role of diversity in sustainability both in terms of non-human actors and also human knowledge. Non-Western ways of knowing give us a vast toolkit and centuries of practice that we can employ to see our selves as part of a whole." —
Professor Kaytayoun Chamany

KAYTAYOU N CHAMANY

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Mohn Family Professor and Chair of
Natural Sciences and Mathematics,
Department of Natural Sciences and
Math at Eugene Lang College of
Liberal Arts; Director of the
University Science Labs

*Q: What changes have you made to
your own life to tackle the climate
emergency?*

Chamany: I am installing solar panels this week even though I may not reap the investment benefits financially as I think this is an important contribution in terms of individual action that can be part of a systemic change.

Q: *What do you do to avoid climate anxiety and hopelessness?*

Chamany: I continue to learn about indigenous practices regarding our connection to the earth and our natural resources, and our obligations as part of this ecosystem.

Q: *What collective action would you lead to galvanize your peers?*

Chamany: I try to remind my peers about the role of diversity in sustainability both in terms of non-human actors and also human knowledge. Non-Western ways of knowing give us a vast toolkit and centuries of practice that we can employ to see our selves as part of a whole.



NADIA ELROKHSY, AIA, LEED AP, CPHD

Associate Professor of Ecological
Design; Director of the AAS Interior
Design Program in the School of
Constructed Environments at
Parsons School of Design

*Q: What changes have you made to
your own life to tackle the climate
emergency?*

Elrokhsy: Not enough. However

what I have focused on is to prioritize renew, asking, "How can I salvage what exists and renew the artifact to extend its life and beauty?" I have ramped up my activism. I have always been an activist, No Nukes in high school, health freedom, and climate change since college. More recently, it has been an uplifting experience to watch and support my daughter in being an activist. She led discussions with friends that initiated composting in her middle school. It's her world at risk.

We can always do more self-work. Sometimes I am just too tired to walk the extra step to carry my compostable from 2 West 13 to UC cafeteria. I have compostables because I was too tired to make my lunch in AM before going to school. But awareness and systems thinking is always present in me, and I am grateful it is a skill nurtured since I was a wee one.

Q: What do you do to avoid climate anxiety and hopelessness?

Elrokhsy: Work for change, research solutions, read, read, read, read, to learn what advancements exist or are emerging, here, there, and everywhere. Closer to home, I enjoy the beauty, flavor, aroma of fresh, local, food from farmers markets and CSAs, like TNS Corbin Hill. I celebrate how fortunate I am to have such choices.

Q: *What collective action would you lead to galvanize your peers?*

Elrokhsy: This is a tough question; what do you do when there is an emergency? Facilitating conversation and listening to people express their various forms of denial doesn't seem to be a strong enough action for an emergency. However, being open to listening to others, no matter what I hear is a collective practice I find necessary right now. When I listen to an individual's sticking points, I learn about their values and their passion for protecting those values.

I cannot find words to express how I feel about our government's targeted and absurd unraveling of the advances we have made. It's horrifying. However, I join Yeb Sano, climate negotiator from the Philippines, who said at a climate summit following the aftermath of Super Typhoon Haiyan, which touched down in his home town in the Philippines, that I refuse to accept a future for my daughter, her generation, and beyond, "where running away from storms, evacuating families, counting the dead become a way of life." "We [I] simply refuse to. We can fix this. We can stop this madness."

With each march, we deepen the movement, and with each conversation will build a larger

cohort, demanding transformative policies — mitigating and adapting to climate change impacts. We need the power of policy to make significant and substantial change. We need people power to push the systems. Films like, Disruption, Surviving Progress, True Cost, The Age of Consequences, An Inconvenient Truth and its sequel, and so many other documentaries that touch on specific sustainability challenges for our water-food-energy nexus, present the issue through a multitude of lenses. There's something there for everyone, except for those who want more than the earth can give. We will need to bounce forward to evolve as things transform, not bounce back to business as usual. Therefore, we need everyone. Every one of us has something to share, and lessons we can learn from that will help us design for resilient transformations.

HEATHER DAVIS

Assistant Professor of Culture and
Media, Eugene Lang College of
Liberal Arts

*Q: What changes have you made to
your own life to tackle the climate
emergency?*

Davis: I have tried to cut back on flying; I incorporate climate change data into almost all of my teaching; I attend rallies and have been involved with Extinction Rebellion; I am hoping to look into the retirement funds at TNS and see if we need to disinvest from fossil fuels.

Q: *What do you do to avoid climate anxiety and hopelessness?*

Davis: I'm not sure that avoiding anxiety is the best strategy. We need to also learn to sit with the loss and grief that we are suffering through. This is painful and avoiding that pain is also a way of avoiding the problem.

WILLI SEMMLER

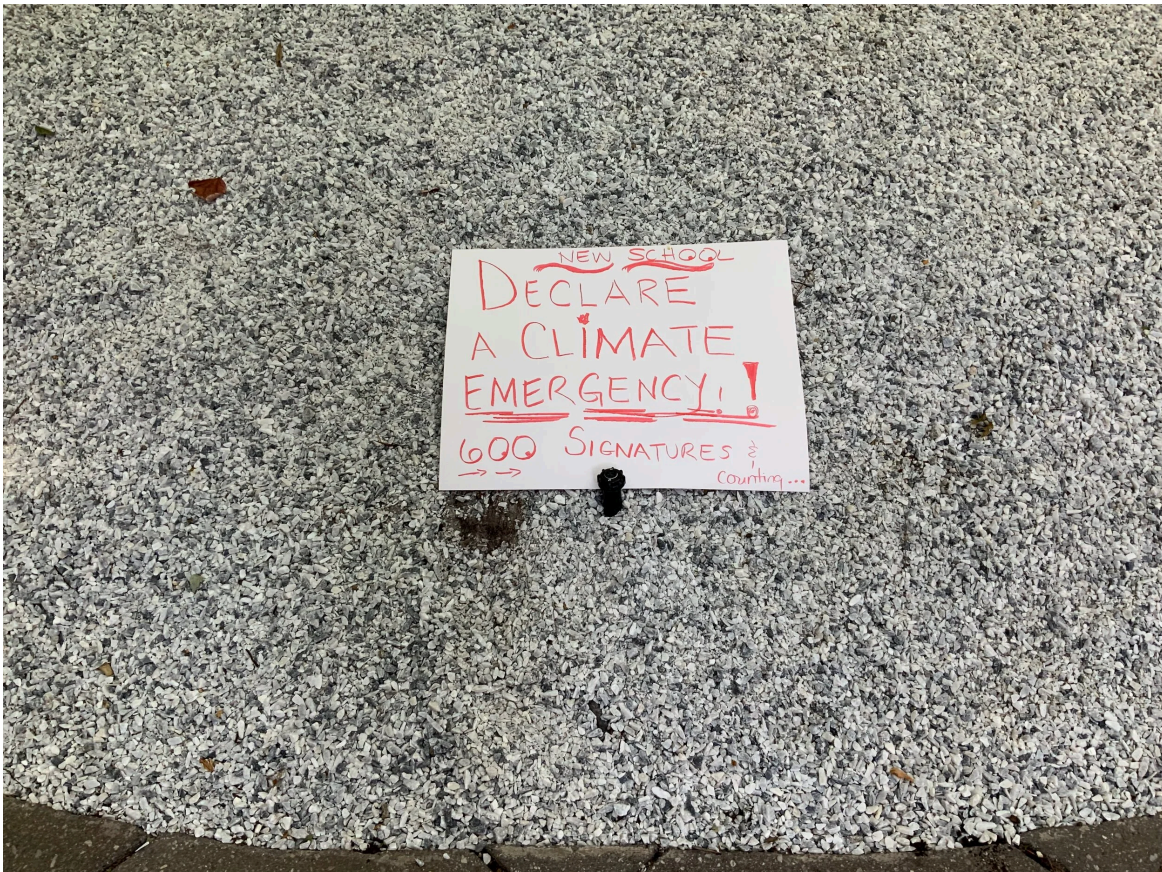
Henry Arnhold Professor in the
Department of Economics at the
New School for Social Research

Q: *What collective action would you lead to galvanize your peers?*

Semmler: One of the areas where I put my effort in is researching how to undertake the transition to a low-carbon economy. My [latest research](#) for the World Bank, co-authored with several New School Economics students and alumni, is supporting the Green New Deal by showing how two proven

instruments — carbon pricing and climate investments financed by green bonds — can be used together to more rapidly moving forward effective climate policies.

"I have curtailed my meat eating, stopped flying almost entirely, and signed up for solar electricity through community solar. I talk about climate change with my friends, strangers, colleagues, everyone I meet, basically. And I've stopped writing about English Renaissance literature and have instead started writing about the role of language in the politics of climate change." —Professor Genevieve Guenther



GENEVIEVE GUENTHER , PHD

Twitter: [@DoctorVive](#)

Affiliate Faculty, Tishman
Environment and Design Center;
Director, EndClimateSilence.org;
Author of forthcoming
book, *Keywords for a New Climate*

Q: *What changes have you made to
your own life to tackle the climate
emergency?*

Guenther: I have curtailed my meat
eating, stopped flying almost
entirely, and signed up for solar
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I talk about climate change with my
friends, strangers, colleagues,
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stopped writing about English
Renaissance literature and have
instead started writing about the role
of language in the politics of climate
change.

Q: *What do you do to avoid climate
anxiety and hopelessness?*

Guenther: Doing everything I can to
change the politics of climate change
focuses my attention on my own
moral standards and my own
behavior, which I can control. I also
fundamentally believe that human

beings overall don't want to destroy themselves, and so eventually there will be a mass movement strong and well organized enough to end the fossil fuel era, even if I sometimes fear that large swathes of the planet will become uninhabitable before that happens.

3) What collective action would you lead to galvanize your peers?

Guenther: I have founded an activist group called End Climate Silence, dedicated to getting the media to mention climate breakdown with the frequency and urgency it deserves. And once my son is a little bit older, and can cope better with his mom being arrested, I plan to engage in civil disobedience as well.

RAZ GODELNIK

Twitter: [@godelnik](https://twitter.com/godelnik)

Assistant Professor of Strategic Design and Management at School of Design Strategies in Parsons School of Design

Q: What changes have you made to your own life to tackle the climate emergency?

Godelnik: Certainly not enough! I struggle with my own carbon footprint, especially after moving with my family from an apartment in

Brooklyn to a townhouse in Princeton. Nevertheless, I work to cut my carbon footprint by reducing flights and beef consumption, cutting on food waste, and trying to avoid consumption when possible (I'm a member of a very active Buy Nothing Princeton, NJ Facebook group). I also try get more involved in climate activism, educate my kids (and myself) on this issue and engage more with friends and family (I'm the annoying guy on their WhatsApp group who keep sending videos of inspiring speeches of Greta Thunberg..).

Q: What do you do to avoid climate anxiety and hopelessness?

Godelnik: Engaging in conversations with my family and students is helpful. I also try to enjoy and admire the beautiful natural environment where I live — trees always make me more hopeful! I also try to use these emotions as a driver for creativity and [writing](#). Finally, when nothing helps, I look for a new series on Netflix and enjoy an hour or two of escapism.

Q: What collective action would you lead to galvanize your peers?

Godelnik: Last year I launched a new space, [Sandbox Zero](#), which I envision as a ground zero for a new paradigm of sustainability thinking that is grounded in a clear sense of urgency, integrating radical thinking

and practicability in order to make a difference in time. Part of my work in the sandbox is dedicated to working with peers inside and outside the university on [campaigns](#) and [new smart tools](#) that explore new possibilities of action to fight climate change. I hope the current campaign to declare climate emergency will also help build a momentum at the university that will be used to ignite more action, especially around using the transformative power of design to support the scientific work of our colleagues.

JESS IRISH

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Assistant Professor of Design and Technology, School of Art, Media & Technology at Parsons School of Design

Q: *What changes have you made to your own life to tackle the climate emergency?*

Irish: We have made a lot of efforts to reduce our consumption of fossil fuels in home energy and transportation. Specifically, we invested in spray foam insulation in our attic, which has made a major difference for how our older home retains the internal temperature. We do not use AC in the summer, and instead use sun shades, natural home shade and fans to pull in cool

energy from our cellar to stay comfortable. In the winter, we turn on our oil heater once in the morning to warm up the house, then maintain this with our woodstove. We use energy efficient bulbs as well. We both drive hybrid vehicles and take public transportation into the city. We have also cut out all red meat from our diet, and have a flexitarian diet that is whole-foods based.

Q: What do you do to avoid climate anxiety and hopelessness?

Irish: I run or walk my dogs on the nature trails around where I live. Dogs have magical superpowers for always being excited to go out, and always present in the moment. This energy is infectious, and I always return feeling refreshed. During these outings, I notice the natural rhythms of the planet: acorns on the path, caterpillars suspended in mid-air, leaf colors emerging. This reminds me of the cycles at play that we are not in charge of, and do not need to be.

Q: What collective action would you lead to galvanize your peers?

Irish: I've developed a project with Milano faculty Stephen Metts called "Visualizing Pipeline Impacts" to do exactly that, specifically in the New York / Try-State area. The so-called "natural" gas industry has done an aggressive and effective job of selling itself as a cleaner, more sustainable

energy system. The reality is that fracked has terrible impacts on every level, from heating our climate through methane emissions to poisoning local air and groundwater to environmental (in)justice. The project aims to source and visualize both the broader understanding of these issues, as well as develop visual analytics addressing to specific developments on our area. Follow us on Twitter @pipelineimpacts or online: vzpi.org. Also: we'll keep marching! #ClimateStrike

"Anxiety and hopelessness arise from apathy and inaction. The cure is simple: action. Small actions every day, bigger ones whenever possible." —Professor Timo Rissanen



TIMO RISSANEN, PHD, FRSA

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Assistant Professor of Fashion
Design and Sustainability; Associate
Dean, School of Constructed
Environments at Parsons School of
Design; Associate Director, Tishman
Environment and Design Center

*Q: What changes have you made to
your own lives to tackle the climate
emergency?*

Rissanen: I have given up meat and

I've stopped flying to conferences, or to give lectures and workshops.

Q: *What do you do to avoid climate anxiety and hopelessness?*

Rissanen: Act. Anxiety and hopelessness arise from apathy and inaction. The cure is simple: action. Small actions every day, bigger ones whenever possible.

3. *What collective action would you lead to galvanize your peers?* Collective brainstorming to determine ways in which flying to conferences and other talking events is eliminated without negatively impacting junior faculty, who are still building their academic profiles and networks.

DAVIDA S. SMYTH, PHD

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(davidasmyth.net)

Associate Professor, Department of
Natural Science at Eugene Lang
College of Liberal Arts

Q: *What changes have you made to your own lives to tackle the climate emergency?*

Smyth: I am doing what I can to reduce, reuse and recycle and I've

tried the impossible burger (it's not that bad). My lab work though is where I am making the greatest changes, not only to reduce and reuse plastic and waste, but also to redesign and rethink the ways I do my experiments and teach my classes. If enough of us lab scientists make changes to our procedures and practices, we could reduce the harmful impact of lab waste and plastics in particular on our planet!

Q: What do you do to avoid climate anxiety and hopelessness?

Smyth: I spend as much time as I can, surrounding myself with New School students. Their hope and positive outlook help me see that they are the future and they can help change the world that I will grow old in. I can give them all the tools and help I can to prepare them to face that new world!

Q: What collective action would you lead to galvanize your peers?

Smyth: My goal is to educate my peers not just those in my classrooms, but also my colleagues and friends about the steps they can take in their work to reduce their impacts. I also use social media to try and spread the message among the broader community. My students and I are studying microbes and we are learning about the essential roles they play in stabilizing and running our planet. We're doing irrevocable

damage to our waterways, our soils,
and our air and they may not be able
to adapt and clean up our mess quick
enough. We need to have better and
greater ideas to solve these
capacious problems!

MORE THAN 600 MEMBERS OF THE NEW SCHOOL HAVE SIGNED THE CALL SO FAR— WILL YOU JOIN?



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