

# It's too late for pessimism

## How the Deep Adaptation Agenda is relevant for teaching in the spatial disciplines

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*Post Pandemic theatre, for me, is a theatre, that is aware,  
more than ever, of its own vulnerabilities and limitations,  
it is a nude theatre, it's a crack in the medium, it's a half empty hole,  
a hacked system, and like every crisis, the pandemic demands  
from us artists more, not only as an artistic challenge of how,  
but as a challenge of articulating the crisis as a real chance and as a new reality*

Ben-Yishai, S. (2020, November 12). Sivan Ben Yishai, what is postpandemic theater?

### **Abstract**

The crises we face today call for a careful assessment of our collective and individual understandings and responses. The past decades have shown us that acknowledgement of the emergencies alone is not sufficient to address the problems, especially within the complex context and conditions of the built environment. In the face of 'inevitable' change, and of current and future challenges, this urges us to direct a critical glance towards how we understand and frame the problems as spatial practitioners, how we position ourselves towards them, and how our ethical and professional responsibilities and agencies must change. As an open question and a long-term endeavour, this echoes within the context of academia. However, a central position has yet to emerge. In this article, we give an account of our experiences by taking a closer look at the approaches, formats, and method we have employed at the Professorship of Urban Design at TU Munich and elaborate on how these concerns can be embedded in the content, systems, and structures of teaching, and how the Deep Adaptation Agenda plays a facilitating role in this ongoing attempt.

### **Keywords**

Deep Adaptation Agenda, University teaching, Spatial practices, Climate crisis

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## Introduction

Scientifically, the dramatic nature of the current situation does not need to be stressed. Climate crisis, biodiversity crisis, global inequality, and spatial injustice, often connected to our 'imperial way of life' (Brand and Wissen, 2017) that externalizes its costs either to other regions of the world or to future generations, are endangering the planet's capacity to sustain human civilization as we know it in the next decades. By now, these facts have been widely accepted. Despite all the rhetoric, though, there is no change underway in the magnitude that would be needed to avert catastrophe(s). While the targets currently set by governments around the globe would probably only soften the blow that will hit large parts of the world in the coming decades, it seems improbable that even these goals will be met.<sup>1</sup> Despite pledges at the international level, rainforests are burning, coal plants are being built, cars are being produced, and even modest sanctions like speed limits in Germany are not being implemented – as if we had a choice but to adapt, to slow down, to fundamentally change.

The situation is characterized by a crass dichotomy between the knowledge about how the problems could potentially be tackled, and the apparent difficulties involved in change actually taking place in the necessary magnitude. It sometimes even seems that the 'solutions' presented to us serve as intellectual tranquilizers to distract ourselves from the fact that, indeed, not many issues are being solved. Also, many approaches entail new problems that then, again, need to be 'solved'. These mechanisms, as they are intrinsically linked to how capitalism functions, are difficult to unmask. It is hard to differentiate between these processes and factual improvements, such as the transformation of the energy sector, which is slowly underway, or other, more invisible changes.

Planning, urban design, and architecture are at the centre of this discussion, as these disciplines connect the many, multi-faceted aspects of how we live, work, consume, etc., and how they are reflected in the built environment. As the practical work in these fields is strongly bound to the current conditions and mechanisms sketched above, universities play an important role as places of free thought, education, and research. However, our education systems are deeply embedded in the 'old ways' as well, in terms of the curriculum and in how professional agencies are defined. Advocating change is thus not limited to warnings or concerns, but also entails a reconsideration of all the roles in the educational and professional fields. Architecture and planning faculties have the freedom and the responsibility to straightforwardly address this and to suggest possible approaches for the next generation of spatial practitioners. It is the last aspect that this article addresses, especially the role of the 'Deep Adaptation' paper by Jem Bendell (2018/2020), which plays an important role in the authors' efforts to develop a teaching strategy to tackle the situation sketched above.

The Deep Adaptation paper draws a narrative of climate change that contradicts the optimism of the wider rhetoric on climate change, and implies an emergency, by suggesting the inevitability of societal collapse. Its depictions and assessments veer away from the comforts of our collective belief in the techno-social systems in which we are deeply embedded. Many of the critics of Bendell's paper claim that it exaggerates, that it is doomism, that it is completely unscientific, that the sources he cites do not allow his conclusions to be drawn, etc. We do not want to and cannot discuss all the criticism in detail here, and instead refer to discussions in Nicholas, Hall, Schmidt (2020) and Bromwich (2020).<sup>2</sup> For us, the quality of the paper lies first of all in the impact it has had: it functions as an eye-opener, possibly with the help of exaggeration, in order to create awareness using drastic descriptions, trying to get people to act. Somehow, the urgency must be

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1 See for example David, 2017 and Watson et al., 2019.

2 For an extensive listing and critical analysis of optimistic and pessimistic stances in the debate on climate change, see Nordgren (2021).

conveyed that it is, indeed, 5 past midnight, even at the cost of triggering depression, as was so memorably described in Vice UK (Tsjeng, 2019). Climatologist Michael E. Mann, although an outspoken critic of Deep Adaptation, in a recent interview in *The Guardian* (27 Feb 2021) acknowledges that a sense of doom ‘can be enabling and empowering as long as you don’t get stuck there’ and ‘ensure that experience can be cathartic’. Bendell’s paper for us fundamentally states: *Open your eyes! The emergency is here! There is no turning back and no way around it!* We humans often have difficulties in thinking more than two steps ahead. Doubt and a certain inertia inhibit us from taking action, the present being so strong and effective; how easy it is to simply dismiss the future, a possible future, until it might be (too) late, as vividly illustrated by Foer (2019, p. 13): ‘When the bombers are overhead, as they were in wartime London, it goes without saying that you will turn off all your lights. When the bombing is off the coast, it doesn’t go without saying, even if the ultimate danger is just as great. And when the bombing is across an ocean, it can be hard to believe in the bombing at all, even though you know it is happening. If we don’t act until we feel the crisis that we rather curiously call “environmental” – as if the destruction of our planet were merely a context – everyone will be committed to solving a problem that can no longer be solved.’

Communicating the urgency to act is difficult, because, as marine biologist and filmmaker Randy Olsen states, for many ‘Climate is quite possibly *the* most boring subject the science world has ever had to present to the public’ (p. 16, emphasis in the original). Therefore, the following questions arise as we lay out our teaching formats and didactic approaches: How can we bring the seemingly boring or intangible to light, to vision, to surface? How can we emphasise antagonisms without being reductive and introduce the planners as transformative protagonists? For us, Bendell’s paper represents a way to present the implications of climate change with the urgency they deserve: it outlines the state of emergency and helps to facilitate its message to the students.

In the context of our teaching, the Deep Adaptation Agenda (DAA) represents one resource within a structure of fundamental position documents, set up as incentives to remember, to challenge, and to update our foundations, integrated in our manifesto for ‘Post-Acceleration Urban Development’.<sup>3</sup> Within this framework, Bendell’s article is assigned as the first text in seminars and design-studios: the urgency expressed by the article has a strong impact on the reader, and serves as a call to action that we consider important as a course kick-off. We want to begin these courses with the awareness that something must be done, that change is necessary: according to Amitav Gosh, ‘the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination’ (2016, section 4, para. 2). Spatial planning, and in extension, all the spatial disciplines are not reduced to giving shape to the world, but instead are concerned with ‘discovering the options people have as to how to live’ (Thrift, 1996, p. 8). Therefore, spatial practices can and should play a crucial role in finding a way to actively deal with and confront these concerns. Here, we would like to share our teaching approach, which was and continues to be inspired by the Deep Adaptation Agenda, intended as a point of departure and a setting of mind.<sup>4</sup>

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3 This manifesto was published in 2018 as a founding document of the professorship of Urban Design at TU Munich to situate the team’s activities and principles in research and teaching. It focuses on framing current challenges from an urban design perspective, developing knowledge, and pointing out new ways in which European cities can be further developed. At the same time, it proposes a series of guiding principles, aiming at a transparent and collaborative working style. The current version can be found at <https://www.arc.ed.tum.de/en/ud/professorship/>

4 The authors teach at BA and MA levels in the architecture and urbanism programmes.

## **TEACHING PHILOSOPHY**

The framework of our teaching philosophy draws inherently on our self-construction as facilitators and conveyors of knowledge in co-creative settings. We believe that the DAA is a perfect wake-up call for fundamentally questioning the way we live, work, move, and organise our cities. While its primary focus is the climate crisis, it is not limited to that: it is rather linked to a whole series of behavioural traditions, dynamics, tendencies, procedures, power relations, and approaches to the world that should be considered to change the systems. Action, and change needed to tackle it, reach far beyond. The following reflexive account is the constantly evolving, and, depending on the occasion, flexible backbone of our approach to teaching and learning.

One of our important principles is communication between equals: we strive to enable students to develop self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-assessment through various forms of recognition. As a prerequisite to taking an active role in the world, it is important to recognise one's role as an actor, to acknowledge that the dynamics that lead to the state of things can be altered, and to apprehend the dynamics that can change these conditions. This constitutes a learning environment not only for the students but also for us, traditionally referred to as educators or teachers, just as much. We do not focus so much on giving actual shape to the world in our teaching, with which the spatial disciplines are often mostly occupied: instead, to begin with, we emphasise thinking and understanding, so the students can judge what tools of the spatial disciplines could be applied at what point in a process. Furthermore, although theory and literature play an important part in our teaching, we are not trying to claim or create knowledge, but instead seek to expand understanding. Here, what may seem like splitting hairs comes from a rejection of knowledge as a rigid concept, as well as planning in terms of end states. Our approach to gathering experience about the world is also flexible and humble. Expanding understanding as a concept behaves like an inverted funnel. We try to push the door open a little wider, and look left, right, up, down, and beyond. In doing so, we strive to not miss aspects, discourses, or actors that may seem not to be of importance, but often turn out to be precisely the decisive ones. Future planners need this knowledge to understand (spatial) phenomena both analytically and in terms of the proposed interventions. Moreover, an important focus of our teaching formats lies in the question of how the specific knowledge of planners can contribute to facilitating change – be it through projects, scenarios, exhibitions, interventions, publications, or other means. In this process, critical reflection and the planner's approach to the situation are not separated, but go hand in hand, with different emphases at different points in the process.

### **Wake-up call**

In this context, we take a stance as educators, questioning the tasks and roles of planners within society: climate and biodiversity emergencies require systemic change, and this includes spatial disciplines and their value systems. The current approaches to solving the many problems at hand have so far not yielded the success that is necessary. Through our teaching formats and content, we want the next generation of planners to be able to enact radical action and thinking. The awareness of the need for change should act as a call to test new ideas and approaches to future challenges, or to question and reconfigure existing ones. In this way, we aim to provide the tools to develop what is needed to cope and face the inevitable change: that is, in our view, a flexible way of thinking, not limited to disciplinary boundaries. Future challenges 'are defined by their interconnectedness and by change. They cannot be solved with the old processes, but require new forms of thinking and working, combining a planetary consciousness with responsible humanism that respects and enables local expertise.' (Harriss et al., 2021, pp. 14-15). Therefore, future challenges must be the basis for a reconfiguration of current approaches, a creative restructuring and reassessment of what it means to be a planner, urban designer, or architect.

## **Power of Conditions**

A crucial premise of our teaching approach is that architecture, and by extension, urban design and planning, are not autonomous, but rather dependent and heteronomous disciplines (Till, 2009). Indeed, they are shaped and strongly influenced by external conditions, such as the economy, legislation, politics, (building) culture, technology, and society. These forces are beyond the planners' control, despite their attempts to resist and sometimes even deny this dependency. However, this dependency should not be seen as an obstacle, but rather as an opportunity. In fact, external conditions can be used as positive tools in the design process. Furthermore, we believe that awareness of this dependency of architecture and planning fosters dialogue with different disciplines, people, and circumstances, linking them to society and its needs. Thus, the relationship with external conditions can be made fruitful in theory and practice and can contribute to the reformulation of spatial agency (Awan et al., 2011) as a shared enterprise. We specifically address these issues in the context of the yearly lecture series 'The Power of Conditions', in which we expand the discourse outside the professional 'bubble' through contributions by experts and actors from different disciplines. Within design studios, workshops train students to embody different perspectives, through which they critically analyse and comment on their peers' projects. In this way, students can become aware of the power of conditions, the effects they can trigger in the design process, and how they can influence the built environment. Through our teaching approach, we therefore pursue the idea of the spatial practitioner as an imaginative interpreter aware of their social role, carried out for and with other actors within a given setting. Within spatial agency as a shared enterprise, spatial practitioners should be aware of external conditions and ready to shape them actively.

## **Being Political**

Being political, for us, means being aware that every action always has a political dimension: it inherently involves taking a stand. Whether this is a conscious process or completely unconscious, there is no getting around it. Just as Fezer (2018, p. 216) puts it: 'Die willentliche Veränderung des Zustands der Welt kann überhaupt nicht anders als politisch beschrieben werden' [The wilful change of the state of the world cannot be described in any other way at all than being political]. This fundamental assumption is always integral to our teaching philosophy. Often, this concern is tackled implicitly, sometimes it is explicitly put in the foreground, as in the winter semester 2021 master studio, with the title 'The Political Site' already making this clear. In this context, being political also means preventing the discourse about the climate emergency from becoming narrow and not letting it lead us to neglect equally important issues such as spatial justice, social justice, and climate justice, each from a global perspective. One of the criticisms of the Deep Adaptation paper was precisely that it would not address the fact that 'gross inequality and injustice are fundamental to climate change' (Nicholas et al., 2020). In addition, we believe that the causes and effects of the current crises are interrelated and mutually reinforcing - Brand speaks of 'multiple Krise' [multiple crisis] (2009) - and cannot be addressed in isolation from each other. Above all, we must avoid legitimate concerns being played off against each other or one concern being addressed at the expense of the other.<sup>5</sup>

One of the fundamental aspects of educating spatial practitioners is to emphasise taking a generalist, transdisciplinary position: an almost unmanageable variety of requirements and justified demands by diverse actors must be weighed against each other. Meeting all requirements and needs is simply impossible, and planning decisions for legitimate interests are always decisions against other equally legitimate interests. What we want to achieve above all is awareness of the fact that planning decisions

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For an illuminating discussion of the interdependencies and pitfalls of the housing question and the climate crisis, see the debate 'Wohnen in der Klimakrise' (Vollmer and Michel) in *s u b \ u r b a n*, 2020, vol 8.

always have a political dimension. Being political also means questioning one's own role: we try to raise awareness among our students of the fact that they are operating in a complex system of actors. Then they can also consider what role, which concept of 'the planner' they want to adopt, what their specific responsibilities are, and what the corresponding agency might entail.

## **Taking Action**

During the semester, as a result of the readings, discussions, and mappings, some questions tend to recur: where does one have to start to initiate the change, practically, as a (future) spatial practitioner? How can we propagate what has been studied, discussed, and achieved within the studio outside the university? How can we raise awareness among the public? How can alternative values emerge and take root in society?

We do not have full answers and recipes to these interrogatives, because the open structure of our teaching formats prevents us from thinking in terms of end states. Rather, we want to provide the students with the means to realise where and how to intervene, as an invitation to think more broadly about system change. We borrow the concept of 'leverage points' from Donella Meadows, intended as 'places within a complex system (a corporation, an economy, a living body, a city, an ecosystem) where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything' (1999, p. 1). We challenge our students to find these leverage points within a given context, and to try to push these levers outside the context of the university, questioning how social change can lead to spatial change. Indeed, societal values and behavioural logics are crucial aspects to consider for a system's transformation and adaptation. Meadows' explanation of the system characteristics and their interconnectedness shows the promising effect of restructuring them, in order to trigger a considerable impact. Our concern is to find out what exactly the contribution of the spatial practitioner can be, based on their specific qualifications and their specific positioning in the field of spatially operative actors.

Taking action for us means instilling a new way of seeing through tactical approaches that highlight the seemingly untouchable paradigms of our systems. In Meadows' words: 'you keep coming yourself, and loudly and with assurance from the new one, you insert people with the new paradigm in places of public visibility and power.' (1999, p. 18). In this sense, informing, as the act of showing different ways or (spatial) structures, plays a crucial role, since it makes it possible to reach and spread awareness, which constitutes the basis for responsibility and action. Therefore, the contribution of the planner, in the form of spatial interventions, can for example focus on the creation of spaces that enable participation and mutual exchange; spaces for resonance and dialogue that allow people to co-create how we want to live together. It could nevertheless be as simple as the provision of adequate housing, well-functioning co-working spaces, accessible urban commons, etc.

## **CRITICAL REFLECTION**

Planning education is, by definition, a complex task – it is difficult to prepare for what awaits the planner in the field. But, until the current ecological crisis (which of course has been underway for many decades, maybe centuries), there at least seemed to be a basis of what could be conveyed to prepare for this complexity: planning procedures, disciplinary roles, functional requirements, different dimensions of interventions. Jem Bendell's paper in essence states what the great ecological movements, the Club of Rome, and other instances also say: that we live in an ecologically depleted world headed for man-made catastrophe. Essentially, it sheds a realistic light on what we have to deal with in the coming

decades, and what we should soberly consider if taking the responsibilities connected with the planner's discipline seriously. And it shows that planning has become an even more impossible task than before, while, at the same time, with modernism, the history of our discipline holds a strong warning against 'reinventing everything'.

Thus, while this paper shows why and how Bendell's text can be a first step in preparing for the nearly impossible, it also suggests that the requirements we impose on ourselves are almost impossible to meet, and the potential impact of the projects or strategies developed by the students is and will be challenging to assess. The long-term effects or benefits of the approach will only be recognisable in many years, when today's students will hopefully be successful agents of change. Until then, we will not be able to scientifically prove that impact, since our intervention in the respective planner's track will only have been a small and selective one.

Bendell's text is only one of many impulses that are given in our courses. In the end, this paper may not be so much about the specific impact of this particular text, but about the general, open, questioning approach that it applies to certain ideas to explore paths towards how planning could be understood in the future, about the necessity to essentially reconceptualize the discipline.

## **EPILOGUE**

'It is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism'<sup>6</sup>, Mark Fisher titles the first chapter of *Capitalist Realism* (2009, p. 1). We cannot devote ourselves fully to the end of capitalism, although the causes of the climate emergency, and resistance to combating it, are not least rooted in it. Subsequently, we should feel obliged to do so. Instead, we are dealing with the end of the world, since this, accordingly, is still less difficult to imagine and embed in a learning environment.

## **Acknowledgements**

### About the review

The authors of this contribution are also the guest-editors of this issue of SPOOL, they recused themselves from handling their own article and were not involved in the peer review.

### About the title of the article

This famous quote is usually attributed to British environmentalist and campaigner Tony Juniper, and has recently become increasingly widespread and used by a wide variety of people (e.g. Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo's contribution to the OECD Regional Outlook 2019) to communicate urgency and demand action in face of the climate emergency. We use it here partly for that matter and in addition to address the attribution of excessive pessimism or even doomism in Jem Bendell's paper.

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