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This paper examines various construction and architecture activist organisations through the lens of a Just Transition, the movement that jointly addresses construction, architecture, and climate justice.

Just transitions: Architecture, construction, and climate justice

Peggy Deamer

My faith in the marriage of construction and architecture for fighting climate change had its origins in a paper by Damian White entitled 'Just Transitions/Design for Transitions: Preliminary Notes on a Design Politics for a Green New Deal.' The article identified the need for designers to band together with all producers and consumers of the built environment.[1] As White writes,

> *Just transitions* […] *are not going to emerge without social protest and revolt, labor stoppages and mobilized class forces seeking to take power at every level to undercut and ultimately shut down fossil capitalism. The day after the demonstration, a just postcarbon world that actively improves people's lives still has to be imagine and built, fabricated and realized, institutionalized and sustained by public support and ongoing engagement.*[2]

Just Transition as a concept that explicitly puts workers – designers/architects and construction, blue collar and white collar – at the centre of forging policies for a green economy became my rallying cry.[3]

As an architecture activist, I have been trained in the knowledge that architecture cannot have impact on our global crises without engaging with the construction trades. Two groups, Who Builds Your Architecture (WBYA?), and Translating Ferro/Transforming Knowledges (TF/TK), have taught me this. WBYA?, a research group at Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, examines the multiple actors and supply chains whose complexity allows architects to ignore the connection with a construction site. It

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was at their first gathering in 2012, where WBYA?'s effort to coax architects with projects in the Emirates to comment on illegal construction labour there failed, that I realised the need for architects to identify as workers, to even consider our connection, or empathy for, construction workers. The TK/TF reading group, examining the writings of Sérgio Ferro, the Brazilian Marxist architect who believes that the architect's primary role is organising construction labour humanely, pounded home the practical and ideological dangers of architects ignoring construction site conditions. As Ferro writes,

> *The sort of design I criticise and protest against is design that has been distanced from the building site, making it heteronomous. It is design unleashed on production like the plague and is one of the weapons that capital uses for exploitation.*[4]

One could not read the writings of Ferro and remain indifferent to architecture's complicity in marginalising construction worker know-how and economic power.

Just Transition, then, links my architecture/construction affinity to climate justice. The term today is often used as a general concept referring to all constituents – socioeconomic and neighbourhood communities – affected by climate change. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states that Just Transition's goals, 'promote inclusive, sustainable, and job-rich economies and ensure social equity.'[5] But the Just Transition that White promotes and that interests me is the original one that explicitly aimed at workers whose jobs would be affected in a transition to a green economy – the one that, in the 1980s, Tony

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Mazzocchi, an Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers Unionist, proposed when creating a 'superfund for workers' to compensate and retain those losing fossil-fuel-dependent jobs. It aligns with the definition that the Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB) now adheres to:

> *Just Transitions will institutionalize the role of workers in policymaking in the clean energy transition, including the role of collective bargaining* […] [*It*] *creates good green jobs in which workers' rights are respected and protected across supply chains;* [*it*] *ensures that workers are at the table when there's a discussion about the climate agenda.*[6]

Just Transition is aligned with and distinct from other climate-forward movements, including the Green New Deal (GND). In the US, the GND was brought to many US citizens' attention by Congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez's and Senator Ed Markey's House Resolution (HR) 109 when they argued that the Federal Government should enforce net-zero greenhouse gas emission, invest in sustainable infrastructure, secure clean air and water for future generations, and suppress future repression of indigenous people and people of colour.[7] (It is linked to Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR)'s New Deal to which it is often compared, favourably and unfavourably.) But before that, the journalist Thomas Friedman used the term in a *New York Times* January 2007 opinion piece entitled 'A Warning from the Garden', where he asked the US government to update FDR's New Deal to orchestrate a Green New Deal that would coordinate technology's power to save our planet.[8] The term was further made popular by the British Green New Deal Group and its influential report on 21 July 2008 responding to the financial crisis of 2008,[9] and from there it was promoted internationally by the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP). In Europe, 'the European Green New Deal' is today the European Commission's comprehensive plan to transform the EU into a climate-neutral, resource-efficient, and competitive economy by 2050. First presented in December 2019, it includes a range of policies and investments aimed at decarbonising energy, industry, buildings, and transport.[10]

My interest in Just Transition found an outlet in the Architecture Lobby's Green New Deal (GND) working group. The Architecture Lobby advocates for the value of architecture labour and the need to unionise. The GND working group puts this worker-forward advocacy towards climate justice and draws the attention of architecture workers to their role in our climate crisis – 'Architects: We are fossil fuel workers!'[11] It has taken up Just Transition as its *cri de coeur*.

'The GND working group puts this worker-forward advocacy towards climate justice and draws the attention of architecture workers to their role in our climate crisis – "Architects: We are fossil fuel workers!"'

My interest has also found an outlet in the Alternate Building Industries (ABI) Collective, a group formed when unionised engineers from the Local 98 union of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE) joined forces with the Lobby's GND working group to support New York City's Local Law 97. LL97 stipulates that buildings over 25,000 square feet in the city must reduce their carbon emissions by 40% by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050. But the ABI Collective vision, beyond this law, promotes national and transnational efforts to rethink profit-driven, carbon-intensive development. As they say,

> *Our political analysis is that transformative change, in-line with climate goals and equity, requires cross-sector labor organizing and power building to challenge the needs of corporate interests.*[12]

'I wanted to learn how to scale up from the ABI Collective, or, if scaling up was not the appropriate goal or the ABI Collective was not the right vehicle, discover other allies for architectural workers.'

The ABI Collective has gathered tradespeople from construction, delivery, and manufacturing into one organisation.

The ABI collective, and my concern for its success, are the sparks for this paper. The call for papers from the TF/TK-organised 2024 Production Studies International Conference, which included a session on climate, was an opportunity to search for organisations like the ABI Collective that bring together architecture, builders, and climate justice in the name of Just Transitions. I wanted to learn how to scale up from the ABI Collective, or, if scaling up was not the appropriate goal or the ABI Collective was not the right vehicle, discover other allies for architectural workers.

For that presentation, it was difficult to objectively categorise and compare the different Just Transition organisations. While it became apparent that those centring on construction workers should be distinct from those centring on architecture, further modes of ordering/comparing had to succumb to my personal assumptions – prejudices stemming from my advocacy work of the Architecture Lobby which include: that impact, however defined, is the criteria of success; that the larger and more global the organisation/forum, the more it will effect change; that power is a goal; that worker power implies unions; that the goal of power is getting to the policymaking table; and that policy demands should include a critique of demand for perpetual growth.[13]

Likewise, my efforts to organise the members of the Architecture Lobby had led to preconceptions of the relative 'power' of various internal forms of

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'To make sure we know why any of this matters: Engineering and Construction Industries account for about 6% of global GDP, 23% of greenhouse gas emissions, and consume between a third and half of the world's extracted resources.'

governance: that general activist agitation is less effective than a legally formed entity; that certain non-profit entities – those say in the UA that take on political work [like a 501(c)(6)] rather than those that (merely) disseminate information [like a 501(c)(3)][14] – are more effective than others; that non-profits are less potent than an NGO; that unions are the best form of worker advocacy; and that governmental agencies are more influential than private entities. And of course, I value those organisations linking climate change to a critique of capitalism's pro-growth the most.

As an elaboration of that presentation, this paper holds onto the order dictated by those assumptions – assumptions that still resonate in a deep-seated way, but which, over the course of writing this paper, I have come to question. I am not sure that bigger is better, nor that organisations embedded in the government will necessarily properly prioritise climate's interest. And in any case, 'ranking' in one domain – say, the scope of a critique's target – never conforms to 'ranking' in another – say, NGO versus non-profit. I will discuss the rethinking of my ranking assumptions at the end, but for now, what follows is a compilation of Just Transition initiatives that reflect thoughts on the 'right' way to bring about a Just Transition. It is, in any case, motivated by the belief that those reading this piece will be forced to consider how best to deploy their climate crisis outrage.

To make sure we know why any of this matters: Engineering and Construction Industries account for about 6% of global GDP, 23% of greenhouse gas emissions, and consume between a third and half of the world's extracted resources. Architects need to admit their role in this unsustainable practice and join with other industries to change development policies effectively.

Organisations

The following list starts with construction organisations arguing for a Just Transition and is followed by architecture organisations that do the same. This compilation is not comprehensive – my context and proclivities circumscribe it – but it is representative of the complexity of integrating architecture, construction, and climate justice in Just Transition advocacy. Most apparent is the asymmetry of these two groups – architecture is absent from construction organising, but not vice versa; the construction organisations have paid administration, most of the architecture organisations do not. If nothing else, this indicates the organisational work required of architects to participate in a Just Transition.

Construction organisations

Construction unions, as is commonly known, generally fear the loss of jobs that come with climate reform. Former American Federation of Labor-Congress of International Organizations (AFL-CIO) president Richard Trumpka had softened his position on climate justice before he passed away, but initially declared that 'Just Transition is a fancy name for a funeral.'[15] The construction unions that do embrace climate justice are the exception, not the rule.

Going from the least disruptive/most acquiescent to the most radical/disruptive organisations, the stacking hierarchy of categories break down to: (1) those that focus on 'sharing solutions' with existing business structures at the table of decision making; (2) those that are concerned less with getting to the table than outlining the requirements that stranded workers should put on the table; and (3) those that are explicit about making demands for a systemic rethinking of capital with green labour. The organisations included here are primarily US and Europe-based, indicating my limited area of expertise.

1. Get to the table of business-as-usual:

The Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB), a UK-based organisation, is pro-business. It identifies itself as 'the leading global think tank working to ensure that corporate activity respects the rights of workers and communities.'[16] Its mission is 'to shape policy, advance practice and strengthen accountability to make respect for human rights part of everyday business.'[17] Their 'Just Transitions in the Built Environment', a two-year research project, investigated the impact of renovation programmes, retrofitting subsidies, and new energy-efficient buildings on housing and construction workers' rights.[18] It found both positive examples of government and business accomplishments and negative trends where renovations lead to evictions and green investment displaces communities.[19] The IHRB is good at identifying symptoms of capitalist-led development but not at addressing the disease. As a non-profit thinktank funded by grants from philanthropic foundations, corporate sponsorship, individual donations, and consultancy fees, it relies on other business organisations to implement its suggested changes.

'The IHRB is good at identifying symptoms of capitalist-led development but not at addressing the disease.'

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which was founded in 2006 and is based in Brussels, is, like IRHB, business-friendly, but less pro-business than 'business realistic'. It promotes and defends workers' rights globally, advocating for social justice and fair labour practices. In 2016, the ITUC established its Just Transition Centre that engages 'unions, communities, government, businesses, investors and experts' to ensure that labour has a seat

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at the table when planning for a Just Transition to a low-carbon world.[20] Opposing exploitative business practices – precarious work arrangements, wage suppression, and unsafe work conditions – the ITUC nevertheless calls for business growth, which it believes will contribute to economic stability and job creation. 'Social dialogue' – including interviews, videos, reports, and case studies – is key to developing its policies, resolving workplace issues, and creating an environment for fair and effective labour standards. The ITUC has close relations with several UN Specialised Agencies and with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It is a non-governmental organisation (NGO), but atypical of NGOs because it functions as a federation of trade unions.

2. Make sure you know your demands:
The Labor Network for Sustainability (LN4S) is a US-based organisation that is less interested in having a seat at the table with business than in making sure that workers know what they deserve when they get there. Their goal is 'building a powerful labor-climate movement to secure an ecologically sustainable and economically just future – from the ground up.'[21] LN4S observed that while the GND of HR 109 submitted by Ocasio-Cortez and Markey includes many protections and benefits for workers, it does not include language that specifically addresses the construction workers most adversely affected by the transition to a climate-safe economy. Their 'Elements of Bottom-up Worker Protection', a guidance outline for policy reform, includes wage guarantee/insurance, education and job training, priority job placement, pension and benefit support, health care, community investment, and the guarantee that there will be no termination of carbon-intensive jobs until new jobs are in place. Believing that climate change is the real job killer and that bottom-up organising coupled with top-down strategies is strategically correct, the principles of a Just Transition will, they believe, avoid the pitfalls that have allowed previous alliances between labour and the environmental movement to stall. LN4S is a 501(c)(3) (educational) non-profit. There is a depth of intellectual labour but it does not apply political pressure.

3. Identifying capitalist problems, at different scales:
The Alliance for a Greater New York (ALIGN), which brings together labour unions and community organisations in New York State, is less broad in scope than the organisations described above, but more critical of capitalism-generated problems. They want the state of NY to address 'the root causes of economic injustice by recognizing that America is facing an economic inequality crisis that must be met with unions and workplace democracy.'[22] ALIGN's left-of-centre economic position targets the American 'extraction economy' in which a small number of corporate executives exploit the workers who constitute the majority of the economy. It wants to restructure the economy to prioritise workers, the environment, and social justice over profits.[23] It is a 501(c)(3) (educational) non-profit, but unlike other 501(c)(3)s, it is embedded in communities and unions that are able to exert political will.

'ALIGN's left-of-centre economic position targets the American "extraction economy" in which a small number of corporate executives exploit the workers who constitute the majority of the economy.'

'The IWW believes that the transition remains in the grip of powerful and wealthy institutions that are systemically constrained to put the accumulation of capital above the habitability of the planet, and that the liberal establishment displaces transition costs onto the masses even as it presides over ever more crass wealth polarisation.'

Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) – formed in 1905 in Chicago in the heyday of radical unionism in the US and following Marxist (anarchist, syndicalist, and socialist) principles to unite wage workers in all sectors – is a US-based volunteer-driven union that trains workers (everyone should be an organiser, not just a select few!) to start organising unions in all sectors. In turning its radical aims to Just Transitions, it emphasises the need to proactively build solidarity with adversely affected workers by drafting counter-narratives to the dominant 'jobs vs environment trap.'[24] IWW believes that the transition remains in the grip of powerful and wealthy institutions that are systemically constrained to put the accumulation of capital above the habitability of the planet, and that the liberal establishment displaces transition costs onto the masses even as it presides over ever more crass wealth polarisation. The IWW emphasises the fact that construction workers, while the most obvious targets of their advocacy, cannot be divided from workers in other sectors; in other words, the politics of transition is for them an overall class struggle. 'You can't save the planet without the working class!'[25] The IWW is a volunteer non-profit 501(c)(5) (labour) relying on membership dues. They walk the walk: 'Workers and ecologists of the world unite! We have nothing to lose but our very existence!'[26]

Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) is a global, multi-sector network advancing democratic control of energy and promoting a worker-led Just Transition. As they say, 'A transition that is "just" from the perspective of workers or "the workforce", but which fails to help achieve the needed socioeconomic transformation, will ultimately

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accomplish little to address pressing climate-related and broader ecological concerns.'[27] Going further, they write:

> *Policies aimed at driving a socioeconomic transformation that are robust enough to achieve climate and environmental targets, but which ignore the impact on workers in specific locations or industries, risk being unable to secure the support from workers that such a transformation requires to be successful.*[28]

TUED works alongside unions, NGOs, and social movements to combat the ethos of energy profiteering. It pushes for the reorganisation of energy power relations and promotes an eco-socialism questioning energy ownership and capitalist-driven consumption. TUED is critical of organisations like the UN's Environmental Programme that perpetuate 'the liberal business establishment as well as the market-focused think tanks and initiatives associated with figures like Nicholas Stern and Richard Branson',[29] and is cynical about ITUC's 'social dialogue' (see above), saying dialogue ensures that transition does not happen. TUED is a network of other institutions, coordinated by the International Program on Labor, Climate and Environment (IPLCE) at CUNY's Murphy Institute, in partnership with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung–New York Office. While limited by its essential academic nature, its global analysis and its emphasis on worker-owned energy companies make it, for me, a model of climate advocacy.

'It is one of the sad but telling truths that these Just Transition construction organisations don't even mention architecture.'

Architecture organisations

It is one of the sad but telling truths that these Just Transition construction organisations don't even mention architecture. Some architects know we need to align with construction, but no construction organisations feel the need for an alliance with architects. As architecture currently situates itself – design for the elite – this is not surprising. But looking beyond a self-imposed marginalising ideology, it is a discipline (whether we are troubled by this or not) that participates in profit-driven building procurement and performance. Architecture's upstream role in development should be taken seriously. In any case, architecture's absence from construction concerns indicates architecture's marginalisation in a space of social and environmental change and the need for architects to fight for recognition.

The following are architecture organisations pushing for their relevance in a Just Transition; or, as it becomes clear, at least attempting to take the first steps required for such relevance. Only a few of these organisations tie architecture labour with construction labour and with climate justice as a totality. Those I cover, like the construction examples, are primarily US and Europe-based. They are distinguished by their different scopes and their different structures and are ordered, again, according to my assumptions of their efficacy. They start with: (1) organisations where architects advocate for change in climate policy; move on to (2) those advocating for change in construction procurement; continue on to (3) those advocating for both climate and construction awareness; and finally come to (4) those also critiquing capitalist development.

1. Advocate for climate change (but not for alliance with construction trades):

The Just Transitions Lobby in the UK (which has nothing to do with the Architecture Lobby mentioned above and which I co-founded) primarily puts pressure on the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) to take on climate justice. An offshoot of a group established in 2022 to elect a worker to the RIBA presidency (and succeeding when Muyiwa Oki was elected president), the Just Transition Lobby tasks the RIBA to leverage its position and resources towards radical climate action and advance the material and cultural conditions of architectural workers. They explain that 'We are an informal network of individuals and organisations, coming together for the specific purpose to lobby for urgent change in the built environment, primarily aiming to shift the internal balance of power in professional institutions.'[30] The movement, they say, 'is connected to long horizons of time, pluriversal perspectives, compelling visions of desired futures, and must be based upon new knowledge and skillsets.'[31] The Just Transition Lobby brings young energy to a hesitant institution but as a grassroots volunteer organisation it has little practical leverage.

Architects Declare Climate and Biodiversity Emergency was established in May 2019 by an initial group of seventeen UK architectural practices. At its height, it had approximately 1,300 signatories from twenty-eight countries. It collected promises from practices to refuse to take projects that do not conform to a carbon-free world. As they say, 'a united declaration will support more effective lobbying of policy makers and government to show leadership and commit resources.'[32] They stress that:

> *For everyone working in the construction industry,* [...] *we will need to commission and design buildings, cities, and infrastructures as indivisible components of a larger, constantly regenerating and self-sustaining system.*[33]

Architects Declare is now Built Environment Declares, an indication that it recognises that architects cannot make significant headway without connecting with the larger Architecture/Engineering/Construction (AEC) industry. It now says, 'Built Environment Declares is a global petition uniting all strands of construction and the built environment.'[34] While it lists many different types of workers, including construction workers, it does not suggest any particular policies. Architects Declare is a grassroots volunteer organisation like the Just

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Transition Lobby, but it has chapters in numerous countries. Admirable in its international scope and its acknowledgement of construction alliances, it nevertheless cannot enforce compliance with a pledge and has lost credibility for lack of confrontation.

2. Advocate for construction labour but not for climate justice:
Design for Freedom is not primarily concerned with climate justice, but it is one of the few architectural organisations that addresses forced labour in our supply chains. Based in the US, it exposes the 'disaggregated and opaque nature of the construction industry [that] increases the risk of worker exploitation [...] and make[s] it nearly impossible to knowingly purchase slave-free materials.'[35] They have developed a list of raw and composite materials that allow AEC businesses to pinpoint where and how material extraction has occurred so that 'firms are no longer able to outsource responsibility for abuses in their supply chain, but now have a duty of care to know who makes their inputs and under what conditions.'[36] They have subcommittees targeting different points of action: contracts and laws; education and research; specification; buyer demand; and owner project requirements (OPR). Design for Freedom's organisational host is the Grace Farm Foundation, whose mission is 'to pursue peace through five initiatives: nature, arts, justice, community, and faith [...] [and to] create more grace and peace in our local and global communities.'[37] Grace Farm and Design for Freedom headquarters are in New Canaan, CT (with the highest per capita wealth on the East coast of the US) and housed in the SANAA-designed River Building that cost $120 million to complete. As a non-profit 501(c)(3), it is primarily funded by private donations, grants, and the personal contributions of its founder, Sharon Prince, and her husband, Robert Prince, a senior executive at the hedge fund Bridgewater Associates, an asset management firm. Right-on in their concern for inhumane material extraction, a critique of capitalism's role in material and labour exploitation is nevertheless clearly not part of its agenda.

'WBYA? traces the links between the various global actors that both shape construction overseas and are obscured by the complexity of their layered, international connections.'

Who Builds Your Architecture? (WBYA?), mentioned earlier and also US-based, does not primarily address climate justice, but is, as per Design for Freedom, a rare organisation connecting architecture labour to construction labour. Unlike Design for Freedom, however, it exposes the links between capitalist-driven development and architecture's acquiescence to illegal construction labour practices. Initiated by two architects based at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) and now expanded to a team of seven other GSAPP academics, WBYA? traces the links between the various global actors that both shape construction overseas and are obscured by the complexity of their layered, international connections. As WBYA? writes, 'From workers' rights to construction practices to design processes to new technologies, WBYA? investigates the role of architecture and architects: what it is and what it could be.'[38] A research group which communicates through pamphlets, panels, studios, and exhibitions within an academic/cultural forum, WBYA? has no political power. It is, however, changing the architecture profession's understanding of its scope of responsibility. WBYA? is primarily funded through a mix of grants from cultural institutions, architecture organisations, and foundations that support socially responsible design and labour rights.

3. Advocate for both, but don't rethink capitalism:
The Urban Innovative Action (UIA) is not an architectural organisation per se; its focus is on cities, and it analyses and supports urban planning and design. It is a European Union initiative that 'provides urban areas in Europe with resources to think through urban challenges',[39] examining how urban development policies are put into practice and made sharable. It offers urban authorities 'the possibility to take risk and experiment with the most innovative solutions.'[40] The UIA Just Urban Transitions complies with the European Green Deal, whose goal, again, is to transform Europe into the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. It addresses three primary areas of concern: identifying and training skills for a green future; making the transition affordable for all; and ensuring a democratic transition for all. It also describes three primary obstacles that cities face in addressing these concerns: lack of government competence on skilling and reskilling; absence of learning spaces for innovative skilling and reskilling; and the limited perception of what constitutes 'green jobs.' For the UIA Just Urban Transitions, progress is achieved by making clear that green jobs are not exotic, unknown things, but variations of existing, quotidian work and that employers need not fear collective action by aggressive employees since employers are 'the core partners in the design of new skills programmes.'[41] Managed by the European Commission, the UIA is unlike other organisations in this overview because it provides funding rather than relying on it. It has power. It also walks a fine line between innovation and assurance regarding the status quo.[42]

4. Advocate for both and go after capitalism:
The Architecture Lobby's Green New Deal (GND) working group, to which I belong and from which I continue to learn, writes in its initial Just Transition pamphlet:

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Current models of development are not inevitable; they are constructed. Existing neoliberal policy legitimates and protects business as usual [...] *If we achieve union density we can speak directly to legislators about our vision for a Just Transition. Collectively, with other building sector workers, we can demand new forms of work that enable new forms of living.*[43]

'Architects should create and develop land trusts and other alternatives to private land ownership; should promote establishing a Climate Corps, a co-created unit for climate protection work; and should establish collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) with employers to guarantee worker input on climate-responsible projects.'

In many ways the opposite of the Urban Innovative Action (UIA) described above, the GND working group says that, in addressing worker demands for an economy offering job security, work itself must change in a green economy. In construction, the scale of work will change as, on the one hand, the necessary expansion of the electric grid will reduce the need for bespoke work, and on the other, the emphasis on retrofitting existing buildings will make construction work more intimate. In architecture, designers are to work in the public sector where they can 'initiate alternative labour structures such as worker cooperatives that transition workers towards economic autonomy and stability.'[44] Architects should create and develop land trusts and other alternatives to private land ownership; should promote establishing a Climate Corps, a co-created unit for climate protection work; and should establish collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) with employers to guarantee worker input on climate-responsible projects. As noted earlier, The Architecture Lobby, and the GND working group with it, is a volunteer, dues-paying membership non-profit of two kinds: a 501I(3) (educational) and a 501(c)(6) (political). (Or, to be more accurate, the 501(c)(3) entity is called The Architecture Initiative, the 501(c)(6) The Architecture Lobby; the two must be legally separated.) The majority of the GND working group's output is addressed to legislators as much as much as they are to fellow architects and is a consequence of its 501(c)(6) political capacity. That power is limited but it is heard by local and national assembly-persons.

And finally, there is the Alternative Building Industries (ABI) Collective, the group that drew me to this inquiry for organising climate activism across AEC industries by bringing together, in one organisation, architects, engineers, and trades people. The Collective links the climate crisis to employment insecurity and the division of labour promoted by capitalist-driven production. It has ties to Local 98 union of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE), Science for the People, Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC), and Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED).

The Alternative Building Industry (ABI) Collective is a group of rank-and-file workers organizing within the building sector in support of a just transition. [It] is motivated by the fact that everyone in the building sector can contribute to a sustainable future for all.[45]

The ABI Collective has two divergent ambitions. The first is global, connecting to TUED and its analysis of different climate/energy needs of nation-states around the world; members of TUED have shared strategies for organising transnationally, particularly in the Global South. The second, local, supports New York City's Local Law 97 – again, a law passed in 2019 mandating that buildings over 25,000 square feet in the city must reduce their carbon emissions by 40% by 2030 and net zero by 2050. Support for this bill, a groundbreaking law that puts New York City at the forefront of climate initiatives, entails fighting Initiative 1197, the real estate-industry-led initiative that wants to 'delay' LL97 enactment.[46] The ABI Collective is a grassroots organisation, and brings union tactics to its agenda, but it relies on pressure, logic, and shaming, not political power. Today, the global efforts have fallen away and the group's energy is NYC focused.

Observations

The 'failure' of the global efforts of the ABI Collective and the examination of other Just Transition organisations has made me reconsider what is the 'right' way to organise. Is focus on the global really more effective than on the local? Is it really the case that NGOs, which fight for influence in the United Nations (which doesn't prioritise worker-led initiatives) are more 'powerful' than non-profits, and non-profits more effective than groups agitating to change the ideological parameters of architecture? And, is my 'requirement' that worker-led initiatives be unions too limited a form of worker engagement? I wonder.

'The "failure" of the global efforts of the ABI Collective and the examination of other Just Transition organisations has made me reconsider what is the "right" way to organise. Is focus on the global really more effective than on the local?'

Global vs Local

I now see as valid both the local scale – immediately engaging but limited in scope – and the global scale – addressing the transnational scale of our climate crisis but conceptually abstract. They work together

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dialectically. The issues people care about start at the immediate, local level, which in turn draws attention to the larger systemic condition within which the local operates, which in turn sheds light on the system's effect at the local level. The scale one determines to be the most urgent in that dialectic probably depends on one's politics. If you are an anarchist like Murray Bookchin (who believed that 'the ecological scale for any of these [healthy] communities would be the smallest biome capable of supporting a population of moderate size')[47] or Elinor Ostrom (who proved that local communities could self-govern and manage common pool resources while still operating in a capitalist society), you will support the small scale. If you believe in syndicalism and/or cooperativism and admire examples such as Emilia Romana (the region in Italy governed by a network of cooperatives) or Mondragon (the global industrial cooperative employing 70,000 people in 150 countries) you would go with medium scale. (This is where I now land.) If you are a socialist, you will think nationally or transnationally.

There is only one wrong choice: not to commit to any scale or any action.

Organisational structure

I now think the hierarchy I initially assumed for 'effective' self-governance is unfair; it compares incomparable categories. Can one really assess the Urban Innovative Action (UIA), which provides funding, against the GND working group that is desperate for funds? Or WBYA?, a research arm, against the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), an NGO? They each do such different work and target such different audiences. Some successes are ideological – the effect of WBYA? and the Architecture Lobby on changing architectural consciousness is real. Some of them are practical – the Labor Network for Sustainability worker demands have guided union policymakers. A government-embedded organisation might have more direct access to power but that power can be deeply compromised. More critical than choosing an organisational type is establishing clarity in any of them regarding who/what is addressed to enact change; how complete the analysis of the problem is; and how much human power is available to forge forward. Volunteerism has its limits, but revolutionaries weren't paid for their work.

Unions

I initially accepted that unionisation is the necessary form of labour cooperation. But unions might be an obstacle to gathering and activating climate-forward workers. The issue is not only that unions are resistant to the potential loss of jobs; it is also that many workers (think of independent contract workers) do not have access to unionisation. As Erica Smiley and Sarita Gupta describe in their book *The Future We Need: Organizing for a Better Democracy in the Twenty-First Century*, the collective refusal to work when organised organically outside of unionism connects people across intersectional identities, awakening the fundamental human right to dignified work.[48] Refusal to work is open to all workers, including architects. Moreover, unions, even if climate-forward, fail to disrupt the economy they operate in.[49] Sergio Ferro points out how industrial capitalist thwart unionisations – the industry's hierarchical organisation, the reliance on replaceable labour, and the entrenched division of labour – and prevent solidarity; and he points to a union's own timidity when it trades in the goal of taking over the means of production for pettier lifestyle gains like higher wages, holidays, health care, etc.[50]

We need more research about where and when unionisation is the preferred mode of organising.

The stakes

Architects can and must participate in a Just Transition and do so with fellow workers. Our refusal to place ourselves amidst a network of building producers and with it, our indifference to the social value we may or may not produce has gone on too long. As Whitney Young Jr, the American civil rights leader asked to address architects at the 1968 AIA National Convention, said:

> *As a profession, you are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights, and I am sure this has not come to you as any shock. You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance.*[51]

'A commitment to Just Transition forces the profession of architecture to live up to its stated ethical duty to design for human dignity and for the health, safety, and welfare of the public; and it makes the discipline of architecture a participant in the collective knowledge necessary to save the planet.'

It is undoubtedly sad that it takes a climate crisis to pull us architects out of our self-satisfied complacency. Still, it is forcing a reckoning with our marginal status as our voices and intelligence go unheard just as they are most needed. A commitment to Just Transition obliges the profession of architecture to live up to its stated ethical duty to design for human dignity and for the health, safety, and welfare of the public; and it makes the discipline of architecture a participant in the collective knowledge necessary to save the planet. This paper has asked how best to do this. We must be ready.

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Notes

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2. Ibid., p. 17.
3. Organisations vary on calling the movement Just Transition (singular) versus Just Transitions (plural). I follow the usage of the organisation being discussed. Where I discuss the movement in general, I use Just Transition.
4. Sérgio Ferro, 'The Case for Art', in Sérgio Ferro, *Architecture from Below*, ed. by Silke Kapp and Mariana Moura, trans. by Ellen Heyward and Ana Naomi de Sousa (London: Mack, 2024), p. 113.
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9. See: Jon Goodbun, 'There Isn't One Green New Deal', *Making Futures* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2022), pp. 74–9 <https://researchonline.rca.ac.uk/5440/1/Goodbun-ThereisntoneGND22.pdf>.
10. <https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en> [accessed 10 November 2024].
11. GND Pamphlet, 'JT-01-We Are Fossil Fuel Workers'.
12. <https://www.altbuilding.co/home> [accessed 3 November 2024].
13. For a critique of perpetual growth, see: Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth* (London: Routledge, 2020). Initially commissioned by the UK and released as a report by the Sustainable Development Commission, Jackson's analysis that growth was not compatible with a living planet was rejected by the commission, whereupon he published it as a book.
14. In the US, all non-profits are tax-exempt, but there are various types depending on what the organisations do. The least political is the 501(c)(3), which applies to corporations, funds, or foundations that operate for religious, charitable, scientific, literary, or educational purposes; it allows donors to take tax deductions and hence is a draw for contributions and philanthropy. Others do not allow tax deductions. The 501(c)(4) applies to organisations promoting social welfare; 501(c)(5) applies to those promoting labour (including unions), agricultural, or horticultural associations; 501(c)(6) applies to business leagues, chambers of commerce, and others that do political campaigning (and not organized for profit); and 501(c)(7) applies to social and recreational clubs.
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28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. <https://www.ndsa.org.uk/articles/2023/5/31/the-just-transition-lobby-a-call-to-action.> [accessed 3 September 2025]
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33. Ibid.
34. <https://www.builtenvironmentdeclares.com> [accessed 1 September 2024].
35. 'Design for Freedom Overview: A Global Movement to End Forced Labor in the Built Environment' <https://www.designforfreedom.org/download-media/design-for-freedom-overview/> [accessed 3 March 2024].
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Who Builds Your Architecture? (WBYA?) <http://whobuilds.org/about/> [accessed 3 March 2024].
39. 'Urban Innovative Actions, The Urban Lab of Europe: What is Urban Innovative Actions?' <https://www.uia-initiative.eu/en/about-us/what-urban-innovative-actions> [accessed 3 March 2024].
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41. Ibid.
42. There is another UIA, the Union of International Architects, that, despite calling architects to the sustainability project, doesn't make the Just Transitions list here because it does not address workers. Still, it is interesting to see how the most powerful and connected international architects' association understands climate solutions and positions the profession's response to it. The most recent and relevant document they have produced is the book, *Design for Climate Adaptation* [*Design for Climate Adaptation*], ed. by Billie Faircloth, Maibritt Pederson Zari, Mette Ramsgaard Thomsen, Martin Tamake (Switzerland: Springer, 2023).] It is a data/science-driven text that tries to prove the worthiness of architecture's

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participation in climate justice policymaking by identifying the innovative tools architecture has at its command (statistical analysis, imaging, measuring apps, etc.) rather than the workers who use them and should be consulted. The UIA is an international NGO. It struggles to get the attention of the United Nations as an organisation for architects tries to navigate the numerous UN committees dealing with climate change. In a conversation with the current president of UIA, Regina Gonthier of Switzerland and the Secretary General Rui Leaõ of Macau, when asked how the UIA connects with the UN, they laughed and said it was a struggle. Interview with author, 8 June 2024.

43. 'The Architecture Lobby Pamphlet JT 01 – We Are Fossil Fuel Workers!' <https://architecture-lobby.org/news/jt-01-we-are-fossil-fuel-workers/> [accessed 1 October 2024].
44. Ibid. Also, see their main policy paper: 'A Just Transition for the Building Sector: Toward a Radical Transformation of Housing and the Built Environment' <https://drive.google.com/file/d/11dDlAyBb3dwqBqhoQ5xAk_CsI-yU9wvP/view> [accessed 5 September 2024]
45. The ABI Collective, 'ABI Collective – Our Best Organizer!', *The Avery Review*, 2023, guest editor Marisa Cortright <https://averyreview.com/issues/66/our-best-organizer> [accessed 1 October 2024].
46. Resisting delay and defeating 1,197 entails exposing the bad faith behind the exemptions 1,197 allows – cooperatives, public buildings, buildings that have already demonstrated 'good faith' by conforming to emissions reductions before the law came into effect – and indicating that the supposed hardship on the grid in the switch to electric energy, also used as an excuse for delay, is a myth perpetuated by the Real Estate Board of New York (REBNY).
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49. Indeed, when I presented this paper at the Production Studies International Conference 2024, Newcastle University, 2024, João Marcos de Almeida Lopes from Brazil, one of the conference organizers, said that unions in Brazil were precisely the problem.
50. Sérgio Ferro, 'The Production of Houses in Brazil'. The text is from notes taken in preparation for classes Ferro gave in 1968/69. I had access to this from the TF/TK reading group. It is now published in Ferro, *Design and the Building Site and Complementary Essays*, ed. by Kapp and Moura, trans. Heyward and de Sousa, pp. 201–60.
51. Full Remarks of Whitney M. Young Jr, AIA Annual Convention in Portland, Oregon, June 1968 <https://content.aia.org/sites/default/files/2018-04/WhitneyYoungJr_1968AIAContention_FulLSpeech.pdf> [accessed 23 October 2024].

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The author declares none.

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