Thinking Like a Climate

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Published by Duke University Press

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Thinking Like a Climate: Governing a City in Times of Environmental Change.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/77756.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77756
One of the tensions that repeatedly reappeared throughout the work to tackle climate change in Manchester was how climate change was positioned in relation to other conceptualizations of nature already at play in the city. Climate change politics entered into a city in which there were already multiple natures. Indeed the City of Manchester’s mascot was itself a symbol of nature: the Manchester Bee.

The bee has long been the symbol of the city of Manchester. Walk into the town hall building and you are met, on the floor of the entrance hall, by a bee rendered in mosaic form. Wander around the city center and you find bollards and trash cans with the bee symbol embossed onto them and highlighted in gold paint. Manchester, the city of workers, the hive of industrial production, of modernity and technical mastery, has taken the bee to heart as an icon for the city and a representation of its industrial past.

However, in relation to recent ecological transformations, the significance of the bee in the city has been transformed. On the front cover of the 2014 Manchester: A Certain Future Annual Report (Manchester: A Certain Future Steering Group 2014) is a full-page photo of a beekeeper. Dressed all in white, a mask over her face, she stands high on the roof of the city art gallery, with landmark buildings in the distance and two beehives in the foreground, nestled between grills and air-conditioning vents. These
hives on the roof of the art gallery—a few of the many bee hives that have been put on the roofs of public buildings in the city—were established in part as a response to climate change, both as a way of supporting a form of life that was seen to be under threat due to human impacts on the environment, and as a way of indexing the accumulated histories of climate change in the fortunes of these bees in the present. For these creatures promise a small resistance to the fragile future that the city’s residents face. The bee’s industriousness no longer operates as just a mimetic symbol of the city as center of global manufacture but has become recast as a symbol of the environmental effects of the industriousness of the city itself. Bees figure here not just as workers, nor as symbols of a pristine nature, but as complex ecosystems, as pollinators, as sufferers of disease and collapse, and thus as sentinels of environmental change.

The relationship between climate change and an uncertain and multiple nature was also present in the partitioning of responsibility for climate change along lines of mitigation and adaptation. So far most of the discussions I have described focused on how to engineer responses to climate change by changing local activities and attending to the role that the city could play in that. This was what was known as climate change “mitigation,” and it dominated the strategies and reports we have talked about so far. But there was another parallel conversation that acknowledged that this aim might not succeed, and this came under the heading of “adaptation.” In urban sustainability literature, mitigation and adaptation are established terms that divide up the field of climate action into attempts to engineer the climate by reducing emissions of greenhouse gases (mitigation) and attempts to tackle how people and places will have to change in the face of an inevitably changing climate (adaptation). In fact, the very first meeting I attended about climate change, when I was scoping out the parameters of my research, was a workshop at the University of Manchester, peopled almost entirely by male academic researchers, where the main topic of conversation was how to demarcate mitigation and adaptation as different parts of the climate problem. It was clear from this workshop that the lines between mitigation and adaptation were not entirely fixed. Planting trees in cities, for example, could both help absorb carbon dioxide (mitigation) and prevent surface water flooding in the city (adaptation).

However, in organizational and conceptual terms, mitigation and adaptation involved significantly different institutions and relationships. Mitigation was focused, as we have seen, on the materiality of energy and on the interplay between fossil fuel–based energy and the thermodynamic...
properties of climate, buildings, and cities. It created a network of relationships among scientists, accountants, accreditation bodies, local government, energy companies, fossil fuel producers, transport planners, activists, and building managers. Adaptation seemed at first glance to imply a more immediate relationship with “nature,” being more about preparedness for the risk of very visceral weather events that could affect people’s life in the city in very immediate ways. This ranged from questions of how to deal with future urban flooding because of heavy downpours that would exceed the capacities of drains, to the problem of how to deal with heat waves, to bigger questions of migration and food security that were often not fully articulated in formal documentation but emerged in conversations as people imagined what life might be like in a climate-changed world. Adaptation drew together a different cluster of people than mitigation did—in this case planners; risk analysts; landowners; environmental stewards such as farmers, wardens, and forestry managers; and those working in tourism. If for climate mitigation nature appeared as a global, systemic engineering problem focused on fuel and energy transitions, for climate change adaptation nature manifested more in local conditions and an attention to forms of life that had the potential to act as allies in the continuation of human ways of living.

Compared to the amount of work happening on energy and climate change mitigation in the city, there was relatively little activity on climate change adaptation. The city council’s environmental strategy team did have a biodiversity officer, but his role was more focused on ensuring that there were adequate green spaces and different kinds of nature in the city than on preparing explicitly for adaptation to climate change. Dave had come into the council as a countryside warden when he was just seventeen and for the past thirty-five years had tried to be a voice for nature within the council. He had pushed back against the idea, for example, that the river running through the city was “effectively just a drainage channel” or that bushes were “hiding places for burglars” or that a clean and safe urban space was one without plants and trees. He recalled how different things had been in the 1970s, when these ideas that he was pushing back against were mainstream; he remembered it as a regressive era, a time when “it was written into my job contract that I had to make my boss cups of tea.” Dave recalled how his boss at the time had a mug in the shape of a woman’s breast. He performed for me how his boss would lean back in his seat, mug in one hand, cigarette in another, as he peered down at Dave superciliously. Luckily, during Dave’s time at the council, both the
organizational culture and the priorities of the council had changed, and in 2005 he was involved in writing the city’s first biodiversity strategy. Notably, though, climate change did not appear in this strategy report. Indeed, even in current work, biodiversity was linked more to conversations about the importance of green spaces for city populations, ways to make nature accessible to all, and the economic value of biodiversity rather than climate change.

One of Dave’s projects was to try to get people to start to record nature again, utilizing the recording possibilities of digital technologies to do so. He pointed out to me that “we have a better record of biodiversity in the nineteenth century than we do for the twenty-first because of all the amateur naturalists who used to record information.” He saw this project as a way of getting people reconnected with the natural world. He was passionate about how this kind of engagement with nature could improve both information and people’s mental health. Moreover, his work was increasingly being informed by work done by consultancy firms like PricewaterhouseCoopers, which were developing techniques to work out the economic value of ecosystem services, such as calculating how much value bees add to the economy. As Dave put it, biodiversity was “green” to climate change mitigation’s “gray.” But adaptation was not a significant part of his work.

Adaptation was, however, just starting to come into conversations about planning for the future of the city when I started doing research. In 2013 a process was initiated to “refresh” the 2009 Manchester, A Certain Future plan. Those who ran the consultation and then wrote up the new version included, more explicitly than in the original, a mention of climate change adaptation. In the council meeting where the new plan was approved, Richard Sharland highlighted that “there is an increasing realization that climate change is going to have to be about adaptation” but also stressed that “there are still quite a lot of unknowns.”

Beyond the council, climate change adaptation was also beginning to appear in the work of the UK regulatory body the Environment Agency and in university research projects. According to its website, the Environment Agency “protects and improves the environment and promotes sustainable development.”1 It was in relation to areas of economic activity most directly impacted by the weather and climate that adaptation was being discussed and addressed, funded in part by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). In 2012 I traveled to the Lancashire town of Preston to a meeting of the North West Climate Change Partner-
ship where a representative from the Environment Agency presented the
draft of a report on climate change adaptation for comment by people in
the room. The PowerPoint presentation that the Environment Agency offi-
cer talked through described how, for the northwest of the United King-
dom, DEFRA had identified potential problems with “flooding for commu-
nities” and “summer heat waves” and highlighted the implications of both
of these for “tourism in particular.” While this was clearly not surprising to
the people in the room, who nodded to the presenter, the report had also
highlighted that “protected environments are more resilient to flooding
and heatwaves” and that “urban areas where there has been less invest-
ment are particularly vulnerable.” These were less intuitive findings that
seemed to surprise the participants. The presenter then pointed out that
150,000 people in the Lake District were predicted to be at risk from flood-
ing, something the chair of the meeting noted as particularly interesting.
The climate models were telling of a potentially dangerous future that peo-
ple were being asked to engage and imagine.

Three years after this meeting, in December 2015, these predictions
were to be actualized as a reality. Following three consecutive storms—
Desmond, Eva, and Frank—the Lake District experienced huge floods not
unlike those prefigured in the climate models. The storms led to the flood-
ing of fifteen thousand homes across the United Kingdom, damaged 557
bridges in the Lake District county of Cumbria, and left sixty-one thousand
people in the city of Lancaster without power for three consecutive nights.

One might think that this would have made people stand up and take
more notice of climate change, but there is an interesting problem here,
which is that it is very hard to establish that floods like this actually have
anything to do with climate change. Even though the floods seemed to ful-
fill exactly what was being predicted, establishing that they were the same
thing as climate change was a different matter altogether. Floods were a
matter of a local nature exceeding itself, with a whole range of explana-
tions as to why this might be, of which climate change was only one. As the
next chapter explores, preparing for climate change effects in the form of
occasional environmental catastrophes that by definition as climate events
exist in the future and out of place is very different from conceiving of
these events as instances of natural activity in place, where people have to
confront and deal with actually existing environmental change as it hap-
pens in particular locations.