

# The Nth Degree Series at The New School

# Design, Justice, and Zero Waste:

## Conference Report November 2018

### Overview:

For over a year The Tishman Environment and Design Center at The New School and the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) worked together to plan a day and a half conference titled Design, Justice & Zero Waste: Exploring Pathways to a Circular Economy, which kicked off our research collaborative. The conference, hosted at The New School on May 8th and 9th, focused on how issues of production, consumption and waste impact environmental justice communities, workers and vulnerable populations around the world.

The goals of the conference were to 1) establish stronger linkages between people across disciplines and advocacy circles that have a commitment to environmental justice through the promotion, design and research of zero waste and the circular economy , 2) work towards transforming policy and promoting collaborative, interdisciplinary research relevant to practitioners, and 3) disseminate more broadly knowledge and research for public consumption, policy makers and advocates.

The conference fostered a robust discussion between audience members and panelists and provided a platform for practitioners, researchers, advocates and activists to share and showcase research, programs, and advocacy campaigns.

*"I think the most significant thing I gained from the conference is the notion that we cannot talk about waste management and reducing our impact without including environmental justice and product design every step of the way. I know this is pretty basic, but I've definitely been guilty of skipping over these topics and just talking about recycling. It's time for me to change how I talk about waste."*

- Survey Respondent

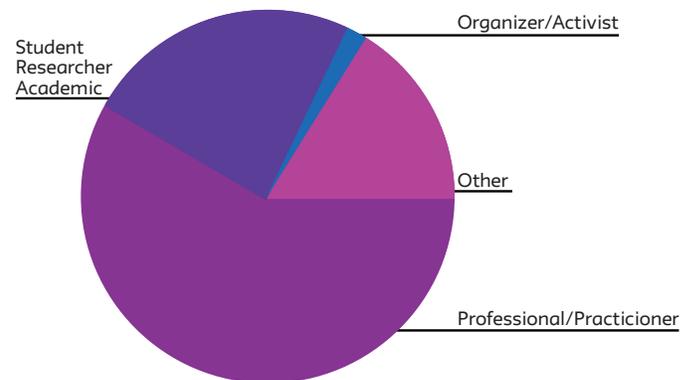
# Participation

The conference attracted over 200 participants. We featured a keynote speaker on each day of the conference as well as thirteen plenary panel speakers and over thirty breakout session presenters. Annie Leonard, the Executive Director of Greenpeace USA, was our keynote speaker on May 8th. She encouraged conference participants to consider taking transformational action and pointed to the urgent need to change the narrative about what is possible when it comes to consumption, production and waste. She urged participants to work collaboratively outside of the traditional silos that define much of the environmental movement and profession. Mathy Stanislaus, Senior Advisor on Accelerating Circular Economy Practices at the World Economic Forum was our featured speaker on May 9th. He previously served as an Assistant Administrator in the US EPA, where he led programs focused on cleanup and redevelopment of contaminated sites. His presentation focused on the benefits of implementing a circular economy, such as economic growth, employment opportunities, and reduced risk for conflict over finite resources. He also discussed methods for moving toward a circular economy and presented the regulatory and economic barriers that prevent progress that need to be addressed.

In order to reach a broad audience and generate interdisciplinary discussions around related issues, we released a Call for Submissions for breakout presentation sessions focused on particular thematic areas (such as Policy for the Circular Economy, Zero Waste Policies, and Industrial and Building Materials). We opened submissions to presenters interested in sharing research, projects, campaigns and design innovations at the conference. We received over 70 submissions from a variety of sectors including graduate students, academics, waste professionals and advocates and we aimed to mix participants from different sectors to generate robust dialogue across disciplines and approaches. There was deep interest from the fashion sector in particular such as those working on over-consumption, textile waste, and new production methods. We also received a number of proposals from product designers and architects working on waste systems, building design, materiality and product life-cycles. We also allowed for limited displays including one from the New York City Department of Sanitation to promote their organics program.

In addition to the general submissions for breakout session presentations, we invited thirteen experts to participate as discussants on interdisciplinary plenary panels. The aim of these diverse plenaries and breakout sessions was to engage participants in an exploration of zero waste systems and the circular economy from different perspectives. For designers, this meant a deepening of knowledge and understanding about the creation and disposal of waste and the critical role that they play in disrupting that cycle. For advocates and activists, the conference provided a networking opportunity with academics and designers as well as with fellow activists. The conference also prompted participants to put forth future actions, recommendations, or ideas that might spark potential partnerships and information sharing.

## Profession of Conference's Attendants



## Conference Reach and Impact

Conference planners used social media to engage the public and conference attendees before, during and after the conference. In order to preserve as much of the proceedings as possible and provide opportunities for participants who were not able to attend, we used professional livestreaming and facebook live for select sessions. This allowed the public to view sessions remotely and provided us with a record of the discussions. As of mid-June, the live streamed sessions have over 1,200 views, and growing. These videos are now posted on the Tishman Center and GAIA websites and will be used to engage in continued dialogue on these issues. Faculty members also report using videos for class instruction and dissemination of ideas. We also used Twitter and Facebook to promote the event before and during the conference. GAIA's global and USA twitter account received over 20K impressions and Facebook had 1,432 cumulative views.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of conference goals and general participant views of the conference we administered a survey to all participants. We received 53 completed surveys from participants. Survey questions gauged the overall interest, effectiveness, and success of the

conference along a standard likert scale. A large majority (88%) of respondents rated the conference highly, with 62% of the respondents giving a 5 rating and 26% a ranking of 4 to the question asking if they enjoyed the conference and would attend again (see chart below).

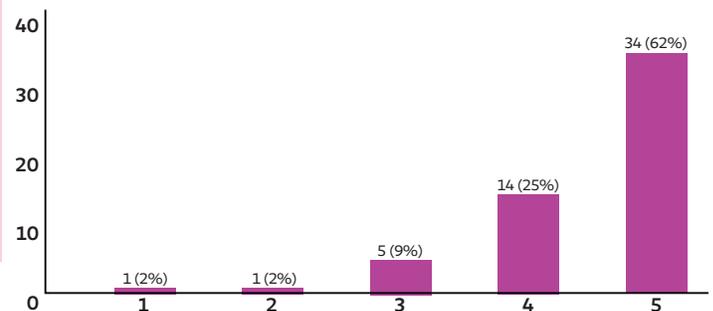
Based on survey responses, speaker presentations, and conference discussions, it is clear many conference participants are eager to engage in discussions and networking around issues related to waste and justice. People spoke about the increasingly urgent need to move past the three R's of reduce, reuse and recycle by advancing policies and systems that protect vulnerable populations, lead to less consumption, limit use of natural resources, and implement equitable waste systems that take into account the international movement of waste.

Several themes emerged as key areas of interest for potential future research, discussion or collaboration such as corporate responsibility, over-consumption, re-design of materials and systems, and worker implications including rights, ownership, health and financial security.

*"While I've always been aware that design affects the ways in which we think and/or participate with the world, it was fascinating to see how many people put this in practice--especially in regards to architectural design. While I do not have a background in this, I would like to explore more of this practice, as it has such a large impact on people's behaviors and understandings."*

- Survey Respondent

I enjoyed the conference and would consider attending a similar conference again.  
(55 respondents)



## Challenges and Lessons

This conference presented some unforeseen challenges. In early April there was a fire at one of the Parsons school buildings which led to the closure of the building and displaced 600 classes. For the conference this meant that rooms booked a year in advanced were moved. The staff worked hard to keep attendees and panelists abreast of critical changes and to address issues with space as they arose during the conference. Two other significant challenges were negotiations between the University administration and the unionized cafeteria workers which resulted in a two-week occupation of the cafeteria at the University Center and a strike by the Student Employees at the New School Workers union. Tishman Center leadership worked with the unionized workers to show solidarity with the striking union members. Some attendees and panelists chose not to cross the picket line and did not attend the conference. Lastly, there was a desire for more activists and workers representing environmental justice organizations from different areas of the country to attend.

Out of the \$10,000 grant, we passed-through \$3,000 to GAIA to provide scholarships for members from their alliance and an additional \$1,000 from the Closed Loop Fund to help support travel scholarships for GAIA members to participate. With these funds, six GAIA member leaders and four staff members were able to attend the conference. At future conferences, we hope to have additional resources to provide more scholarships for both GAIA members and EJ advocates outside of their network.

We also elicited feedback on ways in which future conferences could be improved. This was done through our survey and informal discussions with speakers and attendees. Sample suggestions included, allowing more time in breakout sessions for questions and dialogue, providing more informal networking opportunities, and providing additional information on panels prior to the conference.



## Next Steps

The Tishman Center and GAIA will continue working together on the intersection of design, justice, and waste. The conference themes and discussions will help shape our collaboration moving forward and engage practitioners and scholars around the country. Many conference participants were clear that we are reaching a tipping point for action to address the waste crisis and its impact on vulnerable communities around the globe. Below are some potential areas of research and collaboration we are developing:

- **Co-host waste-centered Hackathon for 2019-2020 Academic Year with Jason Grant** where participants are asked to create solutions to specific waste challenges.
- **Series of Convenings for regional NYC/NJ waste-shed alliance** to create greater impact around just and transformative waste strategies that can complement and leverage existing efforts of local groups. For instance, the waste-to-energy incinerator in Newark, NJ imports over 280,000 tons of waste from NYC every year. Creating alignment between waste advocates in NJ and NYC could help lead to more equitable solutions to our regional waste crises for both sides of the Hudson.
- **Development of curriculum focused on specific challenges.** The Center is launching our first University-wide Lecture series, titled Waste and Justice, this Spring. It will be taught by our new Director and Executive Dean of Parsons, Joel Towers, and was inspired by the Conference. This course will be used to disseminate zero waste and environmental justice concepts more broadly via course content, guest lectures from experts in the field and web content.
- **Provide academic research, technical assistance and convening opportunities** for organizations working on the ground that are fighting false solutions and advocating for equity-based policies around waste management and climate change. This work will be launched through the GAIA network of grassroots organizations.

[See the Conference Program](#)



# THE NEW SCHOOL

## Grants and Restricted Funds Accounting Office of Finance and Business

<b>Sponsor:</b>	The Overbrook Foundation		
<b>Title</b>	Design Waste and Justice Conference: Exploring		
<b>PI:</b>	Michelle DePass		
<b>Sponsor Award Number:</b>			
<b>New School Grant Number:</b>	GR26402		
<b>Grant Period:</b>	November 1, 2017 - October 31, 2018		
<b>Reporting Period:</b>		-	
	Budget	Expenses	Balance
<b>EXPENSES</b>			
Research Assistants	\$ 2,100.00	\$ 1,955.27	\$ 144.73
Travel	\$ 1,500.00	\$ 795.00	\$ 705.00
Catering	\$ 1,950.00	\$ 1,583.35	\$ 366.65
Professional Services	\$ 3,000.00	\$ 3,000.00	\$ -
Honoraria	\$ -	\$ 599.00	\$ (599.00)
Misc supplies, materials & advertising	\$ 100.00	\$ 637.20	\$ (537.20)
Stipends	\$ -	\$ 125.00	\$ (125.00)
<b>TOTAL DIRECT EXPENSES</b>	<b>\$ 8,650.00</b>	<b>\$ 8,694.82</b>	<b>\$ (44.82)</b>
Indirect Costs	\$ 1,350.00	\$ 1,305.18	\$ 44.82
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES (Dir. + Indir. Costs)</b>	<b>\$ 10,000.00</b>	<b>\$ 10,000.00</b>	<b>\$ 0.00</b>
<b>Payments Received</b>			<b>\$ 10,000.00</b>
<b>Balance Remining (Outstanding)</b>			<b>\$ -</b>

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Signature of Financial Officer

11/27/18  
Date