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Design, Climate and Cultural Contexts: Correlating National Approaches in the Design Declares Climate-Action Network

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Abstract

This research explores the ambiguities in national climate-action agendas and is focused on how Design Declares, a global climate-action community, interprets and understands the nuances amongst the four main country chapters: United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and Brazil. The study explores how each chapter interprets and enacts climate accountability within design practice, attending to the cultural, structural and policy conditions that shape their respective strategies. Drawing on secondary research and published materials from the four countries, the study identifies shared concerns across chapters, most notably the urgency of embedding ecological literacy, advocating for systemic change in design education and the importance of political and key strategic backers. However, divergences emerged: the UK chapter prioritises policy alignment and measurable accountability within established regulatory systems; Ireland highlights education and capacity-building in a smaller, fragmented industry; Australia foregrounds Indigenous knowledge and adaptation to climate extremes amid tensions with extractive economies; and Brazil confronts deep socio-environmental inequalities, infrastructural limitations, and the need to integrate justice and Indigenous perspectives into design. On the sidelines of these main chapter characteristics, there is both acceptance and resistance to climate-action with various levels of engagement from government, strategic leaders and the design industry. By correlating these similarities and differences, the research informs both the adaptive strength of Design Declares as a transnational network and the limits of maintaining cohesion across varied socio-political contexts.

Keywords: Climate-action; Design Culture; Transnational; Regenerative; Ecosystems

Introduction

The climate emergency is now widely recognised not just as an impending threat but as an imminent and escalating phenomenon that influences every facet of economic and cultural life. Within this context, design occupies a complex and ambivalent position: it is intricately involved in patterns of resource extraction, planned obsolescence and consumption that have contributed to ecological degradation; yet it also possesses the potential to reconceptualise material culture, systemic frameworks and behavioural paradigms toward more sustainable and regenerative futures (Barnard, 2025; Speed, 2024). This dualistic stance, simultaneously complicit and constructive, has catalysed the emergence of numerous design-led climate activism initiatives that encourage practitioners to publicly endorse and be accountable for sustainable and regenerative practices. One such initiative is Design Declares, established in the United Kingdom in 2022, which has expanded into a transnational coalition encompassing disciplines such as visual communication, digital, industrial and service design, with active chapters in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and Brazil (Design Declares, n.d.). Each chapter solicits signatories' commitment to a shared declaration of climate responsibility, while operationalising that commitment within the unique cultural, political, structural and economic contexts specific to each locale.

While Design Declares presents a shared international commitment to climate action, comparatively little attention has been given to how this commitment is interpreted across different national design cultures. This paper argues that climate accountability is culturally mediated, producing context-specific expressions of a common declaration rather than a single universal model of practice. It also takes the diversity of the movement as analytically significant: a transnational network does not necessarily become stronger by making its chapters more alike. Through a comparative analysis of the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and Brazil chapters, the study examines how institutional, cultural and political conditions shape the evolution of a shared global movement, and asks what must remain shared for such a movement to function while still allowing local differences to thrive.

Guided by two related questions: how do national chapters understand and operationalise climate accountability, and how do local conditions influence the trajectory of a global design movement? - the paper also considers Design Declares as an act of collective disobedience and activism. Its founding refusal to accept business-as-usual design practice encounters differing levels of regulatory ambition, industry maturity, resourcing and cultural expectation, requiring climate accountability to be continually translated rather than uniformly implemented. The tension between shared purpose and local difference is treated as a productive feature rather than a problem to be resolved. This returns to the wider paradox identified above: design is both implicated in the systems producing ecological harm and positioned as a field capable of challenging them. Examining how the tensions and shared commitment are negotiated across national contexts provides insight into both the adaptive capacity and the structural limits of transnational design activism.

Design Declares: A Transnational Climate-Action Movement

The Design Declares movement was founded in the United Kingdom in 2022 as a grassroots response to the widening gap between the design profession's stated environmental values

and its material practice. Structured around a public declaration and a set of associated commitments, later formalised in the UK chapter's '8 Acts of Emergency' and its 52-card Climate Action Cards developed with practitioners across design disciplines, the movement positions signatories as accountable agents within a broader climate response (Barnard, 2025). Since its founding, the movement has spread unevenly. The UK chapter, benefiting from an established design economy employing an estimated 1.97 million people (Design Council, 2025), has grown into the most institutionally embedded of the four. It is sustained through an industry-led coalition model, supported by strategic partnerships with organisations such as the Design Council, voluntary leadership from practitioners and participation from design businesses, educational institutions and professional networks, rather than through direct government funding.

The Irish chapter developed close ties with the Institute of Designers in Ireland (IDI), whose chief executive also leads the national Design Declares chapter, enabling rapid integration into existing professional infrastructure. Building on the momentum of the Year of Irish Design in 2015, which strengthened government recognition of design as an economic driver, the Irish chapter has prioritised education and capacity-building within a small but geographically compact design ecosystem. As a geographic region, Ireland has a comparatively small design business base, comprising approximately 3,923 design enterprises (Kennedy, 2016), but a broader professional design workforce of around 37,500 practitioners working across industry and public sectors (Design Skillnet, 2021). Design Declares Australia was established in 2024, considerably later than the UK and Irish chapters. It currently has a nine-member advisory board drawn from communication, digital, industrial, service and design education, tasked with embedding climate accountability across Australia's design sector, comprising approximately 73,000 core design professionals operating across a large and geographically dispersed nation (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2025). The author is a founding board member of this chapter. The Brazilian chapter, the most recently formed of the four and now self-identifying in Portuguese as Design Declara, has recently engaged a steering panel of seven board members. Brazil's chapter operates within a large and rapidly expanding creative economy comprising approximately 1.26 million formally employed creative professionals (Firjan, 2025), but chapter visibility and reach are constrained by the scale of the country and by more acute socio-environmental inequality. Holistically, these four chapters form a natural site for comparative inquiry: a shared founding declaration, translated into markedly different institutional, cultural and economic contexts.

Why This Comparative Research Matters

Climate policy frameworks exhibit significant variation across the four nations under examination, despite convergence in their overarching net-zero commitments. As indicated in Table 1, each country has enacted binding or quasi-binding climate legislation and holds a legally recognised or nationally declared target of net-zero emissions by 2050. However, the intermediate 2030/2035 targets and the strategic mechanisms used to pursue them vary considerably - from the United Kingdom's comparatively ambitious 78 per cent reduction target by 2035 under a mature regulatory framework, to Ireland's nearer-term but lower 51 per cent target by 2030, to Australia's and Brazil's broader 2035 ranges pursued through

more recently updated national plans.

Table 1 Comparative national climate-policy frameworks

Country	Main legal framework	Main strategy / plan	2030/2035 target	Net zero target
United Kingdom	Climate Change Act 2008	Carbon Budgets + Net Zero Strategy (2021–)	78% reduction by 2035	2050 (legal)
Australia	Climate Change Act 2022	Net-Zero Plan (2035–50)	43% by 2030 (legislated); 62-70% by 2035	2050 (legal)
Ireland	Climate Action & Low Carbon Development Act 2021	Climate Action Plan (updated annually)	51% reduction by 2030	2050 (legal)
Brazil	PNMC: National Climate Change Policy 2009	National Climate Action Plan + updated NDC 2024	59–67% reduction by 2035	2050 (national commitment)

This policy variation matters because Design Declares chapters do not operate in a political vacuum. What counts as meaningful accountability for a design practitioner in a jurisdiction with binding carbon-reporting requirements differs from what counts as accountability in a jurisdiction where climate policy remains comparatively nascent. Design sectors themselves also vary considerably in scale and institutional maturity, from the UK's heavily institutionalised design economy to Ireland's smaller but tightly networked sector, to Australia's more fragmented and Brazil's vast but under-resourced sectors. Cultural expectations of what businesses, government and individual practitioners owe to climate response differ correspondingly. A transnational movement aiming for cohesion across diverse conditions must simultaneously maintain a shared set of values and considerable local adaptive flexibility. This inherent tension is what this research aims to explore.

Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist comparative approach drawing on secondary research and publicly available materials produced by each of the four Design Declares chapters, together with a structured desk review of national climate-policy documentation. This material was supplemented by firsthand insights from the author's role as an Australian board member during the 2025 World Design Congress in London. The conference involved representatives from all four national chapters and included a series of preparatory discussions for a workshop via global online chapter meetings and social media. This gathering marked the first time all four chapters assembled together in-person, cultivating informal yet insightful comparative reflections on their performance, priorities and challenges. These insights significantly contributed to the analysis provided here. The interpretivist framing was chosen deliberately: rather than seeking a single, generalisable measure of climate accountability across chapters, the research interprets accountability as

a culturally and structurally situated practice, informed through document analysis of organisational and policy materials, triangulated with secondary literature and researcher insights (Bowen, 2009; Berger, 2015).

Limitations and comparative scope

The author's Australian board role is both a source of insight and a limitation. While it provides proximity to the Australian chapter, it may also contribute to the greater level of detail available for that case. The comparative design is bounded by the availability and maturity of public material from each chapter. The Australian case is discussed in greater detail because the author's board role provides direct access to its activities and discussions; the Brazilian chapter, in contrast, is newer and has a smaller publicly documented history. These differences should not be read as evidence that one chapter is more active or effective than another. Instead, they indicate an important limitation of the study and support the need for future research using comparable longitudinal evidence, including participation, design industry uptake and demonstrable changes in design practice.

Shared Priorities Across Chapters

Despite their divergent national contexts, the four Design Declares chapters converge on several foundational priorities. All four chapters identify ecological literacy: a working understanding of climate science, planetary boundaries and systems thinking, as a prerequisite for meaningful practice change within the design workforce. Each chapter also calls for reform of design education, arguing that ecological and, in some cases, Indigenous knowledge systems must be embedded earlier and more substantively in design curricula, rather than treated as an elective add-on. All chapters identify political and legislative support as a crucial, albeit unevenly available enabler, recognising that voluntary professional commitment alone is insufficient to drive systemic change (Glicksman, 2010). Strong leadership and industry partnerships, whether with national design councils, professional bodies or individual studios, are consistently identified as critical to chapter survival and growth. Finally, all four chapters explicitly privilege systemic change over superficial sustainability: incremental or performative environmental gestures that leave underlying business models and material flows unchanged. These shared commitments constitute the movement’s standardised backbone, even as their translation into practice diverges sharply.

Divergent National Trajectories

United Kingdom

Operating within the most mature regulatory environment of the four chapters, the UK chapter prioritises policy alignment, including explicit engagement with the Net Zero Strategy, extended producer responsibility regimes, carbon-reporting requirements and measurable accountability. This has led to discipline-specific working groups and the development of the Climate Action Cards (Fig. 1), a deck of 52 cards co-created with practitioners across design disciplines to guide studios, workshops and individuals through practical shifts in practice, business model and mindset. Flagship events, including the Design for Planet Festival held in Manchester, the development of the Climate Action Cards and sector workshops, have expanded the chapter's influence and signatory base, supported

by partnerships with the UK Design Council and Design Week, one of the UK's leading design platforms. The chapter's principal challenges are not access to institutional infrastructure but the sustainability of a volunteer-run model: maintaining volunteer capacity over time and periodically refreshing strategic direction to avoid stagnation are recurring concerns, even within this comparatively well-resourced context.

Figure 1: Design Declare UK Climate Action Cards in use at a workshop in 2025

Ireland

The Irish chapter operates within a small, geographically compact yet highly connected all-island design ecosystem, enabling close collaboration between practitioners, educators, professional bodies and government-supported organisations. Rather than prioritising policy advocacy, its strategy centres on education-led capacity building, most visibly through the Design Declares Ireland Playbook (Fig. 2), a practice-oriented resource that translates each of the movement's Acts of Emergency into locally grounded case studies drawn from Irish studios, educators and designers. Close institutional integration with the Institute of Designers in Ireland, together with the proximity afforded by an all-island geography, has enabled regular steering meetings, collaborative governance and coordinated national events. This collaborative model builds upon the cultural and institutional legacy of ‘Year of Irish Design 2015’, a government-backed initiative that repositioned design as a strategic driver of innovation, enterprise, culture and international competitiveness, strengthening relationships between government, industry and higher education while promoting a more cohesive national design identity (Milton, 2016). Against this backdrop, Design Declares Ireland has been able to leverage established professional networks to embed climate action within existing design communities. Nevertheless, the chapter remains constrained by limited funding and organisational capacity, with ongoing challenges relating to the visibility, accessibility and wider dissemination of its resources beyond its immediate professional network.

Figure 2: Design Declares Ireland Playbook

Australia

Established in 2024 as the third international Design Declares chapter, Design Declares Australia has rapidly developed, after a slow start, to a distinctive model centred on knowledge exchange and practice transformation. The chapter foregrounds place-based and culturally responsive approaches to climate action, emphasising the central but historically under-utilised role of Indigenous knowledge in supporting regenerative, Country-centred design practice. Reflecting Australia's unique environmental and political context, the chapter also addresses adaptation to intensifying climate extremes and the ongoing tensions between climate action and an economy historically shaped by extractive industries. Since its establishment, the chapter has expanded its national profile through a programme of interdisciplinary seminars and workshops featuring Australian and international speakers, collaborative events with universities and industry partners, the adaptation of the Design Declares Climate Action Cards for Australian practice (Fig. 3) and the dissemination of practice resources through an active digital presence. All these initiatives have positioned the chapter as an emerging intermediary for climate knowledge exchange across Australia's geographically dispersed design community.

Complementary research undertaken by the author in collaboration with Rennie and presented at the 2025 World Design Congress examined the structural barriers and cultural apathy shaping climate-engaged design practice in Australia (Douglas & Rennie, 2025). This research was undertaken to understand the initial lag and slow uptake of the Design Declares declaration among Australian designers. The study found that while designers express strong ethical commitment to climate action, implementation is constrained by a pronounced intention–action gap driven by client resistance, market pressures privileging cost, aesthetics and speed over ecological outcomes, limited professional guidance, a scarcity of practical implementation tools and persistent concerns regarding ‘greenwashing’.

Although regenerative design is widely recognised as an important aspiration, it remains inconsistently understood and applied across practice. Indigenous knowledge emerged as a critical pathway for advancing relational and Country-centred approaches to design; however, its integration continues to be constrained by structural, cultural, political and economic barriers rather than by a lack of practitioner commitment. Complementing its seminar series, workshops and practice resources, the chapter has begun investing in research capacity through the commencement of doctoral research by an Advisory Board member focused on regenerative digital design, advocating an emerging commitment to building the evidence base required to support long-term climate capability within the Australian design industry.

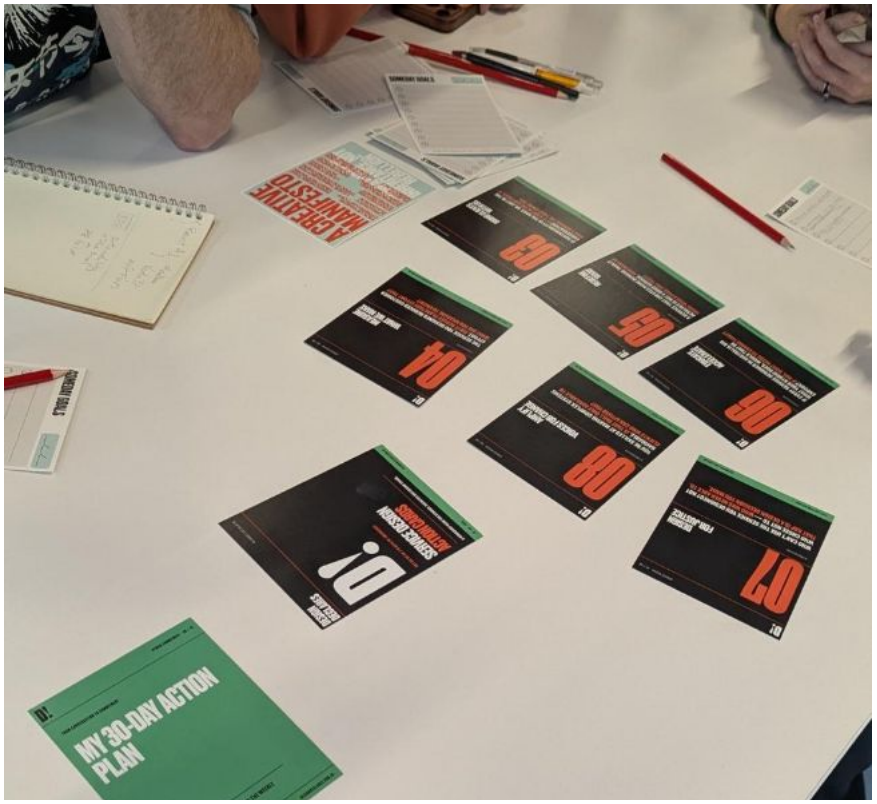

Figure 3: Design Declares Australia Creative Manifesto Climate Action Cards used in a workshop at Melbourne Design Week 2026

Brazil

The most recently established of the four chapters, Brazil's Design Declara operates within a context shaped by profound socio-environmental inequality, continental scale and marked regional diversity. Its strategy is explicitly grounded in climate justice, foregrounding Indigenous, Afro-Brazilian and community-led knowledge systems alongside territorial approaches to design, reflecting a broader commitment to decolonising design practice and amplifying Global South perspectives. As the chapter continues to develop its governance and national profile, it faces practical challenges associated with resourcing, sustaining volunteer capacity and extending engagement across Brazil's geographically dispersed design community. The localisation of resources into the Portuguese language and the

development of context-specific initiatives have become important strategies for accessibility and participation. Because the chapter is newer than the other three, the evidence base for assessing its longer-term impact is less developed. Its emergence is nevertheless important to the comparative argument because it demonstrates how the same transnational declaration can be reframed through questions of climate justice, territorial equity and social inequality rather than primarily through professional standards or organisational governance.

Discussion

Cultural Embeddedness and Structural Constraint

This comparative analysis suggests that climate accountability within the Design Declares movement is neither a fixed benchmark nor a universally applicable model of professional practice. Accountability emerges as a culturally and institutionally situated practice that is interpreted and enacted through the distinctive policy environments, design cultures and governance structures of each national context. Although all four chapters share the same declaration and overarching commitment to climate action, they have developed markedly different theories of change, reflecting the social, political and economic conditions in which they operate.

The United Kingdom chapter adopts a governance-oriented model that emphasises professional accountability, institutional partnerships and practical implementation through tools, events and sector-wide engagement. Ireland, by contrast, has developed an education and capacity-building approach that leverages strong institutional relationships and a highly connected all-island design ecosystem to embed climate literacy within professional practice. Australia's strategy reflects the dispersed and comparatively fragmented nature of its design sector, prioritising knowledge mobilisation via events, regenerative capability and place-responsive approaches that foreground Indigenous knowledge and Country-centred design. Brazil, as the newest chapter, positions climate accountability primarily through the lens of climate justice, territorial equity and decolonising design practice, highlighting the inseparability of environmental degradation and social inequality.

Climate accountability is not translated through a single pathway but through multiple culturally legitimate responses to shared global challenges. Rather than representing inconsistency, this plurality appears to constitute a source of resilience, allowing Design Declares to remain locally relevant while maintaining a coherent international identity. In this sense, the movement demonstrates that global climate commitments gain traction not through institutional uniformity but through contextual adaptation. The comparison also shows that structural conditions shape chapter development as much as policy ambition. Institutional maturity, professional networks, volunteer capacity, funding opportunities and the historical positioning of design within national innovation systems all influence how climate action is organised and sustained. These factors help explain why the UK has been able to build extensive institutional partnerships, why Ireland has prioritised collaborative education and why Australia has focused on professional capability and knowledge exchange. The findings therefore reinforce wider scholarship that understands design as a

culturally embedded practice whose capacity to influence sustainability transitions is mediated by local institutional arrangements rather than universal professional standards (Murphy et al., 2025; Douglas, 2024).

Rather than revealing four independent national initiatives, the analysis establishes how a shared declaration becomes reinterpreted through different design cultures, reinforcing Douglas's (2019) position that design practice is shaped by culturally specific ecosystems in which values, institutions and relationships influence how global ideas are understood and enacted. Climate accountability therefore emerges not as a singular organisational framework but as a relational concept that is continually negotiated between global aspirations and local realities. This suggests that coherence in a transnational movement may be better understood as a shared ethic or vocabulary than as a common operating procedure. The distinction matters because attempts to impose uniform measures can privilege the institutional conditions of more established chapters and inadvertently marginalise approaches emerging from different cultural or political contexts.

Adaptive governance and transnational design movements

The findings also have broader implications for understanding how transnational design movements sustain coherence while accommodating diversity. Discussions arising from the 2025 global chapter meeting indicate that Design Declares is increasingly moving away from assumptions of organisational standardisation towards a more adaptive model of governance. Rather than seeking identical structures, metrics or programmes across chapters, participants emphasised shared values, reciprocal learning and collaborative resource development, while recognising the need for nationally responsive strategies and locally meaningful measures of impact.

This emerging model reflects what might be described as ‘adaptive governance’: a federated approach in which common principles provide strategic coherence while allowing individual chapters to respond to distinct cultural, institutional and political contexts. Practical initiatives including collaborative research, shared educational resources, locally adapted Climate Action Cards, cross-chapter seminars and emerging communication platforms, prove that knowledge exchange may be more valuable than procedural consistency in supporting climate-engaged design practice.

Importantly, the findings also expose the vulnerabilities inherent in volunteer-led international networks. Across all chapters, participants identified ongoing challenges associated with funding and organisational capacity, while recognising volunteer fatigue and the difficulty of maintaining momentum alongside professional commitments. However, these constraints also reinforce the movement's collaborative ethos, encouraging partnerships with universities, professional organisations and industry rather than reliance upon centralised organisational control. Design Declares offers an emerging example of how global design movements can operate through adaptive rather than prescriptive forms of coordination. Instead of copying one institutional approach worldwide, the movement highlights the importance of developing locally based solutions that stay linked through common principles and shared learning.

Conclusion

This study shows that climate accountability within contemporary design practice is best understood not as a universal professional standard but as a culturally and institutionally situated process. Through a comparative analysis of the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and Brazil chapters of Design Declares, the research validates how a common declaration is translated into distinct organisational responses shaped by differences in policy settings, professional cultures, institutional maturity and socio-economic conditions. Rather than representing different stages of organisational development, the four chapters illustrate complementary pathways towards climate-engaged practice, including professional governance, education and capacity building, knowledge mobilisation and climate justice, each reflecting the priorities and constraints of its local context.

The findings suggest that the long-term strength of transnational design movements lies not in organisational uniformity but in their capacity to balance shared purpose with local autonomy. Continued investment in collaborative research and shared educational resources, adaptable tools and cross-chapter learning can strengthen collective action while allowing individual chapters to respond to their own cultural, political and institutional circumstances. In this sense, flexibility becomes a strategic asset rather than a weakness, enabling global movements to remain relevant across diverse design contexts. More broadly, this research positions design culture as a critical lens through which sustainability transitions can be understood. Instead of viewing climate accountability as a fixed benchmark, the study demonstrates that it emerges through the interaction of policy, institutions, professional networks, economic conditions and local knowledge systems. The influence of transnational design movements depends less on exporting standardised models than on their capacity to translate shared values into locally meaningful forms of practice. Future research should therefore examine how different design cultures shape the evolution, resilience and long-term impact of climate-engaged design movements across diverse international contexts.

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