

Climate Action, Now! Museums in (Climate) Change

Embedding Sustainability in Higher Education and Museum Practice

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Introduction

The climate crisis is one of the greatest challenges of our time, affecting all sectors of society – including the cultural sector. Museums are not only guardians of cultural heritage but also platforms for social discourse and transformation. Yet they also contribute to the climate crisis through energy-intensive buildings, art transport, and climate-controlled environments. Many museums engage with these issues but often struggle to implement concrete measures.

Context

Museums enjoy high public trust and cultural legitimacy,¹ positioning them as influential communicators and role models for climate action. To fulfil this potential, museums need to integrate sustainability into their internal operations. This includes reducing emissions, engaging staff, and fostering partnerships.² At the same time, there are few opportunities in higher education for students to acquire the skills needed to support this transformation. The seminar *Climate Action, Now! Museums in (Climate) Change* was developed to address this gap. It was carried out by MA students in Expanded Museum Studies during the winter term 2024/25. In close collaboration with Kunst Haus Wien, students gained hands-on experience and developed innovative concepts that strengthen museums as agents of climate action.

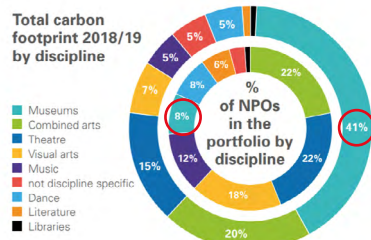


Fig. 1: Total carbon footprint 2018/19 by discipline. Although museums made up only 8% of the National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs), they were responsible for over 40% of the total CO₂ emissions across the cultural sector. Source: Arts Council England (2020) *Sustaining Great Art and Culture. Environmental Report 2018/19*, p. 9.

Methodology

- Research-based teaching with service learning in collaboration with Kunst Haus Wien
- Bridging theory, practice, and social engagement
- Hybrid format to minimize travel emissions and model remote collaboration
- Block structure complemented by expert talks and intensive group work

Project Partner: Kunst Haus Wien

Kunst Haus Wien is Austria's first eco-certified museum, recognized for its sustainable operations and exhibitions.³ The museum served as a living laboratory for students, providing direct access to real-world challenges in energy management, exhibition design, and institutional transformation. Through site visits, workshops, and collaboration with museum staff, students developed practical solutions supporting the museum's climate goals.



Fig. 2: Kunst Haus Wien Façade. © Kunst Haus Wien. Photo: Eva Kelet.

Projects and Results

Students produced concrete, transferable outputs supporting the museum's climate goals:

- **Carbon Footprint Analysis:** First institution-wide CO₂ inventory (Scopes 1–3), identifying major emissions sources and reduction potentials
- **Sustainable Exhibition Design:** Lifecycle-based guidelines for planning, running, and dismantling exhibitions
- **Media Archive Optimization:** Enhanced concept for the "Future Talks: Climate X Change" video archive, with filters, metadata, and categories to improve public accessibility and outreach

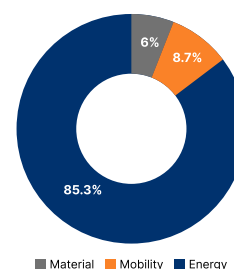


Fig. 3: Kunst Haus Wien, Greenhouse Gas Emissions 2022 (in kg CO₂ equivalent). © Tanja Kimmel.

Systemic Impact and Educational Scaling

The seminar demonstrates how embedding sustainability in higher education and partnering with museums can drive structural transformation in the cultural sector. Interdisciplinary, practice-oriented projects combined with institutional collaboration enable students to develop competencies in sustainability thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative project management. Museums benefit from actionable outputs and enhanced climate credibility. This model is transferable and scalable, empowering future cultural professionals as agents of ecological change.

Recognition and Outreach

- Special 4th-place distinction in the 2025 PROFFORMANCE+ International Higher Education Teacher Award⁴
- Inclusion in Austria's Atlas der guten Lehre⁵
- Presentations at academic events: Lectures for Future (Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Vienna, Austria), Sustainability Symposium (Polytechnic University of Cávado and Ave, Barcelos, Portugal)

The seminar will continue in 2025/26 with broader interdisciplinary participation and a new partner, Architekturzentrum Wien.

Conclusion

Climate Action, Now! Museums in (Climate) Change shows how higher education can actively contribute to solving global challenges. Students acquire practical future skills, work on real-world projects with societal value, and directly support the sustainable transformation of cultural institutions. This project represents an outstanding teaching innovation with high societal impact and sets new standards for climate-conscious, interdisciplinary higher education.

Acknowledgments

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References and Notes

- ¹ Grotz, K.; Rahemipour, P. (2024) *Das verborgene Kapital. Vertrauen in Museen in Deutschland. Eine bevölkerungsrepräsentative Studie des Instituts für Museumsforschung – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin*
- ² NEMO – Network of European Museums Organisations Deutscher Museumsbund e.V. (ed.) (2024) *Guidelines. Climate protections in museums*
- ³ "The Green Museum". Website of the Kunst Haus Wien
- ⁴ PROFFORMANCE+ International Higher Education, *Climate Action, Now! Museen im (Klima-)wandel*
- ⁵ *Atlas der guten Lehre, Climate Action, Now! Museen im (Klima-)wandel*

