

Image description: Greenhouse Effect

[C-SPAN: Greenhouse Effect](#), Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, December 10, 1985 (Carl Sagan)

I am in the middle of RMIT Design Hub Gallery, sitting on a dark flat bench, in the arc of the horseshoe shape that bridges its two rooms; a long cavernous room and a lower-ceilinged corridor. Daylight falls into this corridor like the inhalation between two long dives.

What first demands my attention is the austere stairwell opposite. It's two or three stories of flecked grey steps; I can't tell if they're stone or metal. Whether it's truly narrow or an effect of the deep cut it makes through multiple floors of the building, the effect stands. Vertical steel grates span the walls top to bottom, up and down. Above everything, a row of evenly spaced, white fluorescent lights form a mechanical spine.

I pull my gaze back into my body and let it roll down through the soles of my feet. Here, a couple of metres in front of me – against the perforated steel barrier overlooking the stairwell – there is a wide flatscreen TV propped up on two thick grey stone tiles and a couple of short sections of timber. On screen, there is a Senate hearing – the digital readout on the wall tells me it's an archival C-SPAN video of a US Senate Committee hearing about the 'greenhouse effect', from 1985. On the TV, the image feels a little stretched, and interlacing lines emphasise its vintage. Captions identify Senator David Durenberger and Dr Carl Sagan, who seems to be the main person speaking throughout the video. As it plays, there's a little counter on screen – blocky white numbers (running down milliseconds) on a strip of black backing. Yellow subtitles announce each phrase; sometimes they hang expectantly on an unfinished sentence that suggests quite a different meaning to its eventual conclusion.

Sagan is wearing tinted glasses with a boxy frame, a thick pinstriped grey suit and a burgundy necktie with modest polkadots and a white shirt. It's a profoundly 1980s American aesthetic. He's leaning forward to speak into silver microphones with grilles that reflect the room's lights rather stridently, two of them side by side. He nods and gesticulates emphatically, fingers often interlocked. His face expresses an even, earnest affect as he speaks to a panel of three middle-aged caucasian men who sit behind a raised wooden bench. Behind him, out of focus but obviously serious faces look down into their laps, or blink and stare intently.

(The camera occasionally cuts away; now it's someone who could be a young Al Gore, running his index finger across a conspicuously pursed upper lip.)

I see Sagan expressing concern about the collapse of the West Antarctic ice sheet and 'a general rise of many, many metres in sea level'. 'The idea that we should immediately stop burning fossil fuel,' he continues, 'has such severe economic consequences that no one of course will take it seriously. But there are many other things that can be done.' He talks about ending government subsidies for fossil fuels. The exchange feels unusually pragmatic and uncontroversial. Sagan's hair looks a like modestly cut grass, a little shiny, and bunches into little grey tufts in front of his ears.

Everybody in the hearing is wearing some kind of suit, and spectacles seem not only welcomed but encouraged. People shift awkwardly in their seats; one man rubs his palm against his knee in the background, blurred but still recognisably restless. I wonder if it felt physically different to be restless in the 80s.

Durenberger looks bemused; he is always shuffling and fidgeting with bits of paper, pushing his straightened finger under his nose, shifting his mouth around in funny little ways; I wonder if he feels like he's waiting for Sagan to finish. I wonder if I'm detecting a small smirk on his face; it's not without charm. He rests his cheek against a hairy knuckle. We catch a glimpse of brown leather seats. People write with paper, not computers. Having finished speaking, Sagan reaches for a large pitcher of water and fills his glass. It's just for him; the seats on either side of his are empty. The camera cuts away to an Asian man in a navy suit who's sucking on the ends of his eyeglass handles. Aren't they all feeling overheated in those suits? Maybe it did feel physically different to be restless in the 80s.