

Style, Not Sustainability

Green Architecture

by James Wines; Philip Jodido, editor

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Reviewed by Steve Mouzon

This book was written nearly a decade ago, but grows increasingly more important as the green revolution progresses because it represents a fairly good approximation of the view that many, if not most, architects take toward the idea of "green architecture." This review is a critique of that collection of views as much as it is of the book itself. This critique emanates from the common sense, plain-spoken definition of sustainability as "keeping it going in a healthy fashion long into an uncertain future."

But first, a bit about the author. James Wines (1932-) is an architect, artist and (obviously) author most noted for his work at SITE, which he founded in 1970. SITE produced some of the most memorable architects of the Postmodern era. Their series of Best Products showrooms included crumbling facades, shattered and dislocated facades, facades as green housed rainforests, twisted facades and peeling facades. Any architect studying or practicing in the 1970s or 1980s likely recalls these buildings – or at least their front walls. I'm not sure that anything except the facade was ever published for any of them.

The first hint of the direction of the book appears before it begins, on the inner front cover, which announces that *Green Architecture* will focus on the work of 38 prominent architects. This architect-centric approach is typical of the tack of most in the green movement today: beginning with their product or service and ending (hopefully) at sustainability. At its worst, this devolves into bald-faced "green washing." And even at its best, this method is incapable of getting at the real core of sustainability because it tends to remain focused on the product or service rather than on sustainability.

The author, in good Postmodernist fashion, launches first into the historical and philosophical basis of today's green movement. I found these chapters extraordinarily difficult to follow, in part because the photos are compelling enough to be distracting, and they most often have nothing to do with the adjacent text. Readers with anything less than an iron-clad discipline might want to skip the first chapters.

The "Environmental Architecture Today" chapter begins by listing the standard eco-friendly checklist – and then essentially dismissing all of these common sense measures. The counter list, which forms the table of contents of the rest of the book includes things like "using the elements of earth and vegetation in such a way that they seem to be part of the raw material of construction," "the use of nature-related symbolism as a means of connecting architecture to its cultural context," and "a translation of the most advanced environmental and construction technology... into aesthetic terms." The last item on the counter list is "visionary and conceptual

ideas...that offer prophetic visions for the future..." The prophetic vision of the inside cover, at least, is correct: this book is going to be primarily about style, not real sustainability.

One might reasonably assume that the "Integration of Architecture and Landscape" chapter might revolve around methods of increasing human habitation of the landscape so that conditioned space might be reduced. It does not. Rather, it deals with "the Celtic celebration of cosmology," the "combined impression of Babylonian garden and space-age cele-

bration," and "assertive, pyramidal forms (totemic in themselves), which are embraced by ground surface incisions and sculptural mounds..."

The chapter on "Organic Forms and Cosmic Symbolism" begins with a fascinating jaunt through the work of Jersey Devil, which may well be the most ecological work in the book on several counts. Jersey Devil's nomadic design/build practice has the seeds of the beginnings of living traditions, which were the delivery vehicles of almost all of the sustainable places and buildings ever built. They simply lack the strong connection to the cultures at large in which they are working that are essential to a living tradition.

Then, however, the book lapses back into pure symbolic expression with projects such as the Soft and Hairy House, which the architects intended as an "expression of...orgiastic potency," and is "a sensuous explosion of organic forms that fuse, convolute, and metamorphose... to produce a compelling environment of fluid membranes and cradling sanctuaries." Clearly, something is breeding here, but it's not a living tradition. Charles Jencks' Garden of Cosmic Speculation closes the chapter.

"Architecture in its Cultural Context" begins in promising fashion, with David Lea's Studio in the West Country that can only be described as lovable – by architect and non-architect alike. Buildings that cannot be loved will not last. The carbon footprint of a building is meaningless once its parts are carted off to the landfill. The House on Elba that follows is also lovable, in an extremely vernacular fashion. The Fay Jones work late in the chapter is also highly lovable, but these projects sand-

wich buildings by Hans Hollien, the author's SITE firm, and others that reflect their cultural context in only the most obscure and esoteric fashion.

Renzo Piano's Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Center, which is the cover project, closes the chapter as a building that architects and artists must surely consider beautiful, but which citizens on the street more likely would characterize as "a bunch of giant unfinished baskets."

"Translating Technology into Art" is very nearly headed in the right direction. It can be argued that the green revolution of the 1960s and 1970s was lost because the artifacts of sustainability at that time were conceived entirely as acts of engineering, not as acts of design. So the rooftop solar panels that were installed by the millions all across America in the 1970s were ripped off by the millions in the 1980s when their owners said "I don't care if they are saving me money; get those hideous things off my roof!"

The problem with the proposition of "Translating Technology into Art" is the fact that very little of what is considered art by the critics today is conceived as lovable by the people. So "technology as art" likely faces the same scrap heap as "technology as engineering." "Lovable technology," on the other hand, has a much greater life expectancy.

"Building a Bridge to the Common Client" is a laudable aspiration, but the chapter inexplicably begins with the work of Olson/Sundberg, who work mainly for very wealthy clientele. Sustainability will not occur unless millions of people participate. The homes of exceptionally wealthy people are simply not numerous enough to have much of an effect on the total carbon footprint of a region.

Next up are a series of idea homes which are intended as “a shopping center of green ideas.” Idea homes are much more likely to have an impact because they are pitched to builders and to the general public. But they are most likely to succeed if people are able to say, “I could live there.” The Arizona idea home looks more like a laboratory, for example, and the Australian Home of the Future is more likely to resemble a psychiatrist’s office. Obie Bowman’s Sea Ranch house and James Cutler’s work, however, are as likely as any in the book to be found lovable

by architects and non-architects alike.

“The Sociological Aspects of Green Architecture-Urbanism” begins with two fascinating Troy West projects. Eva’s Kitchen is a combined organic garden/kitchen/halfway house project which highlights the growing realization in some (currently small) circles that a sustainable place should feed those who live there. Citizens should be able to look out onto the fields and waters from which their food comes, because if you can’t eat there, you can’t sustain life there. We should not have to depend on international trade agreements for our daily food. Eva’s Kitchen helps create a nourishing place in laudable fashion.

Troy West’s New American House can easily be imagined as bringing sustainability to a large audience in Rhode Island. After these projects, unfortunately, the chapter slips back into what might best be characterized as formal expression.

“Prophetic Visions of the Future” is a chapter that, at first glance, seems likely to be disappointing because how many “Tomorrowlands” were ever accurate? Architects have had an abysmal track record for prophecy over the last century. And, sure enough, some of the projects seem to resemble nothing so much as drug-induced dreams – or maybe nightmares. Others seem to be straight out of “The Jetsons.”

But there are exceptions. Jeffrey Miles’ Ozone-Maker is a fantastic vision of mammoth airships that resemble horseshoe crabs circling the globe, eating chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and excreting ozone. And the Postmodernist staples of Charles Moore’s Piazza d’Italia and Michael Graves’ Portland building are thrown in with Gehry’s Bilbao Guggenheim and Meier’s Getty Center, although those buildings seem more like history now, rather than prophecy.

The conclusion begins by defending the art and philosophy focus of the book against the forces of the “ecologically correct.” The author denounces the “finger-wagging, eco-moralist architects...” who use green architecture as a “camouflage to justify the work of some vociferously righteous, but very bad, designers.” He then recites the litany of dogmatists excluded from the book: the 1960s nostalgia wing, the eco-universal synthesizers, the Gaia globalists, the radical deep ecologists, the eco-psychologists, the cutting-edge techies, and the salvation-through-art camp. One must ask, however, if the author’s own green architectural expression camp isn’t equally damaging to the prospects of real sustainability?

This much we know: sustainability will not be achieved unless we activate billions of people around the world. How many people are touched by the high arts to the point that they actually change significant things in their lives? We need all hands on deck in order to achieve real sustainability.

While the arts certainly should not be excluded, we cannot expect them to single-handedly change where and how billions of people live. We need far broader tools for this task. Living traditions have been proven for millennia, and they are the only tools to date that have demonstrated a strong ability for delivering real sustainability to entire cultures. We really must reawaken them – it’s getting late. ■

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