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Peer reviewed

Review: Reshaping the Built Environment; Ecology, Ethics, and Economics

By Charles J. Kibert (Ed.)

Reviewed by On-Kwok Lai
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Charles J. Kibert (Ed.). *Reshaping the Built Environment: Ecology, Ethics, and Economics*. Washington DC: Island Press, 1999. 362 pp. ISBN: 1-55963-701-3 (cloth); ISBN: 1-55963-702-1 (paper). US\$45.00 cloth; US\$27.50 paper. Recycled, acid-free paper.

Now is the right moment for us to reshape our built environment for sustainable development, as time is not on our side. Under the pro-growth development paradigm, in the name of economic progress and development, people have been colonizing nature and turning it into building structures of all kinds, which house people for various purposes. Yet the built environment is the source of environmental problems, hence leading us to an unsustainable future. For outlining an alternative vision for sustainable development, this edited volume is a timely, welcome contribution. It articulates ecologically sound thinking upon the broad range of complex issues connected to reshaping the built environment, and also offers concrete, feasible solutions.

Derived from the University of Florida's Rinker Eminent Scholar Series on Sustainability in the Built Environment (1998), the volume is arranged, after a succinct introduction, around three sets of ecological relations, synergies, and praxis. The "foundations" part (chapters 2-5) discusses the underlying frameworks/approaches for thinking about how the built environment should be reshaped, with specific reference to ecological, ethical, and economic considerations. It is followed by the "content" part (chapters 6-10) which addresses the key resource implications of the built environment: the shift towards a renewable and sustainable (solar) energy supply and conservation, building materials, the alternative processing of clean (waste) water, learning from the natural system for greening of land forms and regenerative landscapes, and the case for green building production processes. The "process" part (chapters 11-18) advocates the ecologically sound role model for various agencies involved in the built environment life cycle: architects, planners, and the government. Despite their different roles, the design and the process, as well as the product of building, should mimic natural processes and complement rather than destroy natural systems.

Two positive aspects of this book should be noted. First, in spite of the

diversity in terms of theme, approach, length of chapter (ranging from 7 to 31 pages), depth of coverage, and styles of presentation by 17 authors in 18 chapters, it is a highly readable and reader-friendly volume, both for students and professionals, because of its unique graphic and figurative illustration. Over 140 tables, figures and photos are well placed in 362 pages. Secondly, the presentation of each chapter is clear, succinct, informative yet original and critical-enjoyable reading, indeed!

One caveat is the under-articulation of the cultural meaning and spiritual values of biodiversity at large and in the built environment, and the specificity of localness,¹ though Gail A. Lindsey's chapter (14) on "Building Values" does touch upon the complexity of personal feeling and localness of the living-spatial structure. In short, the emphases of the presentations are more on the functional-systematic aspects of the topic than on the personal one.

Overall, *Reshaping the Built Environment* rates an eighty percent success score for its extravagant ambition. It probes into nearly every corner of ecological thought about buildings we live/work in, highlighting the feasible synergy between physically built environments and ecology, ethics and economics with the best practice. Undoubtedly, this is a valuable publication for those interested in the harmonization of the built environment and biodiversity. This is particularly the case given the increasing degrees of specialization in global ecological discourse. It is a very refreshing read.

Note:

1. cf. United Nation Development Program. (1999). *Cultural and spiritual values of biodiversity*. Nairobi, Kenya?: UNDP.

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