

LINKING SYSTEMS OF THOUGHT

The Green Braid: Towards an Architecture of Ecology, Economy, and Equity: An ACSA Reader (Edited by Kim Tanzer and Rafael Longoria, New York: Routledge, 2007, 400 pp., \$49.95)

by Kayte Young

ARCHITECTURAL SUSTAINABILITY IS OFTEN REDUCED to calculations of energy gains and losses, thermal envelopes, renewable material choices, and rainwater harvesting. The editors of *The Green Braid* complicate the study of green building by placing the concept of sustainability within networks of relationships having three strands: ecology, economy, and equity (the “green braid”).

In their selection of peer-reviewed essays and competition designs from over 15 years of publications issued by the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA), editors Kim Tanzer and Rafael Longoria have included economics and social equity in their vision of sustainable architecture alongside more conventional environmental and ecological concerns.

The book is divided into six sections, each with a general introduction by Longoria and Tanzer. The first section comprises essays by four invited authors, David Orr, Ellen Dunham Jones, Thomas Fischer, and Steven Moore. These contemporary essays lay out what is at stake, specifically the role of architecture in addressing global climate change and the looming environmental crisis. But, as these essays convey, the challenges are not confined to the environment: the editors of this collection compel architects to embrace economics, politics, and social justice as aspects of sustainability as well.

The subsequent five sections are the selected essays, an eclectic, often surprising, collection across theoretical, pedagogical, historical, and practical territory. Highly academic reflections on Donna Haraway’s cyborg theories or on the role of critical theory in architectural practice sit alongside a brief and straightforward description of a modified trailer design. From traditional, sustainable urban development practices in Sarajevo or Chandernagore, India, to SmartWrap, Scupper Houses, and brownfields in Chicago’s rustbelt, this volume pushes at the boundaries of typical green architecture studies.

In an exemplary essay, Mahesh Senagala suggests that sustainability be addressed at

institutional and existential, as well as ecological, levels—another braid. “Solar Sails and the Triad of Sustainability” presents an entry in a design competition for the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). Charged with creating a wall dedicated to educating the public about solar energy at the site of the DOE headquarters in Washington, D.C., Senagala has designed a visually striking, pedestrian-interactive solar temple. This project, capable of producing 142 kilowatts of electricity, would reach beyond the didactic to a dramatic, poetic celebration of the sun.

Suburban development is the focus of several essays. William F. Conway and Marcy Schulte look at possibilities for transforming first ring suburbs into neighborhoods that are culturally rich and environmentally sound.

Anthony Denzer examines a postwar planned community in Los Angeles known as Community Homes. Designed by communist Gregory Ain in 1945, the housing development was to include open floor plans based on feminist ideals and progressive theories of parenting. Racial integration was the most radical aspect of the cooperative and is the most likely reason it was never built (it was denied backing by the Federal Housing Administration). Denzer argues that Community Homes served as a critique of developments projects such as Levittown before they were even built.

The Green Braid is not a book to be read from cover to cover as a coherent thesis or manual, but rather the kind of collection to be kept on hand for inspiration. Just when I thought I had a handle on what the book was all about, I would turn the page, discover another gem, and feel my expectations

challenged and my mind stretched to encompass other perspectives. I found myself surprisingly moved by a critique of Renzo Piano’s Tjibaou Center for the Kanak people of the French South Pacific territory of New Caledonia. Lisa R. Findley’s thoughtful treatment of the complexities involved in the postcolonial project of designing a cultural center for a marginalized indigenous community after centuries of French colonial rule complicated my own initial response to the soaring beauty of Piano’s formal choices. Piano’s use of double-skin wall systems, thermal chimneys, and louvered panels in this project made me think of the Menil campus in Houston. It reminded me that a few world-class architects have been developing technological and aesthetically stunning innovations in green architecture for decades, and Findley’s hard-hitting essay reinstalled my faith in architecture criticism.

This collection looks at the way we think about, teach, design, and build architecture, and asks us to fundamentally change our practice. Tanzer and Longoria hope to see a shift in architectural thinking and building that might begin to create a network of relations linking systems of building and systems of thought: a collective movement toward truly sustainable architectural practice. It is refreshing to find in a collection of essays on the greening of architecture attention paid to the issues of indigenous rights, feminist concerns, and situated knowledges. This bodes well for the future of the sustainability movement—if architects pay heed to Tanzer and Longoria’s compelling call to action.

Senagala writes, “Architecture that does not move us is not architecture. Architecture becomes sustainable when it is part of our journey to understand ourselves.” The work collected in *The Green Braid* takes us a long way on that journey. **c**

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Rendering of Mahesh Senagala’s “Solar Sails and the Triad of Sustainability” entry in a U.S. Department of Energy design competition.

