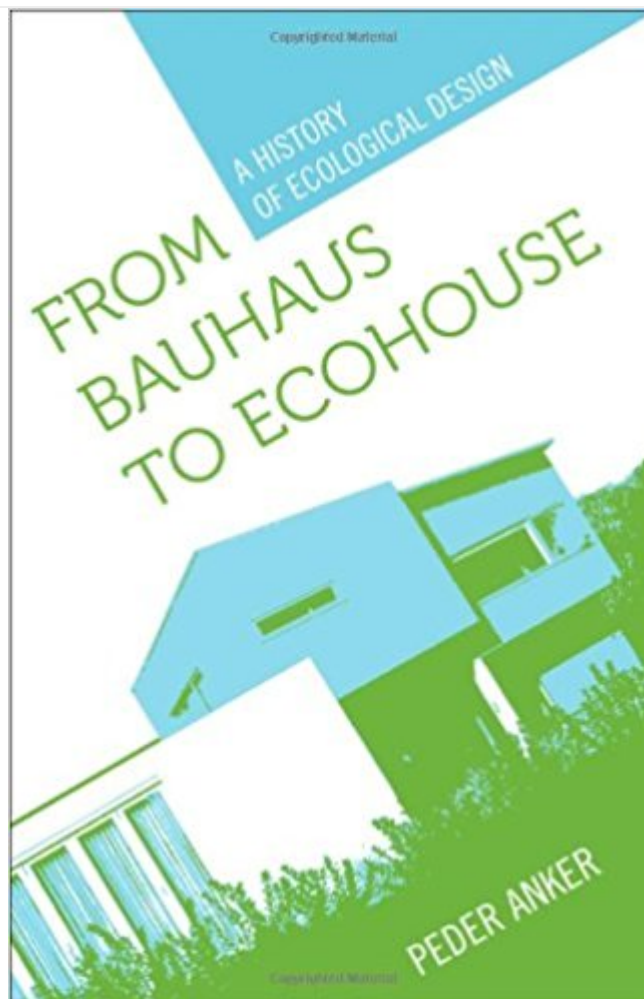


{essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

From Bauhaus to Ecohouse: A History of Ecological Design



Volume 44 (2011)

Reviewed Work(s)

From Bauhaus to Ecohouse: A History of Ecological Design. By Peder Anker (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010). Pp. 216. Cloth, \$34.95.

Peder Anker, in *From Bauhaus to Ecohouse*, continues his iconoclastic style of environmental and intellectual history.^[1] In this book he shifts his focus from ecology to ecological design. Anker is quick to point out that despite ecological design's recent popularity and its 1960s pedigree, its intellectual foundations stretch back to the 1920s and, in fact, began with that paragon of modernist design, the Bauhaus. The connections between modernist and ecological design may come as a surprise due to ecological design's strong links with environmentalism, a movement that is often perceived as antithetical to the sterility of modernist architecture. Anker traces the intellectual and political connections between members of the Bauhaus, such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and influential members of the ecological design movement, including Ian McHarg. Focusing on their shared desire to unite art and science, Anker convincingly argues that ecological design is heir to the Bauhaus and is characterized by a high modernist focus on control and perfection.^[2]

Anker begins by carefully illustrating the role that nature played as a design inspiration for the members of the Bauhaus. Nature was an essential, but often overlooked, element of Bauhaus designs from its very beginning. According to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, its famous mantra, "form follows function," was actually meant as a reference to how nature's designs emerge from the creative pressures of evolution (2). This interest in using nature and science to improve architectural design grew exponentially during the little studied interlude of the Bauhaus in 1930s London. During this period, members of the Bauhaus, including Moholy-Nagy, Walter Gropius, and Herbert Bayer, began working closely with leading British ecologists, most notably Julian Huxley. Anker argues that their work with Huxley in his Political and Economic Planning Organization strengthened their interest in the beneficial role of nature and increased the place of ecological science in urban planning. As a result, the idea of using ecological science and architecture to manage

both man and his environment – to the betterment of both – became central to Bauhaus ideology and traveled with Gropius, Moholy-Nagy, and Bayer to America, where it eventually became the central foundation of ecological design.

American ecological design began, according to Anker, with Moholy-Nagy's school of design in Chicago, which would eventually become the Chicago Institute of Design. After Moholy-Nagy's death in 1946, the Bauhaus vision of environmental design was continued by an autodidact designer by the name of R. Buckminster Fuller, among others. Fuller was such a self-aggrandizing and influential person among ecological designers and within the 1960s counterculture that Anker has published other articles discussing Fuller's life, his megalomania, and his influence on ecological design.[3] Drawing on this work, Anker once again presents a critical picture of Fuller emphasizing his close connections with the military and the authoritarian character of his visions of a world governed by a scientific-architectural elite (69). Fuller achieved celebrity status in the 1960s. His fame was due in part to his technological optimism, which stood in sharp contrast to environmentalists, such as Paul Ehrlich, who foresaw environmental and demographic disaster. [4] Fuller's reputation as a designer was built on the success of his "dymaxion" maps and war games and most of all on his "geodesic domes." These strikingly original structures became quite popular with both the military and the counterculture. Together Fuller's domes and "dymaxion" maps helped to popularize ecological design as they illustrated the existence of ecological problems and demonstrated the capabilities of structure designed according to the laws of nature.

Fuller's technological optimism and his managerial vision of ecology place him well within the bounds of what John Scott has termed high modernism, a view characterized by visions of improving both mankind and the world through rationalist and scientific control. Building on Scott's claim, Anker argues that Fuller's high modernism opened the ecological design movement to the influence of NASA designers of space capsules in the late 1960s and 1970s. Anker takes pains to illustrate that the influence of NASA engineers on ecological design was not incongruous as it may seem. Space capsules, particularly those meant for interplanetary trips, were effectively enclosed ecosystems and, in recognition of this fact, NASA worked closely with a number of

ecosystems ecologists to design capsules that could re-circulate energy and waste the way that natural ecosystems did. Some designers, such as Gerard O'Neill and Stuart Brand, became fixated on the idea of space colonies as a way of solving the ecological and demographic crises believed to be looming in the 1970s. Others like Ian McHarg saw space technology as an inspiration to design buildings that “fit” with the landscapes that surrounded them and encouraged environmental preservation or restoration (114).

Anker's narrative loses some of its force when he criticizes ecological designers, such as Ian McHarg, for embracing a biocentrist and high modernist approach and abandoning the humanism that Anker believes is required of architects (108). This criticism seems belated, as he has argued that concern for the environment and a desire to manage both humans and ecology was foundational to ecological design from the beginning. If a high modernist desire for control has become stronger within the ecological design movement, its proponents believe that one could attribute it to a growing concern for the natural world, just as easily as arguing that ecological designers are prone to authoritarianism. Regardless of whether one shares Anker's belief that ecological design is characterized by an authoritarian subtext, this study is an intriguing and important one. Anker's expert tracing of the tangled ideas and artifacts that make up ecological design and his provocative view of environmentalism are relevant to historians of science, architecture, and the environment.

Henry Trim

University of British Columbia

[1] See *Imperial Ecology: Environmental Order in the British Empire, 1895-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) in which Anker demonstrated the connections between holistic ecology and South African apartheid policies.

[2] See John Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

[3] See Peder Anker, “Buckminster Fuller as Captain of Spaceship Earth,” *Minerva* 45:4 (2007): 417-434.

[4] See R. Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manuel For Spaceship Earth* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1969) and Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968).



Published by

 [View all posts by](#)

Book Reviews

20th century, Environment, Intellectual History, Science, Technology

COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.

FIND US ON:

» [Facebook](#)

» [Twitter](#)

ADMIN:

» [Log in](#)

» [WordPress.org](#)

PROUDLY POWERED BY WORDPRESS | **THEME: BASKERVILLE 2 BY ANDERS NOREN.**

UP ↑