

# Integral Sustainable Design: Transformative Perspectives

Edited by Mark DeKay with Susanne Bennett. (2011). London: Routledge, Earthscan Publishing.

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Mark DeKay, Professor of Architecture and Director of Graduate Studies in the College of Architecture at the University of Tennessee, a prominent scholar-practitioner in the field of sustainable design, opens his latest book with the explicit intention that the volume “help create a breakthrough in the effectiveness of the Sustainable Design movement such that it is transformed to greater power, relevance, meaning and positive effect on people and Nature” (p. xxi). His approach is thoroughly integral, taking up Wilber’s classic integral theory, more or less a version of “Wilber-4,” clarifying and extending this meta-theory in service of creating and advancing sustainable design as discipline and practice.

The book is divided into four parts. Part 1 introduces the four quadrant perspectives of the AQAL model with careful reference to and relevance for the existing field of sustainable design. Indeed, one of the hallmarks to DeKay’s book is its deftness in weaving introductory accounts of integral theory, including novel adaptations and extensions of Wilber’s version, with the content and concerns of the current state of the sustainable design field, yielding an organic interplay and marriage of the two. Summarizing and approximating what are much more complex and multi-faceted presentations, let us say that the perspective for sustainable design is centered in aesthetic experience; that of the intersubjective (lower left quadrant in AQAL) in ethical concern for nature and shared stories about nature and place; that of the objective (upper right quadrant in AQAL) in the performance of individual design features (like heating); and that of the interobjective (lower right quadrant in AQAL) in the ecological nesting of natural and socio-cultural systems in which a building is situated.

DeKay reviews a number of leading edge green measurement standards, like those of USGBC’s LEED and WBGD, as well as number of the most prominent sustainable design theorists, demonstrating that on the whole the field tends to neglect or downplay the left-hand quadrants—an imbalance that AQAL is able to redress. This section of the book also includes an overview of Abigail Houssen’s research model of five developmental stages in the responsive interpretation of visual works of art, with DeKay extrapolating a persuasive four stage model of increasing depth and complexity in aesthetic competency proper to sustainable design.

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Part 2 extends these prior reflections on development to all four quadrants as regards the design process, yielding four levels for each quadrant, hence sixteen distinctive perspectives or what the author calls “prospects.” DeKay never lapses into abstractions, but always grounds his claims in actual design processes and with reference to actual buildings.

Part 3, perhaps my favorite section of the volume, proposes six perceptual shifts that matter for integral sustainable design, each shift moving through stages from modernist to postmodernist to more integral modes of perceiving. The first of these is the shift from *object* to *relationships* to *subject-object relations*: (1) the object as object; (2) the object partially dissolving into its network of inter-objective relationships (as Mondrian’s abstractions would so instruct us); (3a) the recovering of the object as determinate while retaining sense of its constitutive relational networks (in line with philosopher John Sallis’ post-deconstructive phenomenology); and (3b) the subjective sense attending what is perceived coming forward and folding into the objective moment. These six perceptual shifts, overlapping and co-constituting, are not merely cognitive, but embody cognition as perception – a topic underexplored in integral circles.

Part 4 broaches the issue of the nature of nature, five developmental levels in the understanding of nature that come to inform and underwrite design processes. This section extends and advances for sustainable design the groundbreaking work of the earlier 2009 volume on *Integral Ecology* by Sean Esbjörn-Hargens and Michael Zimmerman.

The conclusion of the book lists the basic issues that an integral sustainable design is to address, announcing rather than hiding this new approach’s ethical commitments, while also reflecting on the limits of the project as it has just been presented, noting the need for a transformative yoga for sustainable designers as well as increased clarity on the relationship between design and the fostering of states of consciousness. This conclusion’s spirit is rare in forwarding a ramified ethical stance while offering an auto-critique of the project’s own limits—in line with Bernard Lonergan’s rarely enacted consciousness level of rational judgment as presented in his magisterial volumes *Insight* and in *Method in Theology*.

In engaging this wonderful book, my direct cognition and perception of the built environment has become transfigured. I now am able to see any building I inhabit in a much more integral manner, bringing that structure to life in ways I had not suspected were possible, even as part of my professional university responsibility is to teach architectural history to undergraduate studio art majors. Indeed, my approach to teaching architectural history, as I now see, had been heavily slanted on the left-quadrant sides of the AQAL matrix, with not enough explicit consideration of waves of development/complexity proper to a fuller tetra-disclosing and inhabiting of architectural place.

In the remainder of this review, I shall explore three themes in the mood of complement (and compliment). The first is DeKay’s discussion of matters proper to the lower-left quadrant of cultural. The second is to bring to light the book’s deepest ethical commitment and its intuition of the situation today facing the implementation of a more integral sustainable design. The third is the theme of states of consciousness proper to architectural space and design.

With regard to the lower left cultural quadrant, DeKay stresses ethical views of nature and the stories associated with a given building or building style. What I would add is the cultural consideration of meaningful practices enacted within and coordinated by architectural space. Such practices are embodied (hence involve upper-right objective considerations): they are the concrete forms of life proper to and shaped by the design site. For example, the Starbucks in which I am now sitting and writing is in part structured so that the interior space coordinates and conducts specific normative practices: food and coffee are prepared in a spot that is separated and yet visible from the rest of the open floor; money is exchanged not at the front door but at a specific place with a physical division between those enacting the exchange; the seating arrangements, flexible in offering diverse options, sustain some but not all senses and modes of social interactions amongst clients, while being inclusive of non-customers in constituting a kind of a public space. And so on. With this view in mind, the styling of the interior and the branding of the products being sold can be seen to combine with this coordination of normative practices to evince a sense of story proper to one's being in this space with others, this storied-cum-practical environment having embedded norms and mores.

Second is the theme that goes to the heart of the study: that of sustainable design's relationship to nature, with Part 4 of the book dedicated to this topic. Here I want to call attention to a basic method of Derridean textual interpretation called double reading ("*clôtural* interpretation"), explicated by among others Simon Critchley (in his study *The Ethics of Deconstruction*): a first moment of close and meticulous reading of the general coherence and argument of the text; and a second layered moment that points to fissures in that coherence. These fissures are, to be sure, neither mistakes, authorial errors, logical contradictions, nor due alone to semiological drift, but are the evitable rifts within the textual fabric that enable the breaking through of the ethical call. These textual ruptures are like placeholders, the ethical's disruption of the text's apparent "good sense" as promise-of-justice-to-come (hence, justice as undeconstructable). Here I want to suggest that the main fissure within the current study to which I shall point is not only, in Derridean high style, an opening for an infinite and general call of the ethical that can never be fulfilled (sure as that is), but also has a finite and specific content as symptom and expression of a problematic that lies at the center of sustainable design, a problem that as such can in principle be redressed.

DeKay is aware on the one hand that in classic integral theory the noosphere transcends and embraces the biosphere; that nature is in culture. This means that there are emergents proper to the noosphere not found in the biosphere (like class relationships within economic systems). And yet the text calls repeatedly for sustainable design to find its ecological models in nature, even as nature is a lower holonic evolutionary unfolding—the lower as model for higher orders of complexity and depth. This is not a mistake or contradiction, but the expression of the tacit insight that at some point in human history and building there occurred a decisive dissociation of the noosphere from the biosphere; an alienation of culture from nature and even from humanity's self-nature, as in the classic critical-theoric allegorical tale about Odysseus in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. What shines through so decisively in the present volume is the imperative to heal the nature/culture, biosphere/noosphere dissociation inherent within the domain of architecture. The necessary first moment of an emergent integral sustainable design is not more cultural Eros, which would intensify the dissociation, but a creative Agape to heal the wound and rift.

Third is the topic of architecture and its fostering of expanded states of consciousness. DeKay is clear in his Conclusion that this is a theme requiring further investigation. In his using an integral model centered more or less in Wilber-4, he stacks a transpersonal design stage above that of second-tier/integral stage. In light of Wilber-5 (more complex than the AQAL version used by the author, as DeKay intentionally avoids such meta-theoretical intricacies in this initial integral presentation for the discipline of sustainable design), one can distinguish within the category of the transpersonal states from third-tier stages. Transpersonal states can be experienced at more or less any stage; while third tier stage-structures are constructed over time through the taking up of states which are folded, like materials, into the increasing the complexity of perspective cognition. There are a few buildings cited by DeKay that perhaps correlate with something like the expression of a third-tier stage-structure of consciousness (e.g., figure 24.5, top); but it is not necessary that design move past an integral stage to nurture expanded states. Chartres Cathedral is, within the scheme presented in the book, a pre-modern design; yet it famously engenders expanded state experiences. How the fostering of states can be intentionally folded into design considerations is an open question within integral circles, preliminarily explored in the work of Jessica Weigley and Kevin Hackett (of Siol Studios in San Francisco), whose presentation at the 2010 Integral Theory Conference reflected on architectural design's relation to the gross, subtle, and causal bodies.

Finally, it must be noted that the design of the book is integral. The volume has a running narrative divided into parts, chapters, sub-sections, etc., inserting blocks of questions that activate cognition, key phrases boxed off and inserted at key junctures, photographs of sites and buildings with running commentary, diagrams, tables, various types of lists, cumulative bibliographies at the end of each section, a comprehensive bibliography organized by general theme at the books' end, and an Appendix with summary of the volume's argument and additional questions to activate the readers' ongoing engagement with the topic. Woven together through an innovative graphic design, the interrelationships amongst these materials move past post-modern montage into a dynamic, sliding, open integral whole. The design enables a given reader to enter effectively into engagement with the book in a wide variety of manners and scales of complexity/depth, depending on one's time constraints, interests, and disciplinary competency. The book's organization performs its tenet message.

*Integral Sustainable Design* has been for me the single most important book on architecture I have ever read. It will be of interest to all manner of integralists and meta-theorists, will serve the world of sustainable design as a guiding manual, and for the non-expert can profoundly change one's day to day experience of the built environments in which we dwell.