



# Design With Nature

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## **Design With Nature** Ian L. McHarg

In presenting us with a vision of organic exuberance and human delight, which ecology and ecological design promise to open up for us, McHarg revives the hope for a better world." --Lewis Mumford

"... important to America and all the rest of the world in our struggle to design rational, wholesome, and productive landscapes." --Laurie Olin, Hanna Olin, Ltd.

"This century's most influential landscape architecture book." --Landscape Architecture

"... an enduring contribution to the technical literature of landscape planning and to that unfortunately small collection of writings which speak with emotional eloquence of the importance of ecological principles in regional planning." --Landscape and Urban Planning

In the twenty-five years since it first took the academic world by storm, *Design With Nature* has done much to redefine the fields of landscape architecture, urban and regional planning, and ecological design. It has also left a permanent mark on the ongoing discussion of mankind's place in nature and nature's place in mankind within the physical sciences and humanities. Described by one enthusiastic reviewer as a "user's manual for our world," *Design With Nature* offers a practical blueprint for a new, healthier relationship between the built environment and nature. In so doing, it provides nothing less than the scientific, technical, and philosophical foundations for a mature civilization that will, as Lewis Mumford ecstatically put it in his Introduction to the 1969 edition, "replace the polluted, bulldozed, machine-dominated, dehumanized, explosion-threatened world that is even now disintegrating and disappearing before our eyes."

## **Design With Nature Details**

Date : Published February 20th 1995 by Wiley (first published March 26th 1969)

ISBN : 9780471114604

Author : Ian L. McHarg

Format : Paperback 208 pages

Genre : Architecture, Cities, Urban Planning, Nonfiction, Design, Urban, Environment

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# From Reader Review Design With Nature for online ebook

## Jon says

This book combines ideas from urban planning and landscape architecture with ideas from ecology. What is to be gained? A lot of lyrical passages about the beauty of nature, which grow more and more tiresome the longer they go on. It's not that the book is without its merits. McHarg's text, after all, is considered a classic. And when he gets down to practicalities, he often has intriguing ideas to present. But every other chapter is theory rather than practicum, and reading this theory fifty years later is like reading a set of dated truisms amid a collection of late 1960s liberal diatribes.

McHarg especially has it out, it seems, for Christianity, which he often blames for the environmental ills of the planet. Christianity is anthropocentric, he denotes, and as such we don't pay attention to the earth's natural balance. (What, I might ask, would paying attention to the earth's natural balance entail other than stewardship and a belief in human-centered superiority? I don't know any cats or dogs or pigs or chickens that worry about preserving the planet's balance. If they overpopulate or do environmental damage the earth naturally takes care of it--through evolution, if you will. The distribution of the animal changes, as does the distribution of the other animals and plants it affects. So too, one might argue, with humans, if indeed we are here merely by chance and are merely one other creature among the rest of the globe's inhabitants. The idea that we need to keep nature balanced, the way it was supposed to be, is then itself an anthropocentric one, one that implies that we are somehow above the other creatures on the planet. Anyway, the constant attacks on Christianity obviously wore thin on me.)

But as I noted, the practicum chapters were of some interest. An early one discusses the ocean and the beach. Much of this is old information to me from other reading I've done--how important beach dunes are, how various attempts to keep beaches in place using groins actually damage beaches further down, and so on. But it was concrete.

Those sort of points make for interesting studies later in the book, when McHarg lays out the best ways to, for example, choose where to lay roads. Too often, he points out, we pay attention chiefly to costs--and by that, he means, the physical costs, of laying a road. Hence, highways are placed where there is less development or where development is cheap (i.e., poor communities) and where the land offers the cheapest means to lay the road (less drilling, etc.). But this often doesn't equate to what the actual cost is--that is, the actual cost needs to include the culture and social cost. When we lay down a highway through a community, we're splitting the community in half and we are likely killing off neighborhoods. And when we lay a road through pristine forestland that birds use for nesting, we may also be laying out environmental effects that will in turn affect the social and cultural ones. His solution? He takes various maps that lay out the different costs associated with each route for a road. Overlaying this maps allows us to see which route is likely the most cost effective.

In another practicum chapter, McHarg looks at different environments that are best for city building, laying out a hierarchy of preferred land on which to build, in this descending order: flat land, forest, steep slopes, aquifers, aquifer recharge areas, floodplains, marshes, and surface water. Knowing these preferences, we should thus really aim not to build on floodplains and to build on flat land. The only qualifier? Flat land is also the best land for agriculture, so we have to be attuned to those needs as well.

In an extended example, McHarg focuses on a plan for the city of Baltimore and how that city can continue to grow without giving in to sprawl, selecting the proper places to grow and the proper places to preserve and

what the density in these locations should be.

Next, McHarg turns to a theoretical discussion of how we would go about creating a proper environment for an astronaut sent to live in space. He shows how all the various systems are integrated and how difficult it is to account for everything that nature does naturally. The astronaut easily can find that he or she has not accounted for some need and throw the system out of whack. This leads into the chapter on Staten Island, which again is planned according to different values and needs, using overlaying maps that give planners the means to know where the best places for conservation are, as well as the best places for urbanization, both residential and commercial.

In the next theory-heavy section, McHarg approaches a group of thinkers he calls "Naturalists." Here he lays out the idea that we need not see evolution, the survival of the fittest, as necessarily negative. He argues that natural organisms adapt to one another, that the fittest only surviving is actually a way of advancing nature so that it is more interdependent. The lion that eats the caribou, for example, is doing the caribou a favor in terms of keeping its stock lower and also helping it to evolve to a higher state through only letting the most fit survive. Parasites depend on hosts, but hosts often adapt to depend also on the parasite. Whole ecosystems exist because of this interdependence. One of those, arguably, is our own body, which consists of a host of cells, most of them cells that have learned to specialize in particular tasks in order to make the body work together efficiently. The cells are interdependent, supporting a much greater whole, the way each living thing supports the greater whole of the earth.

Next, McHarg turns to a project on the Potomac River basin. Much as he has done in earlier chapters, he lays out the various areas as being most suitable for various resources in order to understand where it would be best to urbanize and so on. The one intriguing point he makes in this chapter is that we are too prone to zone things for one use, whereas nature does not zone: various uses can be gleaned from one area in nature, and we should do the same in the city. But other than that, the discussion of the Potomac seems like yet another practicum that repeats information that has gone before. The techniques to discover what the best places to build are well known by now, and so the extended examples grow increasingly tiresome.

Potentially, the section on Washington, D.C., could prove interesting insofar as McHarg attempts to apply his ideas to a city that is already in existence, rather than to the suburbs of a city that is expanding. But in the end, I found this section to be disappointing. His main point seems to be that we need to take into account more than finances when designing sites. In D.C., it would be important to take into account the "palette" of the particular area, make the landscape conform to the overall tone of the section of the city. Of course, this is easier said than done, since in the end it is the market that determines how we value space. His earlier points about taking into account how altering that space affects value seemed more direct to the point.

The book ends with a chapter on the health of a city, which is perhaps one of the most interesting and thought provoking. Here, he uses his mapping system to denote neighborhoods in Philadelphia with various diseases, mental diseases, and pollution, along with economic troubles, crime, race, education, unemployment, income, density, and so on. Putting all these together helps to establish a "healthy" area of the city as being in the north and west. But why is not as clear. He then goes into studies of population carried on with rats, showing how density of living has great effects on health. Though apparently able to have a denser population in their environment, the rats at some point begin to stop multiplying as fast, and disease--physical and mental--begins to become more rampant. Those rats that are dominant don't have the health problems; the rats that are submissive do. They become loners or sexually deviant or sickly. This, he thinks, is because of the stressful stimuli that exist in high densities. There seems that there might be some correlation to human populations as well, as denser areas have greater amounts of antisocial behavior and sickness. But the ideas, while intriguing, are not entirely proven or provable. But surely, one wouldn't then

say that humans need to move into suburbs and less dense areas for health reasons--or would one? Here he briefly looks at how attempts to gentrify troubled areas with such densities rarely solve the problem. The original inhabitants are usually pushed out of the area, and what social network they had to deal with their problems is thus taken apart. I found myself here wanting to read more about density and its effects.

In the end, then, McHarg notes how we can take into account various factors of our environment as we build and plan and rework cities. This is a valid point but one that seemed, in McHarg's reasoning, too bound to his anti-Christian 1960s ethos.

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## **J says**

A hell of a resource if you're ever put in charge of colonizing a new planet. McHarg alternates between case studies and philosophic chapters that veer towards pantheistic. Many of the revolutionary ideas and techniques McHarg writes about are now common practice, but it's still an interesting read for anybody with an interest in cities.

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## **Lauren says**

A critical read for architects, planners and landscape architects. I'm assuming everyone but the building architects reads this during school. It's heavy on the academic case studies and really requires very focused attention. I skimmed a lot and stuck to the lecture subjects. Written in 1969, it has a striking topical quality.

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## **Jingyan says**

Informative, alarming, practical and inspiring view on the relationship between earth and human, first printed 45 years ago. In 1990, the author was awarded the National Medal of Art by the President Bush who stated then: "I hope that in the 21st century the largest accomplishment of art will be to restore the earth."

Quote from the last paragraph in the book:

"In the quest for survival, success and fulfillment, the ecological view offers an invaluable insight. It shows the way for the man who would be the enzyme of the biosphere- its steward, enhancing the creative fit of man-environment, realizing man's design with nature."

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## **Dro Sohrabian says**

ahead it's time

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## **Lisa says**

Design with Nature was an interesting read that covered two different topics concurrently - land use analysis and a new environmental ethic. The land planning portion is brilliant and equips landscape

architects/planners with the ability to support design decisions. The switch between chapters on land planning case studies and chapters supporting a new worldview was sometimes a little forced. I would definitely recommend reading the case studies throughout the book.

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### **Dawn says**

more accurate title might be:

"mcharg philosophy of paganism and land analysis" ... no design here, just abstract musings and maps.

i did not appreciate his condemnation of judaism as nature raper, and for as caustic and accusatory as several chapters were, i would expect that mr. mcharg lived a decidedly non-western lifestyle; off-grid, net-zero, the whole bit, lest he be Hypocrite Extraordinaire. and while i understand his intense passion for the subject at hand, i found nothing of value as a contemporary reader. perhaps i was too quickly turned off by the angry finger-pointing, but i just wasn't inspired by his many analyses of floodplains and value-scaled plants. too dated to read.

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### **Briana says**

A fellow Goodreader (J) put it best: "A hell of a resource if you're ever put in charge of colonizing a new planet."

I picked up this book as an environmental engineer interested in learning more about the origins of GIS. (McHarg is said to be one of the first people to publish on the concept of "layering" visual data.) I walked away wishing I had read the book much earlier and had had the chance to meet McHarg in person.

I think I'll read his autobiography next.

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### **Ahn Mur says**

Ian McHarg's "Design with Nature" has garnered a great deal of notoriety in the fields of both landscape architecture and conservationism. Taken as a whole, the prose can be lofty and is, in certain parts, somewhat dated (having never been updated), but generally it is both detailed and philosophical: a kind of walk through the woods with Ian McHarg. It gives an excellent understanding of the foundation of environmentally-sensitive planning.

In the Introduction, Lewis Mumford introduces ecology as the effort to balance society's relationship with nature. He introduces Ian McHarg, the author of the book, as a far more than a town planner and landscape architect: as an ecologist. Design with Nature, Mumford postulates, lays the groundwork for the future and for the hope of mankind to develop a new methodology in approaching the natural world.

Design with Nature was a thoughtful meditation. There were aspects of the prose relating to its historical context that I did not agree with, particularly low density development. I would be interested to see the book interpreted with a modern lens. How modern technological resources could be used and how further developed ecological scientific understanding might influence the physiographic determinism approach

would be particularly helpful. Nevertheless, I found reading Design with Nature to be very useful and, especially, inspiring. It is a voice of bravery in a world of economic savagery.

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### **Sophie Hauser says**

Fantastic use of theoretical chapters highlighting the natural process of our world amongst practical case studies of how to improve man's relationship with our habitat.

Written in the 60s it could be seen as slightly outdated, as most of the ideologies are largely realized and methods are practiced, it is still relevant for anyone who is interested in man's relationship with nature and how we can improve it, particularly good for anyone getting into a profession related to this: landscape architecture, planning, ecology. The ideas in this book are extremely well communicated opened my eyes and making me think; needs to be promoted.

Only reason it doesn't get a five is at times it was hard to read and seemed to get stuck one point.

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### **Sarah says**

It's always so tough to enjoy a book that you're forced to read for a meager 10% of your grade in a class, this one, however, was extra difficult to enjoy. It's dated, that's the problem. Everything is "man's domain" and ideas that are commonplace in planning/architecture/urban design are presented (repeatedly) as something outrageous, which maybe they were 50 years ago. So maybe my problem isn't really with this book or it's author, but rather with the fact that we're still reading it in 2009, when there's gotta be new stuff out there that would take us beyond designing with nature, to maybe designing for nature, design by nature, nature by designers, who knows, just anything but Design with Nature! My favourite part? A reference to "the bitch goddess success". I wish I could work that into the paper I have to write on this sucker now.

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### **Phillip Fernberg says**

Hear ye, hear ye oh aspiring designers, architects, and engineers of the world! And come read the true doctrine of listening to the land!

Mcharg delivers a captivating, honest, informative, constructively critical, yet optimistic tutorial on how man can be transparent in his design treatment of both Mother Nature and the races that inhabit her. I highly recommend for anyone interested in environmental topics or the urban design discipline.

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### **Karen R says**

Overall, I enjoyed reading this book because it covered a variety of issues, tied them together and presented them in a manner that made them understandable to me, since I do not possess an extensive amount of knowledge on environmental issues. In certain chapters, it did cover some areas that I had not had any previous background in. This expanded my knowledge of environmental problems and increased my interest in new issues. For example, the book starts with a chapter titled "Sea and Survival" in which it describes how

sand dunes are formed and the role they play in nature. McHarg articulates why they are important and goes on to explain why they are vulnerable and need to be sustained by humans. The author kept my attention through his strong reasoning and I feel that the many pictures, graphs, maps, and sketches he used aided in my understanding of his arguments.

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### **Greg Balzer says**

The classic book on how to design in harmony with the natural environment. This book was green at least two decades before it was cool to be green - LEED, etc. It is really too bad that so many of the concepts expressed in this book have not been able to be implemented in the numerous new towns and planned communities developed since this book was published. A number of those communities pay lip service to conforming to site features such as topography, streams, rivers, solar exposure, views, wind patterns, etc., but economics, financial constraints, and other realities of the modern world have prevented full implementation.

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### **Karena says**

Excellent book for anyone interested in or studying architecture, planning, environmental design, or even sociology, geography or cartography. There is a study of social diseases in Philadelphia that are mapped toward the back of the book that correlate the rate of disease with increase in population density. This book makes you think.

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