Integral plaudits

by Peter Buchanan

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Integral Sustainable Design, by Mark Dokay, Earthscan, 2011

Integral theory has developed over some decades, initially the product primarily of philosopher and prolific author Ken Wilber working alone. But he draws upon and brings into useful relationship a mass of earlier philosophy and theory from several fields and thinkers, together with empirical evidence from an equally broad range of disciplines, along with the sacred traditions of west and east. There are now a number of parallel figures, particularly in psychology, whose work confirms, expands and draws upon in differing degrees the work of Wilber and so are recognised as Integral thinkers. Integral theory is also being applied to various fields. Of particular interest to architects would be Integral City by Marilyn Hamilton (New Society Publishers, 2008) and Integral Ecology by Sean Esbjorn-Hargens and Michael E Zimmerman (Integral Books, 2009).

The Integral approach is especially well-suited to application in architecture, which is also concerned with drawing upon a very wide range of disciplines and with subjective experiences and meanings as much as objective physical reality. So it is surprising that it has had such limited impact so far on architecture. I have drawn upon it for more than a decade and a half - explicitly in lectures, implicitly in writings while working on and off on a book applying it to architecture and urbanism. Now the big and wide-ranging book under review has appeared applying the Integral approach specifically to sustainable architectural design. Yet it is a tribute to the richness of Integral theory that my book will be quite different to this one, although I have learnt a lot from it that will inevitably, once properly digested, influence my approach. Nor will The Big Rethink essays, that from this month onwards will draw on Integral theory, among other things, overlap with this book.

Although there are now many good books on sustainable design, the focus is primarily on objective, technical and ecological issues described as the right quadrants in the essay in this issue (page 57). This book provides the vastly expanded context and disciplined intellectual framework for sustainable design that it has lacked to date, not only drawing attention to neglected fields but introducing multi-levelled ways of thinking about them. (It is, in Integral jargon, not only a four quadrant approach but also an all levels one a subject barely touched on in the essay in this issue.) For instance, among many other things, I found the discussion of the many levels of aesthetic
appreciation extremely illuminating. The book thus shows that, no matter how important are current approaches to sustainable design, and despite our ever increasing expertise in them, they are also much too narrow and shallow.

The author is active as an architect besides being a professor and director of graduate studies at the College of Architecture at the University of Tennessee. It seems to be mostly away from the big metropolitan centres that Integral theory is being applied to architecture, perhaps because there is more freedom to develop new modes of thought when more remote from the grip of postmodern theorising. DeKay draws not only on Wilber, but heavily also on Integral Ecology (another marvellously rich book and, because of its design and production, somewhat more approachable than this one). And he draws widely on non-Integral thinkers, including Fritj of Capra, using the latter's list of ecosystem principles as the basis of six perceptual shifts he sees as part of the underpinnings of Integral sustainable design. But probably most useful of all is DeKay's application of levels of thinking to his discussion of the quadrants and other matters.

The hook is much too rich in content to even begin to summarise, but fete Integral approach presents this in a usefully disciplined format, although the result is somewhat overwhelming and not as approachable and attractive as it should be. It has the potential to be a definitive text book and design primer, and is very nearly there. But it is difficult not to get the impression that many publishers do not recognise a book of such potential even when they have it on their list. A paperback, the book is not well enough produced and too expensive, perhaps because of the copious colour illustrations. And it is simply not robust enough for a book that, once discovered, is bound to be intensively used. The book deserves to be reformatted, with a more robust cover (a heavily laminated soft cover would be better), the text carefully polished somewhat, and the layout redesigned or at least line-tuned, and confidently re-launched and widely distributed at a realistic price that will ensure large, long-term sales as architects and students realise that they need a personal copy for frequent consultation.

Despite these cavils, this is a book that should be welcomed and widely read and used. If any architectural school is seriously concerned with preparing its students for the long-term future a very big if, I know then this book will play a central role both to guide and ensure the comprehensiveness of the curriculum and as a fundamental resource to be read by all students. It will be equally useful to all practitioners prepared to embrace a much expanded way of thinking about sustainability.

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