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Point of View

Integral Sustainable Design

By Lisa Norton

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Integral Sustainable Design, [amazon.com] reconciles divergent knowledge arenas and priorities while establishing integral sustainable design as a unique practice, ideal for this time of environmental and communitarian crisis. It's author, Mark DeKay, prods the profession and asks, **what design challenges lie beyond whole systems design? And how can we shift our focus from 'doing' design to 'being' design?** DeKay, a professor of architecture and director of Graduate Studies, College of Architecture and Design at the University of Tennessee, has crafted an accessible introduction to the fascinating emerging field of integral studies as applied to the practice of architecture.

What is Integral Theory and why might it be useful to designers? Integral Theory is a powerful critical

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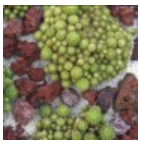
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approach, actually considered a meta-theory due to its breadth, its applicability to interdisciplinary studies, its integration of the truth claims of the arts, sciences, and humanities as well as its integration of the perennial philosophy across Eastern and Western, sacred and secular views. Ken Wilber, the American writer, scholar and framer of Integral Theory, first began writing in the early 1970's in his area of specialization, developmental psychology, and its intersections with spirituality and the spectrum of consciousness described throughout history. Wilber has published over 25 books. His influential ideas have found application across a range of disciplines, spawning the young but expanding global interdisciplinary movement in scholarly and practical applications of his ideas now referred to as integral studies, inclusive of but not limited to the research and writings of Wilber himself.

Wilber's Integral AQAL (all-quadrant, all-level) framework is a profound tool for understanding any circumstance, relationship or event. The AQAL framework describes all experience in terms of four orientations or perspectives (quadrants) that simultaneously arise; subjective as well as objective, individual as well as collective. Integral Theory teaches that all perspectives are valid, yet partial. Thus, experiences can be fully understood only through comprehensive all-quadrant, all level analyses that honor the partial truths of each perspective. Another way of describing the value of the integral AQAL is to say that it validates the unique perspectives of the Arts, the Sciences, and the Humanities without conflating them. Thus integral analysis of any topic or project, be it climate change or local food networks, benefits from this leading edge integration of The Good (the humanities), The True (the sciences), and The Beautiful (the arts). What about the all-level part? Integral Theory understands all phenomena as holons;[i] parts that are simultaneously wholes, compromising holarchies, nested orders of increasing depth and complexity. Growth, according to integral developmental theory, proceeds in levels and along multiple waves or lines related to given sets of capacities or traits. Each level transcends and includes its predecessor while each line develops independently and according to its own logics and timeline.

Why might this theory be useful for designers? Applying this simplified snapshot of integral developmental theory to the context of architectural design history, we might say that every epoch has its architectural dignities as well as its architectural disasters[ii], evolving and in turn transcending what proves un-resourceful, while incorporating what is valuable. DeKay's book skillfully details precisely such developments and anticipates future possibilities for designers of habitus. His skillful choice of a range of contemporary and historical examples, drawn from every continent, elucidates what an integral approach to designing for sustainability might look like. He duly criticizes normative sustainable architectural pedagogy for its nearly exclusive emphasis on the empirical world of objects and systems. In an integral studies view, this mainstream ecological architectural approach is considered partial because it deals only with the manifest physical world and thus is skewed toward what can be located, measured, and quantified (reduced, reused, and recycled). In the integral view, our object-oriented, status quo design methods are partial because they omit the interior dimensions of subjective individual and collective experiences. For example, individual interpretive dimensions of experience, if they are accounted for at all, tend not to be integrated with robust analytical data and building performance metrics. Seen in larger perspective, such partial approaches are shortcomings by no means unique to the design professions; they typify a common bias toward exteriorities and surfaces that can simply be described as characteristic of Modernity.

I cautiously use the word breakthrough to describe *Integral Sustainable Design* because I believe that until this book, no author had connected the dots from the still-emergent field of integral theory to design in such a way as to give clear instructions for its application, particularly to sustainable architectural practice. *Integral Sustainable Design* is a vivid map with examples, that offers possible reasons for why existing approaches to sustainable architecture do not reliably deliver the catalytic outcomes that one would expect given the overall promise of and excitement around whole systems design for architecture and urban studies. In fact, this book can be seen as a kind of explanation for the failure of sustainable design in general to really take root, thrive, and achieve that widely anticipated and catalytic social tipping point.

Integral Sustainable Design points toward practical ways to apply integral theory to the daunting challenges germane to the realm of sustainable design and architecture. DeKay situates typical problem spaces faced by designers and architects within an accessible, carefully staged introduction to the rather complex AQAL (all-quadrant, all-level) framework that is core to Integral Theory. Noting that designers are actually skilled at pattern recognition and development, he applies the four perspective AQAL framework to sustainable architecture and identifies the perspectives of each of the four quadrants as follows, "Shape form to Maximize Performance" (the objective behaviors perspective); "Shape Form to Guide Flow" (the objective systems perspective); "Shape Form to Manifest Meaning" (the subjective, cultural perspective); and "Shape Form to Engender Experience" (the subjective and sensory perspective). As the reader is drawn, via stunning color plates and evocative language, into the thoughtful critical analysis of historical and contemporary approaches to architecture and habitus, she simultaneously inhabits the clear space afforded by integral analysis. In part II, Levels of Complexity in Sustainable Design, we are introduced to a subtlety that will engage any designer wishing to take human-centered and/or biomimicry driven design thinking methodologies to the next level of challenge. Integral perspective-taking, here applied to architectural history via examples that DeKay calls Unfolding Prospects of the Interior and Exterior Perspectives, provides a compelling demonstration of the value of a design awareness grounded in all quadrants of the AQAL and valuing the contributions and insights of all prospects of developmental orientation.

I appreciate the staging of the major sections as the author first offers an orientation to the AQAL quadrants, and then adds further discernment in describing the views from each developmental level within each quadrant. Later, in Part III, Ecological Design Thinking: Six Perceptual Shifts and Part

IV, Designing Relationships to Nature, the author wisely simplifies the integral lines and levels of development as Traditional, Modern, Postmodern, Integral and Transpersonal for clarity, and then performs a sensitive analysis of relationships to Nature at each of these levels throughout history. Along the way, he transcends yet includes the wisdom of such giants of whole systems design and architecture as Frank Lloyd Wright, Fritjof Capra, Sim Van der Ryn, and Christopher Alexander, balancing these representative cases with plenty of examples drawn from non-Euro-western sources and from outside the canon of architecture.

Ken Wilber is famously quoted as saying that the culture gap and the environmental crisis are one in the same. "Because the startling fact is that ecological wisdom does not consist in understanding how to live in accord with nature; it consists in understanding how to get humans to agree on how to live in accord with nature."[iii] In a low-key yet authoritative manner, DeKay demonstrates that designing integrally is an inside job; it begins with one's own consciousness. He challenges the architecture profession and the schools that feed it to create a culture of transformation. "What we designers need is....a Designer's Integral Yoga," he writes and sets out body, mind, spirit practices for cultivation of the being of the designer. These practical injunctions take their cues from sources such as *Integral Life Practice* (Shambhala, 2008), [amazon.com] a whole-person practicum for embodiment filled with tangible pointers for any designer wishing to engage, to align, and to integrate their whole being and who aspire to lead the next generation of sustainable practice. In Part IV, Metaphors and Injunctions for Deep Connections, and what follows, DeKay gives poetic concluding remarks and inspirational next steps toward a general integral theory of design.

Integral analysis is a powerful lens for human-centered designers and architects. In addition to this core audience, this book will also appeal to planners, landscape architects, and interior designers. Integral studies, although initially seemingly complex, is actually an elegant and very practical tool for any designer wishing to arrive at distillations on the other side of complex Wicked Problems.

As professionals in the worlds of design and architecture, we stand at the leverage point with respect to consumer society. We have the responsibility to express innovative and actionable sustainable lifestyles and behaviors that speak to the spectrum of worldviews. Integral Theory can serve as a powerful complement to existing design methodologies. Challenging the profession as well as to the individual designer to walk the talk, Mark DeKay's vision of an integral design practice constitutes an entirely new way of performing the role of designer with our whole being. *Integral Sustainable Design* models the user-empathic and designer-embodied capacities demanded of a new type of integral designer, while it underscores the awesome responsibility that each designer holds.

Interested Readers may also enjoy *Integral City* by Marilyn Hamilton (New Society Publishers, 2008) [amazon.com] a thoughtful and disciplined application of the principles of nested holarchies gleaned from Integral Theory to design, community and urban planning challenges on the scale of cities and regions and going beyond whole systems theories to engage collective human interiorities and values, and *Integral Ecology*, by Sean Esbjorn-Hargens and Michael E. Zimmerman (Shambhala Publications, 2009) [amazon.com] a singular work in interdisciplinary ecological studies.

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[i] Koestler, A., (1967, 1990) *The Ghost in the Machine*, New York: Penguin.

[ii] Esbjorn-Hargens, S., and Zimmerman, M., (2009) *Integral Ecology: uniting multiple perspectives on the natural world*, Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., p. 295

[iii] Wilber, K., (2000). *A Brief History of Everything*, Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., Second Edition, p 268

Dekay, M. (2011). Integral Sustainable Design: transformative perspectives, Oxford, United Kingdom: Earthscan, Taylor & Francis Group Ltd.

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Tags: A Brief History of Everything, all-quadrant all-level, AQAL, architectural design history, Book Review, Christopher Alexander, College of Architecture and Design, Design Advocacy, Design Denied: The Witholding of Good Design and Its Ethical Implications, Design for Exchange, Esbjorn-Hargens, Frank Lloyd Wright, Fritjof Capra, Integral City, Integral Ecology, Integral Life Practice, Integral Sustainable Design, Integral Theory, Ken Wilber, Koestler, Lisa Norton, Marilyn Hamilton, Mark DeKay, meta-theory, Michael E. Zimmerman, New Society Publishers, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Sean Esbjorn-Hargens, Shambhala Publications, Sim Van der Ryn, sustainability, sustainable design, The Ghost in the Machine, University of Tennessee, Wilber, Zimmerman

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