Integral Sustainable Design: Transformative Perspectives, by Mark Dekay: Book Review

Book Review by Aran Baker

Integral Sustainable Design: Transformative Perspectives, by Mark DeKay applies the lens of Integral Theory to sustainable design, shaking up current definitions and inviting us to re-imagine the power of design in affecting global change. Until now, sustainable design has focused mainly on technological innovations and systems thinking—green building materials, energy efficiency, and performance—and has left out the realm of culture and human experience. DeKay gives us the tools to move beyond the current thinking and embrace a much needed multidisciplinary and human-scale approach.

Throughout the book, he references the work of Sim Van der Ryn, Fritjof Capra, Christopher Alexander, and others. In formulating an integral approach to design, DeKay breaks new ground, arguing we cannot continue to leave out the important discussion of culture and how people experience these new green buildings. In short, Integral Theory, posited by Ken Wilber, is a comprehensive framework for understanding multiple, competing theories and ideas. An integrally informed approach to any discipline invites us to simultaneously understand different perspectives and solutions, weaving together pre-modern, modern, and post-modern thinking. Wilber adds a future, “integral” age to the widely used classifications of traditional, modern, postmodern, etc. DeKay beautifully reinforces the potential for an integral level of design to transcend deconstruction and move into reconstruction.

DeKay is chair of the graduate program in Architecture at the College of Architecture and Design at the University of Tennessee, in Knoxville, and has spent the past twenty-five years researching solutions to energy-efficiency and ecological approaches to architectural and urban design. He also coauthored a book called Sun Wind & Light: Architectural Design Strategies with G.Z. Brown. Over the years he noticed his students seemed more motivated by aesthetics and experience than technological aspects, while another group of designers seemed much more interested in design-as-storytelling, rather than how it looks or functions. He began to reflect on his own work, realizing he needed a way to address these varied perspectives, and discovered he could apply principles of Integral Theory to design. A registered architect and honorary fellow of the Institute of Green Professionals, his future goals include working to develop an integral design school paradigm. This book will be of interest to anyone involved in the theory and practice of sustainability, architecture/design, planning, and Integral Theory.

Holistic Sustainable Design

Performance is the criterion for success in much of sustainable design today. The field has been dominated by empirically-based perspectives, and limited, like many areas of our society, by dualistic thinking; we tend to think of art versus science, design vs. technology, etc. As DeKay points out, we have no collective framework for navigating and moving past this fragmentation in the theory and practice of sustainable design. This book offers a hopeful beginning. Integral Sustainable Design offers exciting possibilities for a more holistic approach, placing technological sustainable design into its larger context of ecological sustainability, experiential sustainability and cultural sustainability.

The book begins with an introduction to Integral Theory, and is further divided into four parts. Part one introduces the Four Perspectives (or quadrants) of integral sustainable design: Behaviors, Systems, Cultures, and Experiences. So far sustainable design has concentrated heavily on “objective” Behaviors and Systems, leaving out the “subjective” dimensions of Experience and Culture. In the chapter on the Cultures Perspective, DeKay asks questions such as, how can design better fit its cultural context? How can design convey symbolic meaning and embody cultural values? The final quadrant, the Experiences Perspective, investigates the often-overlooked areas of emotional response to building and aesthetics. In this chapter, he asks, how do important ecological relationships and patterns translate into felt experiences?

Part two situates sustainable design within the context of human developmental levels: traditional, modern, post-modern, and integral. DeKay also looks at the history of design and examines how each perspective unfolds in waves of increasing complexity through a spiral, transcending and including its predecessor. Part three explores new ways of perceiving and thinking ecologically which emerge at
the integral level. In this section, he provides tools to help us shift our perception into ecological thinking. He asks questions such as, can designers expand their awareness fast enough to solve the imminent ecological crisis? And most notably, can design itself become an integral method for embedding ecological consciousness into our built environment?

In Part four, DeKay asks how buildings can best connect people to nature. He offers ten methods (which he calls injunctions) and a set of strategies for each. For example, he asks, can buildings be embedded in nature yet distinctly human? He points to Condominium One at Sea Ranch in California as a successful example.

Overall, I enjoyed this ambitious book and recommend it for many reasons, but I do have a few criticisms. In the conclusion, DeKay includes an excerpt from an essay he wrote while visiting Gandhi’s home in India. This excerpt is a welcome poetic pause, from which the book (at times, quite dense with information, charts, etc.) could have benefited more. He also admits it focuses only on two main aspects of Integral Theory, perspectives (quadrants) and levels (of developmental structure). He sees this book as a beginning, a simple framework and he invites us to expand up on it.

DeKay concludes with a passionate call to action as he invites us to light the fire of life through our designs. At this point in time, we desperately need a more human-centered approach to sustainable design. While essentially holistic, Integral Theory offers a powerful, analytical tool for design educators and practitioners to articulate current challenges and transform the scope of sustainable design for the future. DeKay argues convincingly that through weaving the technological with the cultural, the scientific with the aesthetic, design has the power to actually regenerate life and help transform society.

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