

Review: Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature

By Steven Vogel

Reviewed by Byron Anderson

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Vogel, Steven. *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015. 283 pp. ISBN: 9780262029100 US \$29.00 cloth; ISBN: 9780262326971 US \$21.00 eBook.

Thinking like a Mall explores what an environmental philosophy might look like beyond the end of nature. Vogel, a Professor of Philosophy at Dennison University, while respecting a number of end of nature authors, such as Bill McKibben and Eric Katz, believes that “nothing in nature is separate from human society” (p. 12). “Nature” has two different meanings: either humans are part of nature or nature is independent from humans. Yet, if nature is independent from humans, then humans cannot be natural; if humans are part of nature, then the built environment would be part of nature. In some sense or other, our hand is in everything produced in the environment. Vogel asks if it is not time to think about an environmentalism of the built environment.

The book focuses on the City Center Mall in Columbus, Ohio which was built in 1989 and demolished beginning in 2009. No one planned for this abrupt end, but rather it fell to the vagaries of the market. This mall is representative of today’s environmental degradation, and illustrates our lack of moral regard for our artifacts. These products are discarded when they are of no more use and this has resulted in an ugly and damaged ecology.

The lesson here is to realize that the “...products of our practices are always beyond our power to understand and to control...” (p. 232). Vogel infuses Marx’s idea of the worker’s alienation from one’s work and the products produced. As things now stand, control is in the hands of market forces. The City Center Mall’s demise was not in the hands of the construction workers or the community, but rather decided by economic decline and an inability to compete. We need to take responsibility for the environment, artifacts and all. Because the artifacts we produce, like City Center, cannot speak for themselves, we need to, in this case, think like a mall and recognize that it too is part of the environment. We have to change our practices and “find new ways of building that will make it a good environment...” (p. 165).

Environmental questions are political questions, and they require communal solutions and discursive democracy. This would mean that “...the right environment for a community is simply the environment that the community would choose in a democratic discourse...” (p. 233). It would be our responsibility to make it well and lasting.

Thinking like a Mall is a worthy addition to the development of environmental philosophy beyond the end of nature. Other recent books on this topic include, for example, *Humans in Nature: the World as We Find It and the World as We Create It* (2014), which suggests, among other ideas, having intrinsic moral values in public policy. The book is recommended for libraries with specialized collections in the areas of philosophy of environmental sciences or the philosophy of nature. The text is enhanced with three figures, notes, bibliography, and index.

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