

BOOK REVIEW

Design for Ecological Democracy

by Randolph T. Hester The MIT Press, 2006, 509 pages

Reviewed by Anne J. Martin

Design for Ecological Democracy is indispensable as both field guide and handbook for creating ecological democracy through the design of the buildings, cities, and landscapes of the future. As a field guide, Hester enables the reader to recognize the social and ecological beauty of places when it is encountered with his rich hand-drawn illustrations and watercolor paintings. As a handbook, Hester gives the reader the intellectual tools to apply these ideas in one's own work in planning and design with his thoughtful analysis and clear design principles.

Hester shows that designs that are most cherished fulfill a multiplicity of social and ecological roles, and critically, they impel greater participation in an "ecological democracy." Hester defines this as direct, hands-on participatory democratic governance, informed by the complexity of particular environmental and social contexts of place. The book is organized around three types of city form that Hester deems key to the pursuit of ecological democracy: enabling form, resilient form, and impelling form. Enabling form encourages social interaction and participation in collective life, and reinforces social connectedness. Resilient form incorporates natural processes and ecological context, so that cities can recover and adapt when faced with natural disaster, economic crisis, or other shocks. Impelling form utilizes beauty and delight to inspire participation in the interconnected web of social and ecological life. These three types of city form are each illustrated by five design principles, around which examples are organized. Examples are drawn from Hester's own work, historical precedent, scientists, visionary contemporary planners and designers, as well as from artists and community groups. The book is carefully organized, but Hester insists that these design principles must not be interpreted as isolated categories, but instead understood as a constellation of interconnected ideas that work best when considered in concert.

Hester points out that often it is easier to identify what we do not want in terms of buildings and cities, and this book opens space for envisioning positive futures. Throughout the book, Hester is optimistic but decidedly not naive. While there may be very real difficulties involved in the realization of these principles, Hester bolsters hope through telling

stories about the realization of visionary designs where hardships were overcome, and through illustrating analytical tools used to tackle these barriers. Hester's examples throughout the book reinforce the importance of the involvement of local communities in design and city-making, illustrating the ways in which people can work with designers and planners to shape designs in subtle and radical ways.

The framework for the book was initiated in Hester's 1995 article "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Sustainable Happiness," where the three types of form and rough design principles were introduced. *Design for Ecological Democracy* builds upon this earlier framework, refining the design principles and building upon the formerly brief practice stories with multiple robust examples defining each principle. The book also successfully shifts away from a more generic concept of sustainability as a goal, and shifts towards the production of ecological democracy: a multifaceted, culturally embedded understanding of the relationship between the environment and cities, with implications for governance.

One way this book is remarkable is that it is written in language that is accessible enough to inspire new students to join the fields of city-making and design, while presenting complex concepts and challenging ideas that reward readers who are expert in these fields. *Design for Ecological Democracy* introduces a theory of design grounded in empirical study, a theory that is able to inspire practice at all levels of experience, and a theory that can be applied at different scales, from the backyard to the region.

Hester reminds readers that designs for the future must be at once ambitious, creating enabling, resilient, and impelling form, and humbly compatible with everyday life, carrying forward social traditions and respect for natural processes into the future. As planners and designers, we have the opportunity to shape our future cities, and Hester inspires us to make not only beautiful places, but ones that impel people towards an ecological democracy.

References

Hester, Randolph T. 1995. Life, liberty and the pursuit of sustainable happiness. *Places* 9: 4-17.

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