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The Coming Ecologic Epoch: Sim Van der Ryn at EDRA

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Throughout his long career as an architect, teacher, writer and public figure, Sim Van der Ryn has challenged accepted approaches to design and argued for fundamental change in ways of thinking. In the 1960s and 70s, as a young architect and professor, he helped pioneer the application of physical and social ecology to building and environmental design. When ecological design was subsequently dismissed by many as naïve during the 1980s and 90s, he remained a staunch advocate. Now that the Green Building movement has brought concern for sustainability back to the mainstream, his passions seem to have been vindicated.

But in a keynote talk May 31 at the annual conference of the Environmental Design Research Association, held in Sacramento, California, Van der Ryn sought to dispel notions that current concern for better technologies will solve such deeply rooted problems as global warming.

“Climate change is the ultimate design challenge,” he said. “You can give everybody a Prius, and you can put solar collectors on everybody’s roofs, but that ain’t going to get us anywhere.”

The reason is that there is no such “thing” as sustainability. What is needed is a change of worldview: in the words of the theologian and ecologist Tom Berry, “We are ready for a new story.”

Even the title of Van der Ryn’s presentation sought to gently displace sustainability as an attribute of unquestionable virtue. Instead, we should be interested in “surpassability,” he argued.

“In the next generation or two we will have to redesign most of what we have taken for granted...all the things that we thought we were getting for free.” Yet, even today, most green buildings are designed

and produced according to an upside-down logic that puts numbers ahead of human experience.

“The challenge is not so much thinking outside the box, as throwing the box away,” he said. Or, quoting Albert Einstein: “the same thinking that produced the problem can never solve it.”

Bridging Generations

When the decision was made to hold the thirty-eighth annual EDRA conference on the theme “Building Sustainable Communities,” the conference chair, Janice Bissell, realized Van der Ryn would be the perfect keynote speaker. Bissell, of Stafford King Wiese Architects of Sacramento, even made a special trip to Van der Ryn’s home in Inverness, north of San Francisco, to recruit him.

At seventy-one, Van der Ryn is perhaps best known for championing energy-efficient design as California State Architect in the mid-1970s. But through his teaching and collaborative work he has also inspired several generations of younger architects to pursue ecological design. And he has been a long-time member of EDRA—ever since his desire to study building performance more scientifically helped pioneer the field of postoccupancy evaluation in the 1960s.

Today he is president of Van der Ryn Architects in Sausalito and its nonprofit partner, the Ecological Design Institute. Both seek to create environments, from the community to the building-specific scale, that are sensitive to place and climate, responsive to human needs, and supportive of ecological systems and quality of life.

Many of Van der Ryn’s comments at the EDRA meeting were drawn from the concluding chapter of his 2005 book *Design for Life*.¹ The book provides a first-person account of his life and work, beginning with his

boyhood in Queens, New York, where his Dutch-Jewish parents immigrated to escape Nazism. Early chapters describe his architectural education at the University of Michigan, his first attempts to find a place in a field dominated at the time by cold modern formalism, and his move to San Francisco in 1958 in search of adventure and a more inspiring natural setting.

At the age of twenty-six, a job with the firm of Bob Marquis and Claude Stoller helped open the door to a teaching career at the University of California, Berkeley. There, taking a cue from his hero, Buckminster Fuller, his classes in Descriptive Geometry soon departed from exercises in Euclidean construction to embrace hands-on explorations of organic form. Meanwhile, his research challenged the notion that aesthetic acclaim for a building necessarily corresponded with a positive experience among those who lived or worked in it.

As a UC professor, Van der Ryn also became involved in the eventually violent struggle over the collaborative design and construction of People’s Park, on a piece of land cleared for redevelopment by the university. And as his voice grew as an advocate for alternative forms of architectural production, he became instrumental in founding the Farallones Institute, a research center that supported experiments in “integrated ecological living” in both urban and rural settings.

In the mid-1970s, Van der Ryn came to the attention of California’s new governor, Jerry Brown. Brown was looking for outsiders to reshape state agencies, and he named Van der Ryn State Architect in 1975.

In Sacramento, Van der Ryn’s goals included integrating ecological principles into the design of state office buildings and creating an Office of Appropriate Technology. But

he resigned the position in 1978 to return to teaching. And with the election of Ronald Reagan as President in 1980 and the return of Republican governors to Sacramento in the 1980s he saw many of his initiatives fall abruptly out of favor.

“Despondent,” he told the EDRA audience, and taking the change in social direction personally, he became increasingly interested in philosophy, particularly the works of writers in the Perennial School. Among them, the German historian Jean Gebser has described a progression of non-biological mutations within human evolution, which has produced huge shifts in thinking, allowing societies to move from an archaic, to a magic, to a mythic, to a present mental epoch.²

At the beginning of history, there was no separation between humans and nature, Van der Ryn explained. But we now live in an age when we have completed “the mechanical disassembly of the organic.”

Unfortunately, our very success has created a world that is both unsustainable and unstaining. It is unsustainable because if every living person were to require the same ecological footprint as the typical American, three-and-one-half planet Earths would be needed to support them. It is unstaining because our mechanistic worldview cannot accommodate true human aspirations, which are based on integration with, rather than separation from, the natural realm.

What is needed—and what may result from a new “great leap forward”—is a shift in consciousness allowing a U-turn in population growth and levels of personal consumption. According to Van der Ryn, the arrival of such an “ecologic” epoch will allow a reassembly of ties with nature and the development of systems of design that mimic natural

processes instead of seeking only to dominate them.

As he wrote in *Design for Life*, “this involves a deeper process where geometry at all scales of the built environment integrates with the scale and processes of the living world.”

The impetus for such a revolution in consciousness will need to come from the grass roots, however. None of our present institutions is ready to meet its challenges.

The Future We Can Create Now

As an organization, EDRA’s aim is to disseminate research that improves understanding of the relationship between people and their surroundings and that helps create environments responsive to human needs. A concern for sustainability has long been part of this agenda. However, the program materials for the Sacramento conference acknowledged that the concept has long been difficult to pin down. They explained that early definitions emphasized simple physical metrics such as improving air and water quality, reducing energy consumption, restoring and conserving natural resources, and reducing landfill

mass. Increasingly, however, “sustainability is being viewed as a concept that is multi-faceted, encompassing social, political, economic, cultural and spiritual as well as ecological dimensions.”

Van der Ryn’s comments went to the heart of this distinction. In the end, he argued, the potential of the movement for sustainability is less interdisciplinary than metadisciplinary; what is needed lies less in method or number than “in the power to challenge views about how we think we are.”

“We will not perish from a lack of information,” he said, “but a lack of ability to wonder.”

Notes

1. Sim Van der Ryn, *Design for Life: The Architecture of Sim Van der Ryn* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2005).
2. Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, trans. by Noel Barstad and Algis Mickunas (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1984). Other influential works mentioned by Van der Ryn in *Design for Life* are Arthur Oncken Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*; Arthur M. Young, *The Geometry of Meaning*; and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*.

Above: Global environmental crises may offer the chance for new ways of thinking about self, technology and culture. Drawing by Sim Van der Ryn.

