

Revolution or Co-Evolution?: Radical Ecology and Social Design in Berkeley, Circa 1970

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In Berkeley, California in the late 1960s, a number of prominent architects saw it as their responsibility, not so much to serve existing social needs as to collaborate with social forces that were in the process of an entirely new world, both physically and institutionally. These architects took their cues from ecology, systems theory, and counterculture communes, theorizing a dynamic unfolding of co-evolving social subjects, within which architectural design might join together with a radical politics of egalitarian interdependence. This paper especially focuses on the research and writing of Sim van Der Ryn between 1967 and 1971, tracing his transformation from an architect primarily concerned improving the social functions of architecture to an architect most closely identified with ecology and ecological systems. These two phases of his career, I would argue, are not as separate or disjunctive as they might first appear. Rather they are the flip sides of an ecological utopianism that emerged in the work of a number of architects around 1970, but whose original problems and meanings have been obscured in subsequent decades.

In Berkeley, California in the late 1960s, a number of prominent architects saw it as their responsibility, not so much to serve existing social needs as to collaborate with social forces that were in the process of creating an entirely new world, both physically and institutionally. Unlike the earlier generation of the modernist avant-garde, who had dreamed of a streamlined, mechanized society, calling into being some universalized “modern man,” these architects instead took their cues from ecology, systems theory, and counterculture communes, theorizing a dynamic unfolding of co-evolving social subjects, within which architectural design might join together with a radical politics of egalitarian interdependence. This paper focuses on the research and writing of Sim van Der Ryn between 1967 and 1971, tracing his transformation from an architect primarily concerned with improving the social functions of architecture to an architect most closely identified with ecology and ecological systems. These two phases of his career, I would argue, are not as separate or disjunctive as they might first appear. Rather they represent flip sides of an ecological utopianism that emerged in the work of a number of architects around 1970, but whose original problems

and meanings have been obscured in subsequent decades. At the same time, many of the same concerns are being echoed by contemporary architects and community activists albeit in a somewhat different form.

Van der Ryn is selected here not because his career was typical of Berkeley architecture faculty working between 1967 and 1971 – in some ways it was quite eccentric – but rather because his work combined social activism, ecology, and institutional critique in ways that illuminate the conundrums, both politically and methodologically, that pervaded architectural education, not just in California, but also more widely across the industrialized West in this period. This paper investigates three phases in the development of Van der Ryn’s architectural career, from his early commitment to objective research, in the tradition of liberal progressivism, to his later countercultural utopianism. Up until 1967, Van der Ryn’s research was still predicated on the application of positivist social science in the service of improved architectural functions. After 1967, this procedure of scientific reasoning, and even identifying the proper social functions of architecture, seemed increasingly problematic. For Van der Ryn, the lines between scientific research and radical activism began quickly to blur as his writing turned towards institutional critiques of the established social order. Finally, as prelude and accompaniment to his later career as an ecological designer, Van der Ryn attempted to build an alternative architectural practice that, following the models of the counterculture communes, would consist of an informal knowledge network of experimental builder-inhabitants. Giving up on both technocratic systems of modernist architecture and the traditional politics of reform, this practice envisioned a grassroots architecture of perpetual social change.

RESEARCH IN THE SERVICE OF SOCIAL PROGRESS

When Van der Ryn arrived as a new faculty member in 1961, UC Berkeley’s College of Environmental Design had become a center for social and technological research in the service of a progressive politics. Such research followed the established modernist dictum that social equality and a generally improved quality of life could be accomplished through universal access to good design. The detailed studies of social behavior; the prototyping of architectural systems and materials for mass-production; the

War, as part of a national struggle over issues of peace and justice, thus equally turned their focus inward toward the role of the University in perpetuating conditions that they were determined to overturn. In this context, the institutional architecture and campus planning of the University itself came to be seen as a symptom of oppressive systems more generally. Perhaps more than most architecture faculty at UC Berkeley, Sim Van der Ryn straddled the awkward position between the University administration and the various student and community activists who were becoming increasingly critical of that administration. In 1967, Van der Ryn was appointed chair of the Chancellor's Committee on Housing and Environment which he attempted, mostly without success to use as a platform for enacting institutional reform from within the University.



Figure 2. Warnecke and Warnecke, Student Residence Halls, UC Berkeley, 1956 (image in public domain).

1967 was also the year in which Van der Ryn published his post-occupancy study, entitled “Dorms at Berkeley” which he had begun in response to student complaints about dormitory life during the Free Speech Movement. The objects of analysis were a series of high-rise dormitories by the firm of Warnecke and Warnecke the result of a 1956 competition. The basic template of the design had then been repeated on later sites from the late 1950s through the early 1960s. (figure 2.) Radically separated from the surrounding South Campus neighborhood, the clusters of nine-story slabs, stood isolated from the streets on sparsely landscaped parcels. In addition to the specific architectural dysfunctions cited by the report, there was a more general sense that standardized construction spaces and details amounted to a spatial equivalent of the detested IBM punch cards. Thus, “Dorms at Berkeley” took on a polemical tone against the social regimentation suggested by the dormitory architecture, even quoting Free Speech Movement activist Michael Rossman on the needs of students to shape and personalize their own environments. Condemning what it called the “institutionalism” of the architecture, the report concluded: “A humanist view in architecture holds that individuals are responsible for their own development; they must define and meet needs for themselves,

and so must influence the forms by which they live.”⁹ Students, in other words, were not standardized users to be housed or passive residents to be molded into functional diagrams, but rather active subjects of their own self-creation.

In a public lecture entitled, “Architecture, Institutions, and Social Change,” which he delivered at the University of Oregon in December 1968, Van der Ryn generalized his criticism of institutions and institutional buildings. Architects, he claimed, were designing obsolete buildings for obsolete institutions of every kind, ranging from schools and office buildings to prisons and hospitals. By carrying out the abstract and often-stereotyped briefs of distant institutional clients, architects had become collectively responsible for creating a “mass institutional environment.”¹⁰ Like their institutional clients, architects justified their dysfunctional and impersonal environments with rationalist abstractions that had little or nothing to do with the ostensible needs of the people they served. Even worse, architects were often brought into the design process only after all of the key decisions had already been made behind closed doors. Architects were thereby reduced to being little more than fashionable stylists for pre-determined institutional forms, organized by superficial data. What under modernism had developed in the name of functional efficiency had now reduced people to mechanical abstractions. In his analysis, Van der Ryn pointed to a widening gulf between bureaucratic systems, that merely served to perpetuate existing social relations, and informal systems of social change, driven from below by architectural inhabitants.

Van der Ryn proposed to resolve this standoff by radically decentralizing the design and planning process, with decisions about fundamental social goals and corresponding architectural forms being carried out by small, localized groups. This idea would be most clearly developed in a 1968 paper, entitled “Notes on Institution Building,” which Van der Ryn coauthored with a recent college graduate Robert Reich, who would later become labor secretary under the Clinton administration. The authors began with the proposition that modern, bureaucratically-governed institutions were dysfunctional insofar as they failed to meet higher human needs and provide what they called a “healthy society.” Advocacy planning, they claimed was still only a weak compromise between actual subjective needs and objectifying institutional assumptions. By contrast, “the goal of the radical planner” would be to form “new institutions which answer basic human needs better than existing institutions.” Thus, they suggest: “In the poor, badly housed community, the radical planner would work with his neighbors in attempting to gain resources and create viable shelters and communal facilities...He and his neighbors may decide to experiment with different community living models, cooperatives, community units, multifamily dwellings, in an attempt to discover the most workable and suitable living form.”¹¹ The users and clients would no longer be passive recipients of design services but would themselves be empowered as designers, planners and administrators in small-scale, collaborative environments. In such passages, there were more



Figure 3. Photograph of the People's Park construction. April, 1969, (Sean McGrath).

than a few echoes of the kinds of experiments in communal living then being conducted by students living off campus.

Some of the ideas presented in "Notes on Institution Building" would be directly tested when Van der Ryn became personally embroiled in the battle over People's Park, a contested block of university-owned land. Specifically, the struggle involved the University administration's attempt to control the institutional environment of the campus housing environments while simultaneously seeking to eliminate part of what it viewed as the culturally problematic South Campus neighborhood, with its mixture of hippie communes and leftist student enclaves. The site had been acquired through eminent domain in 1967 but remained unused until April 1969 when a group of local activists built a spontaneous park on the site. (figure 3.) Failing negotiations with the University, the park builders had been forcibly evicted first by police and then National Guard troops as the surrounding city erupted into pitched street battles, in one of the most publicized events of the turbulent 1960s. Viewing People's Park as a living example of the kind of "radical design" he had envisioned just one year earlier, Van der Ryn had led an unsuccessful effort to transform the park into an experimental research station in participatory design.¹² In a July 1969 report,

entitled "Building a People's Park," he describes encountering an egalitarian social structure in which design is no longer the source of a single vision to be carried out by others, but all ideas have an equal chance, and nothing is planned out too far in advance. As ideas about the design of the park were allowed to freely compete in a kind of survival of the fittest, a group consensus seemed spontaneously to emerge which was, at the same time, expressive of each unique individual. Moreover, the gap or distance between architects and their users now seemed completely closed as the users and the designers were now one and the same. Van der Ryn noted how elements in the park, such as benches were "more natural, more comfortable, and more functional" than had they been the more usual, mass-produced variety.¹³ It was the perfect ecological model of both design harmony and social order. At the same time, Van der Ryn claimed, it was a social order beyond political ideology:

For [the new culture people], radical politics conform to an old system built on personal power, ego, and bring the rhetoric and tools of bureaucracy and hierarchical organization. But the emerging culture, fighting for its survival is political only in a total sense – as a style of life which passionately believes that people have the potential to be whole, and

Recreating an educational microcosm of the rural hippie communes that had continued to proliferate around 1970, Van der Ryn taught a rural studio on his own land in a remote part of western Marin County, assigning his students such tasks as designing and building their own tiny studio retreats, using found and recycled materials. This retreat, however, was intended to be only a tactical moment in a much larger project for radical planning and design. Like Stewart Brand and the other new communalists of the Northern California counterculture, he believed that a new egalitarian, networked culture was in the process of emerging out of the ruined of a dying technocratic society.¹⁸ This new model of an alternative, networked architectural practice would not remain cloistered in the countryside but soon returned to infiltrate the institutions of the cities.

In 1970, Van der Ryn soon embarked on a project of de-institutionalizing school classrooms, using the school children themselves as collaborators. Incorporating as the Farallones Institute in 1970, Van der Ryn, together with a small group of graduate students, contracted with local, especially alternative schools to conduct learning experiments in which grade-school students were asked to re-design the furnishing of their classrooms under the advice and direction of architect-teachers. The collective result, as reported in *The Farallones Scrapbook*, was the deconstruction of the “classroom box,” with its rows of desks facing the teacher, in favor of circular inflatable furniture and clusters of personalized, semi-private carrels.¹⁹ The deconstruction of the classroom was, of course, more broadly intended as a de-institutionalization of the school itself, with schoolchildren now directing the social form of their own educational process.²⁰ These experiments incorporated principles of ecological design, including the use of recycled materials, but it also exemplified the egalitarian model of ‘social ecology.’

The Freestone conference of March 1971, co-organized by Van der Ryn and the conceptual, performance art group Ant Farm near a tiny rural town just north of San Francisco, was to be the template for this new, dispersed architectural practice. For their July 1970 issue, the editors of *Progressive Architecture* published an extended special feature on the Freestone Conference which outlined an alternative to the mainstream architectural profession. In this feature, entitled “Advertisement for a Counter Culture,” quoted Van der Ryn’s stated purpose of the conference: “learn to design new social forms, new building forms that are in harmony with life...to build a floating university around the design of our lives.”²¹ This rhetoric and the wider aim of the Freestone Conference marked a fundamental split with the older aims of a rationalist architectural modernism to solve social problems through specialized technical expertise; at the same time, it signaled a new type of ecological design that would fuse the older social utopian aims of architecture with a new ecological ideal, simultaneously environmental, social, and psychological. Echoing the often-messianic language of the counterculture, Van der Ryn called for designing not only new structures but new forms of social life out of the fragments or ruins of a failed culture:

The purpose of life is to attain the state of full participation again – the state of the whole. Man has lost the totality of being because culture destroys it. We have made art the system that recombines fragments because our lives are not art.²²

Rejecting the usual hierarchies and distinctions between professionals and amateurs; artists and technicians; or consultants and activists, the Freestone Conference issued a diagram of affiliated groups thought to be part of this larger project, labeled “social design,” which Van der Ryn described as “a way of effecting change in social forms and states of consciousness.”²³ (figure 4.) The diagram included numerous groups and activists that had participated in the occupation and building of People’s Park, as well as representatives of the rural commune movement.

CONCLUSION

This vision of a new, more egalitarian and participatory architecture, built in harmony with the landscape reached a certain logical conclusion in the counterculture Freestone Conference. Participants such as Van der Ryn in this movement for social design imagined that they were participating in a much broader countercultural project, constructing both social and architectural forms simultaneously. In ecological terms, they saw human society consciously co-evolving together with this new habitat. At the same time, they conceived of themselves as participants in a political revolution of sorts, one which, they hoped would spontaneously assert itself across all architectural practices. By the mid-1970s, this utopian moment had largely collapsed, together with the overwhelming majority of the counterculture communes. The idea that architecture could subsist outside of institutional systems of practice and patronage seemed increasingly illusory, especially under the more austere economic conditions of the mid-1970s. Nevertheless, powerful strands of ecologically-inflected countercultural thinking continued to percolate through architectural research and practice in Berkeley and elsewhere. In 1975, Van der Ryn was appointed California State Architect by Governor Jerry Brown, designing in that role the pioneering Gregory Bateson Office Building, known for its innovative applications of passive cooling and ventilation systems, well before such practice was commonplace in the American profession.²⁴ Leading California’s new Office of Appropriate Technology, he essentially reconciled himself with new forms of bureaucracy and a certain taming of his earlier, more radical vision. Upon resuming his teaching position at Berkeley’s College of Environmental Design at the end of the 1970s, Van der Ryn and his colleagues continued threads of earlier research into to the collective basis for an ecological architecture, some of which was published in 1986, under the title, *Sustainable Communities*.²⁵ The tone of this later work, however, was more pragmatic than utopian. Ideals were subsumed beneath practical models for incremental change. One of the pressing questions facing architects today is whether such incremental changes within the existing system can still suffice.

ENDNOTES

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