H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peder Anker. *From Bauhaus to Ecohouse: A History of Ecological Design.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010. 216 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3551-8.

Reviewed by Matthew Mindrup (School of Architecture, Marywood University)

Published on H-Urban (June, 2011)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari

Excavating the Trail of Ecological Design

In *From Bauhaus to Ecohouse*, Peder Anker vividly exposes the beginnings of ecological design underlying the architectural project of modernity. As Anker rightly observes, architectural historians have largely ignored the importance of biology to Bauhaus design pedagogy, a significance that was greatly expanded during the mid-1930s and influenced the development of ecological design throughout the Cold War years. While recent concerns about global warming have drawn attention to environmentally sensitive design in contemporary architectural discourse, Anker argues that the project of sustainable design has been ongoing for nearly a century.

For the architectural historian, Anker is at his best examining the inter-permeation of biological and Bauhaus reasoning in Walter Gropius and László Moholy-Nagy's early approach to design according to the laws of nature. As Anker observes, Moholy-Nagy's 1929 book *Von Material zu Architektur* (translated in English by the author himself as *The New Vision: From Material to Architecture* [1930]) and Gropius's lectures in London from the mid-1930s aimed to reinforce a design method that would set human life in harmony with nature's biological forces. Throughout his study, Anker deftly excavates key influences and associations mitigating Bauhaus's emigration to the United States and the reconfiguration of Bauhaus ideology into a blueprint of ecological design at the Museum of Modern Art's 1938 Bauhaus Exhibition. A reader familiar with the early Bauhaus may challenge Anker's claim that the underpinnings of Bauhaus design lie in biological functionalism or cringe at his reference to the expressionist paintings of Wassily Kandinsky as "constructivist abstractions" (p. 49). However, the transformation of early expressionist ideology to biological reasoning in Bauhaus pedagogy is not the focus of Anker's study. Instead, he follows the historical relationship of design and ecological science through the careers of Bauhaus's preeminent members, Moholy-Nagy and Gropius, after they left Nazi Germany in the mid-1930s.

In the first chapter, Anker argues that attempts to relaunch the Bauhaus school in London and the United States fused biological reasoning with modernist architecture. The key to this chiasma of interests, Anker argues, was in their "shared belief that the human household should be modeled on the household of nature" (p. 9). Particularly valuable are the sources that Anker employs to support his thesis, including the guest list of ecologists and designers at Gropius's London farewell dinner, which, as he argues, alone demonstrates a familiarity among key individuals working in the two fields. It is, however, through Anker's examination of the meetings at the Lawn Road Flats (Isokon Building), Isobar Club, and H. G. Wells's house in London between 1934 and 1937 that the first chapter provides ample clues to the exchange of ideas between Bauhaus designers and ecologists in London. Where most research on Moholy-Nagy's work during his London year's views it as "disparate" or fragmented, Anker demonstrates that it "was actually a re-launching of the Bauhaus as an ecologically inspired program of design" (p. 14). Taking his cue from Moholy-Nagy's frequent reference to Raoul H. Francé's 1920 book, *Die Pflanze als Erfinder* (Plants as inventors), Anker demonstrates its use to create the intellectual underpinning of *The New Vision* and later abstract film projects.

Anker continues to follow the trail of ecological

thinking in Gropius's tenure at Harvard, Moholy-Nagy's foundation of the "New Bauhaus" in Chicago (subsequently the Chicago School of Design), and Herbert Bayer's exhibition and graphic designs in the later 1930s. Through Gropius's lectures and publications on the education of architects from this period, Anker brings to light his latent interest in the knowledge of biology, as a way for architects to resolve social, urban, and ecological issues that have emerged from the "miraculous potentialities of the machine" (p. 38). It was Gropius's belief that because of capitalism, "our human greed has interfered with the biological cycle of human companionship which keeps the life of a community healthy" (p. 38). Paraphrasing Gropius, Anker explains his belief that an architect armed with the knowledge of biology should be capable of "evolving the 'complete being' ... from his biological centre" so that one could understand how to build in nature in the most responsible way (p. 38). Moholy-Nagy praised Gropius's ethical thesis of organic architectural design, and while in Chicago, promoted bio-technique or the "transportation of natural forms and design into the media of human production" as an approach to generating built form, since "nature evolves ingenious forms ... every bush, every tree, can instruct us in and reveal new uses, potential apparatus, and technological inventions without number" (p. 42). Bayer, the former director of printing and advertising at the Dessau Bauhaus, also contributed significantly to the task of mobilizing designers to the call of ecology. In his design for the Museum of Modern Art's 1938 Bauhaus and 1943 The Airways to Peace exhibitions in New York City, Bayer, Anker illustrates, sought to use visual communication to change people's way of thinking about nature.

In the remaining chapters, Anker charts the heritage of Bauhaus pedagogy through the complicated currents of ecological design thinking after World War II and throughout the Cold War years. While functionality during Gropius and Moholy-Nagy's London years was concentrated on the biological investigation of human well-being in the environment, Anker explains in the concluding chapters that the emergence of space exploration during the postwar years led to new theories on closed-system living in space capsules, space stations, and planetary colonies. Buckminster Fuller is credited with originating the image of the earth as a huge mechanical spaceship hurdling through space in a series of lectures titled "Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth" wherein engineering and good management were promoted as the salve for all the earth's ecological and economical problems. Surveying the work of ecologists, Eugene P. Odum, Howard T. Odum, and physics professor Gerard K. O'Neill, Anker illustrates how imagined and real environments in space acted as a source of inspiration for Ian McHarg's 1929 landmark treatise, *Design with Nature*, or John Todd's New Alchemy projects during 1969-76. For Anker, each of these projects sought, in their own way, to conceptualize eco-friendly environments in harmony with nature on earth.

Anker's book will cause a considerable reevaluation of one's preconceptions about contemporary ecological design as a recent development. In my case, this book transformed my understanding of the ways the project of modernism lives on in William McDonough and Michael Braungart's recent call for a new industrial revolution founded on the principles of ecological and sustainable design in *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (2002) and *The Hannover Principles: Design for Sustainability* (1992). By illuminating important connections between theories about the relationship of humans and the built environment, Anker's study provides a valuable resource for a critical period in the evolution of environmental awareness. This book is a good addition to the collection of any historian of Bauhaus design and stable reference for developing new arguments or solutions in sustainable and ecological design.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban

Citation: Matthew Mindrup. Review of Anker, Peder, *From Bauhaus to Ecohouse: A History of Ecological Design*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. June, 2011.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29410

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.