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Review: To Heal the Earth: Selected Writings of Ian L. McHarg

Ian L. McHarg and Frederick L. Steiner (Eds.)

Reviewed by [Eric Weir](#)
Decatur, Georgia, USA

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Ian L. McHarg and Frederick L. Steiner (Eds.) *To Heal the Earth: Selected Writings of Ian L. McHarg*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1998. 310 pp. ISBN 1-55963-573-8 (cloth). US\$34.95. Recycled acid-free paper.

Forward by Robert D. Yaro

In an essay in this book, Ian McHarg writes, "The time has come to discover and celebrate the accomplishments of our predecessors." [191] He was speaking to his fellow landscape architects, about the founders of the profession, Frederick Law Olmsted and Charles Eliot. He could just as well have been speaking to us, about himself.

McHarg's ideas about the relevance of ecology to landscape architecture became familiar to many through his 1968 book, *Design With Nature*. With his colleagues in the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the University of Pennsylvania, he exerted a profound influence on planning education and practice throughout 70's and 80's. He played a significant role in shaping national environmental policy. While today neither his ideas nor his work are well-known to the broader public, they remain as refreshingly relevant as when first articulated.

This book is not the ideal vehicle for reviving interest in McHarg. It is a collection of papers written largely for specialists; there are thoughtful essays on the history of landscape architecture, the relevance of ecology to planning, and broader policy issues, as well as numerous detailed planning reports. The basic ideas are powerful and appealing, and are elaborated with clarity and conviction, yet the contexts and subthemes are many. As a result, many readers will find themselves struggling, simultaneously, with the redundancy and the disjointedness of the collection.

Still, with persistence the vision, the work, and a sense of the man come through. The vision is of a harmony between man and nature. What is good for nature is good for man. If we bring science to bear on understanding how, in particular settings, nature functions, it will provide us with a determinate "sense of the place" and how we should be related to it.

McHarg's "ecological planning model" provides a clear, comprehensive, and replicable process for carrying through on this vision. The inventory phase

itself is exhaustively inclusive. Initially McHarg's concern was to insist on the need for the natural sciences (-) and, integrating human ecology. It is by integrating these diverse perspectives into an overall understanding of how the place works, argues McHarg, that we get the concrete guidance we need. The book includes several reports of applications of the ecological planning model by McHarg and his colleagues at Penn. All presented difficult challenges on a large scale, e.g., developing a plan for commercial development of a new town on a 28 square mile site, while preserving the natural hydrology and wooded character of the site. The resulting plan met the developers economic objectives and, by minimizing reliance on artificial drainage structures, saved \$14 million in construction costs.

These reports are impressive in their comprehensiveness and attention to detail. They also exemplify McHarg's insistence that planners should not impose their values on the community. Their job is to help communities themselves make effective choices -- by providing the best possible understanding of the site, helping them articulate their needs and preferences, and providing a range of options.

This conception of the planner's role flows from McHarg's understanding of the relation between nature and man. If this book is any indication, perhaps also it is a reflection of the character of the man, at once critical and irreverent; visionary, holistic, and intuitive; yet practical, analytic, and precise; deferential and eager to help -- and very funny.

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