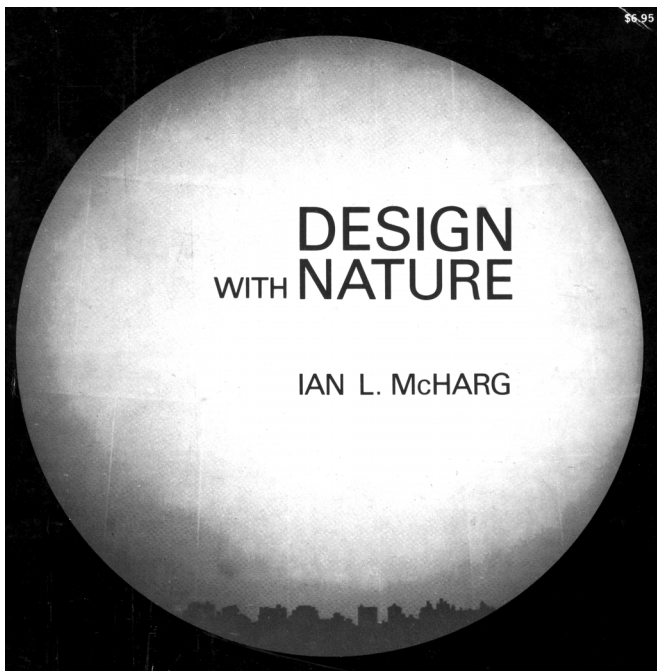


# DESIGN WITH NATURE



**DESIGN WITH NATURE** is widely considered as one of the most important and influential works of its kind. It was originally published in a hardcover edition by the Natural History Press in 1969. The edition was printed by Eugene Feldman, The Falcon Press, Philadelphia, U.S.A. Paperback edition was published in 1971. As mentioned in his autobiography (McHarg, Ian L. *A Quest for Life: An Autobiography*, 1996. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), **DESIGN WITH NATURE** sold more than 350,000 against McHarg's moderate expectation of 5,000 copies. It was reprinted in 1992 with a new preface.

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Feature by **T. M. Chengappa**

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**D**esign with Nature – by Ian L. McHarg was first published in 1969 at a time when there were very few books that dealt with the intrinsic relationship that humans have with their natural environment, and the consequent impact that they have on it.

McHarg was the founder of Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the University of Pennsylvania, and after retirement was Professor Emeritus till his death in 2001 at the age of eighty.

At the time that the book was written, ‘planned’ development was still in the hands of individuals and departments that had single-minded goals to expand cities for the apparent betterment of the public, with very little thought given to the impact that this development would have on the environment.

McHarg wrote *Design with Nature* based on his experiences over the years, both at a personal level and also in his professional career as an ecological planner. Although an important component of the book lies in the technical processes that he recommends for ecological planning, his thoughts on the relationship between man and nature are far more powerful, and are certainly more appropriately, tremendous ‘food for thought’.

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After completing his professional education at Harvard University, McHarg returned to Scotland intending to put into practice all that he had been taught, and was devastated by the impact that development had wreaked on the natural landscape that he remembered - he writes in the first chapter of the book:

*'...the city of Glasgow had annexed this land and made it its own. Each hill had been bulldozed to fill a valley, the burn was buried in culverts, trees had been felled ,..... every tree, shrub, marsh, rock, fern and orchid, every vestige of that which had been, was gone. In their stead, were uniform four-storey walk up apartments,.....'*

It was this devastation that sowed the seeds for all the ideas that are referred to in *Design with Nature* and subsequent writings. Much legislation has been written in the developed nations to ensure that some modicum of attention is paid to the environment and towards mitigation of the damage that unhindered development wreaks on the landscape. However, human beings still find ways and means to exploit the land – especially in the name of commerce and public need. Even today projects are promoted with images of sylvan landscapes – raising expectations for those who would like to live in them, hiding all that has been destroyed to create settlements that are supposed to ‘improve the quality’ of our current situation.

**M**an and nature are integral part of a complex system which regulates and sustains life on the planet earth. Any man induced change in the system results into imbalance, reducing the quality of the environment and its habitability. Primitive man understood this system to some extent and made use of it by respecting his surroundings by leaving much of it as undisturbed for his day to day living.

It is only with the publication of the book *Design with Nature* by Ian L. McHarg in 1969 that this old wisdom got re-advocated as the concept of ecological design. Ecology, a unique body of knowledge, brings many aspects of nature together and establishes the interrelationship within them and predicts the tolerances for self renewing environment. McHarg formulated a theory of understanding of the natural components. He said that unless one understands the process that goes in the formation of the landscapes, one can't understand the end results. These components of the processes with their interrelationships form the basis of landscape architecture. He was against landscape architecture as superimposition phenomenon on nature.

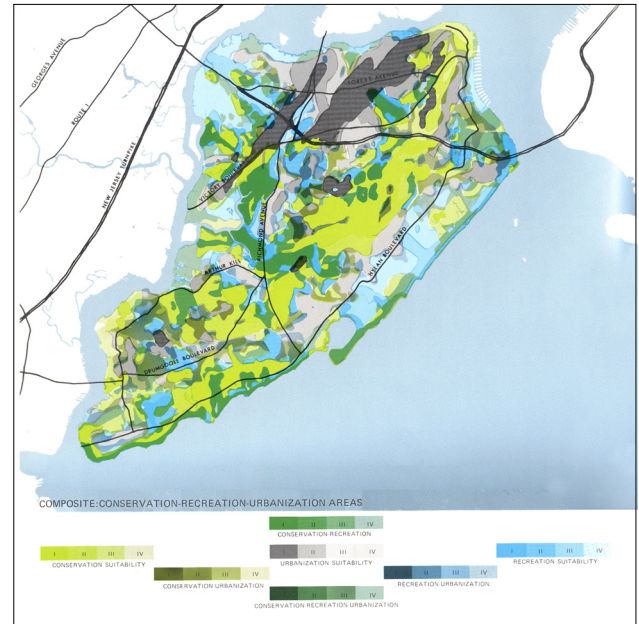
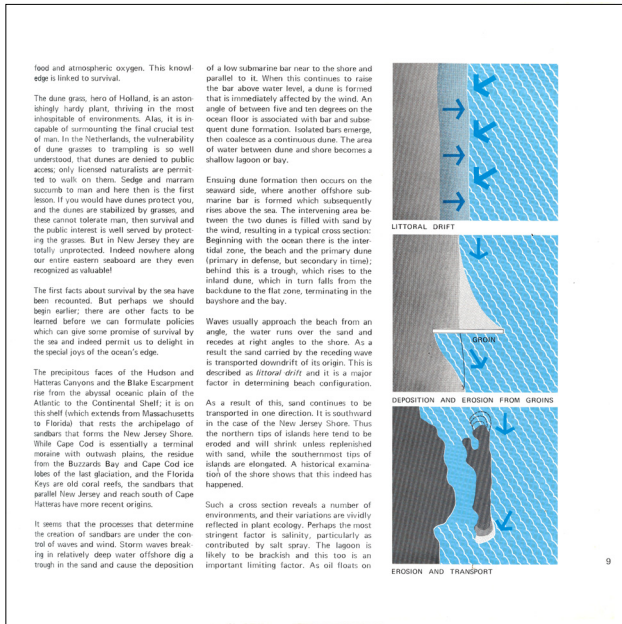
Various case studies of his office works and that of his professional colleague's works were showcased to explain many concepts of his theory. I worked on various maps, sketches, sections and illustrations. Others who were involved in the work were Narendra Juneja, Derik Sutphin, Charles Meyer assisted by other staff members. It took us around a year to put together the dummy copy of the book with all the text and illustrations.

In late sixties, there were very few schools in America that were imparting landscape architecture education. They were mostly promoting the city beautiful concept. The release of the book was a big revelation for the design professionals, especially for the profession of landscape architects. When it was released, it completely changed the whole approach to landscape architecture in the world.

Lewis Mumford, who has written the introduction of the book, has said, “McHarg revives the hope for a better world, without the passion and courage and confident skill of people like McHarg that hope might fade and disappear forever.”

**Ravindra Bhan**

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McHarg goes on to write about expectations that people have about the natural environment:

*‘There are many people who look to nature for meaning and order, peace and tranquillity, introspection and stimulus. Many more look to nature and activity in the outdoors as the road to restoration and health. The best symbol of peace might better be the garden than the dove...’*

He recognises the need for nature within the city as well as the countryside, and for preserving existing natural conditions, and concludes that:

*‘It is not a choice of either the city or the countryside: both are essential.....’*

This in effect is the crux of MchHarg’s holistic approach to ecological planning - that all natural processes that exist in the “countryside” and which contribute to its environmental stability need to be evaluated and looked at in tandem with all the social, cultural, and economic systems and processes that make human settlements what they are. Once we educate ourselves to the fact that both nature and culture are equally important, we are able to rationalise the least damaging plan for a site.

The book goes on to outline different projects and the process through which planning solutions need to be thought out and in each case it is his fundamental philosophy which gives us an insight into the process – that Man is an integral part

of Nature , and appropriate planning is achieved through a respect of nature and an understanding of the natural processes that control our environment.

McHarg writes almost poetically on the man - nature relationship, and on the importance of nature:

*‘If one accepts the simple proposition that nature is the arena of life and that a modicum of knowledge of her processes is indispensable for survival and rather more for existence, health and delight, it is amazing how many apparently difficult problems present ready resolution.’*

“...a book to live with, to absorb slowly, and to return to, as one’s own experience and knowledge increases.”

More specifically, on the seeing nature as process, rather than an object, or a result, he notes that:

*‘...nature is process, that it is interacting, that it responds to laws, representing values and opportunities for human use with certain limitations and even prohibitions to certain of these.’*

McHarg sums up the essentialness of nature to human existence thus:

*‘Clearly the problem of man and nature is not one of providing a decorative background for the human play, or even ameliorating the grim city: it is the necessity of sustaining nature as a source of life, milieu, teacher, sanctum, challenge and, most of all of rediscovering nature’s corollary of the unknown in the self, the source of meaning.’*

One of McHarg’s primary goals was the preservation of nature, too much of which had been lost through the suburban sprawl of American cities. The case studies in the book demonstrate how the overlay process (where all natural components of a site are mapped, assigned values, and overlaid with each other, to obtain a map indicating the development potential) is applied to specific environments – like the preservation of areas of natural ecologic importance like lakes,

wetlands and forests, and how one may go about applying the process to extensions of urban areas.

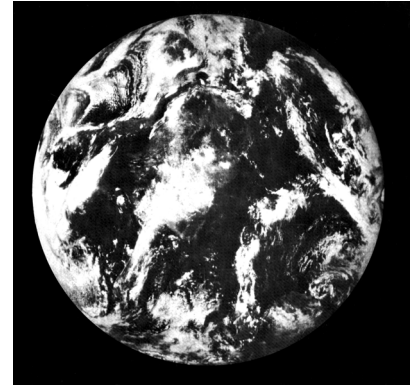
To conclude, below is quotation from the first chapter of the book:

*‘...The world is abundant, we require only a deference born of understanding to fulfil man’s promise. Man is that uniquely conscious creature who can perceive and express. He must become the steward of the biosphere. To do this he must design with nature.’*

Today, forty years after its publication, we are still witnessing the rapid destruction of our environment – and now need to pay even more attention to the thoughts and processes that McHarg outlined, especially in the context of the dialogue that is taking place all over the world regarding climate change – the direct impact of our disregarding the fact that man is an integral part of this ecosystem that we call earth.

Lewis Mumford in his introduction to the book, writes aptly:

*“ This is not a book to be hastily read and dropped; it is rather a book to live with, to absorb slowly, and to return to, as one’s own experience and knowledge increases.”*



**ABOVE |** The famous first photograph of the earth as seen from Moon in 1969 was used as the back page of the dust cover of *Design with Nature* with permission from NASA.

Book inside pages scans courtesy **Ravindra Bhan**

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