

INTRODUCTION

In late 1972 a group of architects, engineers, and biologists in the San Francisco Bay Area began meeting with the aim of joining our professional skills to create dwellings that would translate into physical form the central principles of the emerging environmental movement. Each of us—often feeling isolated by the narrow perspective of our specialties—was looking for ways to extend and integrate ideas and practice, to teach others, and continue his or her own learning. We saw the potential of integrating principles of biology, food and energy production, and the design of living space and community to create places where one might function without total dependence on an “artificial,” centralized technology; at the same time, we saw the need for a center where people could combine theoretical and philosophical learning with practical experience in our areas of expertise: agriculture, architecture, building, engineering, biology and natural systems. Our immediate goal became the combination of all of our skills toward the design and construction of a place that would test experimental, ecologically stable and resource-conserving living systems.

Many people at that time seemed to be giving up on cities, attempting to reconnect to the earth by moving to rural areas. I was one of these. In our group Bill and Helga Olkowski argued persuasively for another approach. “Cities are where people are,” they said. “Everyone can’t move to the country or there won’t be a country any more, and besides, if people move to the country with their urban consciousness, the country will be transformed into the city just as happened with the suburbs. The challenge is to make cities ecologically stable and healthy places to live.”

The Olkowskis had already acted on their beliefs. Over a period of years they had redesigned their home space and their lives so that they were raising a good portion of their own food, wasting nothing, and enthusiastically experimenting with dozens of little and big ways for average city people to reduce their dependence on centralized systems and become more connected to the basics of life support. When I first heard of Bill and Helga over twelve years ago, I nodded, thinking to myself, “Yes, Berkeley is full of eccentrics.”

In 1973, the big news was the energy crisis as the Mid-East oil producers withheld their production from the U.S. and European markets. More of us discovered in coping with this “crisis” just how dependent our technology and economy had become on nonrenewable resources. Few persons heard about another significant event of 1973, though many were touched by it. For the first time since the Great Depression of the thirties, rising incomes did not keep pace with the increasing cost of goods and services. Real income in this country began to fall in 1973 and has been falling ever since (that is, the dollars it costs to buy homes, food, clothing, education, health care are outdistancing dollar increases in income). This little-noticed statistical event marked an important turning point whose full significance most of us have yet to grasp. It comes down to this: more and more energy—material and human—is used to maintain present wasteful habits and pay for their effects. More government to administer and regulate the complex effects of centralized technologies. More dollars to treat the social and environmental diseases that result from the way we live, and more and more energy required to secure the usable energy needed to run our homes, businesses, transportation, agriculture—all the pieces that make up our society. We *are* on a treadmill running a rat race in which we move harder and harder, faster and faster simply to stay in place.

By 1973 some of the practices the Olkowskis had begun years before no longer seemed strange. In fact, I was doing many of them myself: growing vegetables, composting, raising chickens, learning how to heat water and houses with the sun and wood, helping people design and build places they could build and maintain themselves, designing and building sanitary systems that didn’t pollute or waste water or nutrients.

Our group—established as the Farallones Institute—bought the Olkowskis’ dream, and added to it and developed the Integral Urban House in Berkeley as a Farallones Institute research and educational center to develop urban-scale appropriate technology. We have been pursuing that vision for several years; it has been a difficult and rewarding journey. In the first months of designing and building the Integral Urban House there were almost daily conflicts growing out of the selective vision bred by our own particular specialties. Tom Javits and Jim Campe almost came to blows over how the concrete floor would be poured. Jim wanted to bring a concrete truck down the driveway for the pour and Tom vowed to lay his body in front of the wheels before he would allow the precious soil to be compressed by the giant truck. So we wheel-barrowed in many yards by hand. The builders learned that what they called “dirt” was living, organic matter, and Tom learned that concrete is heavy and dries fast. Should we cut a tree to allow more sun to fall on the solar collector? Was space to store wood scraps

for the stove more important than space for the chickens? The learning still continues, and we now know a whole lot more about how to live lightly and well in the city. And through your use of this book, we will all come to know more, possibly enough to make a way for ourselves, our children, and grandchildren, to a sustainable future urban life.

This book, then, is the result of four years' experience in living with and refining the systems of the Integral Urban House. Many people contributed to making the house and this book a reality. Jim Campe, Jeff Poetsch and Sheldon Leon were responsible for much of the construction of the house. Since the beginning, Tom Javits has been the resident manager and the sparkplug that has made the house a vital part of the community. A grant from the Heller Charitable Trust made it possible for the Institute to develop a syllabus on integrated systems which was the seed that led to this book. And Harlow Daugherty provided the original grant that made the project possible. In addition to the principal authors, key chapters have been contributed by Sterling Bunnell (part of Chapter 11), Scott Matthews (Chapter 12) and myself (Chapter 2). Stuart Leiderman typed much of the manuscript. We are indebted to Jon Beckmann, Director of Sierra Club Books who first suggested that our work deserved a wider audience. Our editor, Wendy Goldwyn, has patiently and tenaciously seen the book project through over the three years it took to get it together.

This book shows you how to achieve a high quality urban way of life using a fraction of the resources we are accustomed to, at lower cost, with less waste, pollution and ugliness. At the center of the concept is a view that envisions a new connection between urban habitat and natural systems. Any of us can learn to live better and with more satisfaction by employing ecological principles in designing how we live. At the present point in history, when monoculture-promoting human organizations have become unviably gigantic while their resource base is rapidly contracting, the application of ecological principles is imperative to the well-being of individuals, households, and communities.

The house and this book are the collective product of many different people. We don't always agree about everything, and we are all still learning and improving ways of living lightly on earth. As I see it we have no other choice but to learn—however haltingly—to walk the path towards our sustenance and the survival of this beautiful and fragile blue-green planet we call Earth, our only home.

Sim Van der Ryn

President and Founder, Farallones Institute