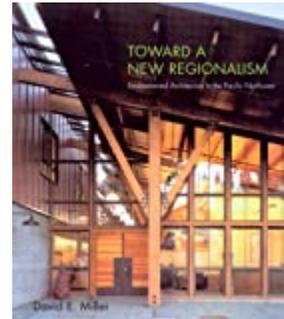


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



David E. Miller. *Toward a New Regionalism: Environmental Architecture in the Pacific Northwest.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. xviii + 174 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98494-0.



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Published on H-Urban (March, 2006)

A Regional Perspective on Sustainable Architecture

In this era of globalization and proliferation of generic approaches to design, it is a great comfort to know that architects throughout the Pacific Northwest United States are expanding and deepening the connection between regional architecture and sustainable design. The ecological design lessons from David Miller's book *Toward a New Regionalism: Environmental Architecture in the Pacific Northwest*, provide design insights that extend far beyond the boundaries of the northwest. Miller elegantly reveals how architecture can powerfully respond to and be shaped by the particularities of place, while also helping to address very real problems such as resource and energy consumption, healthy design, and indoor environmental quality.

The book contains four primary sections: an overview of the conditions of regionalism; a brief history of regionalism and sustainable design in the Pacific Northwest; environmental strategies as viewed through the lens of the four elements of earth, fire, air, and water; and a series of contemporary regional case studies on the topics of site, light construction, light and ventilation, and technology. While there have been many

new publications exploring the precepts, principles, and even philosophy of sustainable design, Miller takes a perspective that explores the form-giving potential of a regional approach to sustainable design. He argues that "fashion, however, is the enemy of integrity.... The imperative question then becomes, how does a designer determine the overall conception and realization of architectural form that captures the spirit and quality of place and at the same time addresses the compelling issue of our day—the world's ecological dysfunction" (p. xv). As sustainability becomes more fully integrated into the design professions, the critical and often overlooked questions of form-making and design integrity are issues that planners and designers need to consider in light of the many (and often overwhelming) pressing ecological design challenges.

The emphasis on sustainability as a question of design excellence and quality is a refreshing counterpoint to the dominant national conversation on the U.S. Green Building Council's (USGBC) Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) sustainable design rating systems.[1] In stark contrast to the complexity and quantita-

tive emphasis of LEED, Miller guides the reader through a thoughtful discussion of the concept, history, and practice of regionalism from a sustainable perspective that informs design, form, aesthetics, and human experience. An emphasis is given to simple, elegant, and lasting sustainable design lessons that inspire architectural form and design decisions. Chapters 1 and 2, on the content and history of regionalism, reveal that sustainable design lessons extend through time from the earliest Pacific Coast native structures to the Arts and Crafts period to the early modernists and finally to contemporary design. Miller underscores the important role that the early modernists in the Pacific Northwest played in shaping a uniquely environmental dialogue and practice in the post-World War II era, including the use of local wood and stone; concern for blending the building with site; the integration of the structure with the outdoors; extensive skylights, clerestories, and daylighting; exposed wood structures; the open plan to maximize light; and gardens and landscapes (pp. 30-31). After a period of indifference in the 1980s and 1990s, Miller suggests that designers are returning to the roots of the Northwest traditions to expand and extend regional design.

Significant attention is given to an historical overview, including the Arts and Crafts period, the early Northwest modernists, the Northwest School, and Contemporary period extending into the 1970s, but a more in-depth discussion and summary of the characteristics and trends of the new regionalism would have been useful. The reader is referred to a series of case studies (which comprise the last four chapters of the book) to discern the primary distinctions of the most recent evolution of the new regional architecture in the Pacific Northwest. While the case studies are exceptionally thoughtful and well-considered works of architecture, the particular and unique ways that Pacific Northwest architects and designers are extending sustainable design thinking and practice in the new regionalism are not adequately discussed.

Chapter 3 on environmental strategies bridges between the earlier discussion of regionalism and the concluding chapters on contemporary case studies. This section focuses on the ways that the four elements of earth, fire, air, and water can shape a sustainable approach to regional design. The four elements serve to focus the reader on the primary issues of design, in contrast to technology and building systems. As Miller explains, he “concentrates on the elements and concepts of environmental design that contribute to architectural form and excludes issues that do not have formal consequences”

(p. 35). While useful as a general conceptual framework, the four elements (earth, fire, air, and water) limit the sustainability issues to be considered. In particular, this framework minimizes sustainable design construction, materials, technologies, and systems integration. The four elements are perhaps most limiting as a framework for discussion when Miller moves to the contemporary case studies in chapters 4-7. There is tension between the discussion of the four elements and the primary issues for chapters 4-7, each of which focuses on a particular sustainability topic that is revealed through contemporary regional case studies.

These case study chapters would have benefited from a straightforward discussion of the chapter topics (e.g. site, light construction, light and ventilation, and technology and materials) rather than using earth, fire, air, and water. How do technology and materials, for example, impact the new regionalism? The reader is left to do much of her or his own work to discern the essential themes of the new regionalism.

Fortunately, Miller has selected outstanding case studies that not only embody his emphasis on design excellence, but also impart a myriad of important sustainability lessons. This is particularly true of the small-to mid-sized projects that elegantly reveal the best regional attributes of inspired sustainable design. The integration of regionalism, sustainability, and design excellence is perhaps less convincing in the larger commercial projects, where regional sensitivity is more difficult given the scale and complexity of the buildings. The design lessons and emerging patterns revealed in the case studies would clarify the unique characteristics of new regionalism and sustainability in the Pacific Northwest and further help to inspire regionalist design thinking and practice in other areas of the country.

Although the reader is left to piece together the major attributes of new regionalism, Miller’s contribution to the national dialogue on sustainable design is thoughtful and well considered. The book is broad rather than deep; it emphasizes issues and questions for a new regionalism that expand and embrace sustainability and design excellence. The author’s perspective is much needed in a world that increasingly honors globalization, uniformity over regionalism, the bottom line, and the quantitative over the qualitative. “The core of sustainable design lies in responding to a ‘spirit of place,’” Miller wrote in the preface. “Architecture that heals the heart, our biological systems, and the environment is sustainable. It needs to be shaped by and for a region’s conditions. The green

past has relevance for the future“ (p. xi).

Although Miller discusses various twenty-first-century challenges for sustainable design, such as communication systems, digital design, and construction technology, his discussion throughout the book emphasizes design integrity and form-making as integral to and resulting from the particular conditions of place and sustainability. A new regionalism is emerging that integrates lessons from the past (such as site integration and architectural simplicity, honesty, and material expression), attention to the sustainability issues of the present (energy, resources, environmental quality, and health and well-being), as well as an architectural expression that has inherent design beauty and integrity. Miller suggests that “architects in the Pacific Northwest, more than any other region of the world, have the op-

portunity to bring these elements together into a comprehensive design approach. Such an approach is much more about environmental-quality issues than about the form-making and material gymnastics prevalent in the obsessive and indulgent 1990s” (p. xvii). The works of the new regionalist architects of the Pacific Northwest do indeed represent some of the best sustainable architecture in the country. May designers throughout the world learn from this work, which embodies not only the art and science, but also the spirit of a regional approach to sustainable architecture.

Note

[1]. For information on the U.S. Green Building Council’s (USGBC) Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) sustainable design rating systems, see the council’s website at www.usgbc.org.

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Citation: Mary Guzowski. Review of Miller, David E., *Toward a New Regionalism: Environmental Architecture in the Pacific Northwest*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

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