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legacy matters now more than ever.

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The last 50 years of landscape architecture and environmental planning belong to Ian McHarg. In theory and practice, no designer has done more to stoke the public imagination or reshape the professions around the environment. And nothing captures the scope and scale of his legacy better than his landmark book, *Design With Nature*, published in the spring of 1969.

More manifesto than scholarly text, McHarg's now-canonical book arrived amidst the tumult of an ascendant, leftist environmental movement—one that delivered a series of landmark political victories in the 1970s, a period that would become known as “the environmental decade.” It remains one of the best-selling books ever written by a designer, has been translated into Chinese, French, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish, and remains in print today.

(Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania)

On the 50th anniversary of its publication, one is struck by the durability of McHarg's ideas and the parallels between the ecological crisis and resultant activism of his era, and those of the contemporary moment we now find ourselves in—one defined by global climate change, a new generation of activism around the Green New Deal, and, more generally, a resurgent left in American politics.

From Glasgow smokestacks to the GIS revolution

Despite this, McHarg (who died in 2001) is far from a household name. He was born in 1920 in Scotland. There, he grew up along the banks of the heavily industrialized Clyde River, just outside of Glasgow, during the Great Depression. It was a landscape of billowing smokestacks and rushing water at a moment of extreme precarity and collapse, one reflected in notions of suitability, balance, and rationality in McHarg's later work.

He went on to serve as an infantryman in Britain's elite special forces during World War II and, later, to earn degrees in landscape architecture and city planning from Harvard's Graduate School of Design—where, at the time, Walter Gropius was building a Modernist, American Bauhaus school. McHarg garnered admission to Harvard through something resembling the *Varsity Blues* grift: He wrote a letter to the dean of the GSD, representing himself as a major in the Scottish military (he was an enlisted man) and telling the admissions office to “please make necessary arrangements” as he was coming to study landscape architecture.

After a brief return to Scotland, where he became involved in postwar reconstruction, McHarg was recruited back to the United States by Holmes Perkins, dean of the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Fine Arts, to build a new department of landscape architecture in 1957. (Penn had begun offering courses in the field in the 1920s, one of the first American universities to do so.) McHarg also co-founded a design firm in Philadelphia—Wallace, McHarg, Roberts, and Todd (WMRT, now WRT)—and increasingly blurred the lines between academic research and professional practice.

On campus, McHarg ran design studios that served as research engines for WMRT and taught a campus-wide course titled “Man and Environment” that brought luminaries like Loren Eiseley, Margaret Mead, Lewis Mumford, and Julian Huxley into the department of landscape architecture.

McHarg (left) on the set of *The House We Live In*, a 12-part series he hosted on CBS in 1960 and 1961. (Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania)

These courses gave McHarg the grist he would need to write *Design With Nature*. The first copies of his book arrived on April 8, 1969, amid a national environmental awakening. *Design With Nature* immediately became part of the zeitgeist, giving planners, designers, and urbanists a manifesto for their frustrations with America's lax land use and environmental regulations. In the introductory chapter, McHarg framed his argument:

Our eyes do not divide us from the world, but they unite us to it... Let us abandon the simplicity of separation and give unity its due. Let us abandon the self-mutilation which has been our way and give expression to the potential harmony of man-nature ... 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.

The book also provided a practical method for intervening in the land-use system—the layering of large, complex spatial data to make policy and design choices about a site’s “fitness” or “suitability” for various types of development, conservation, and restoration plans. If that method of suitability analysis sounds familiar, it should: It gave rise to a technological revolution in Geospatial Information Systems, beginning with crude punch cards on room-sized computers and evolving into the suite of highly sophisticated GIS software companies we know today (including Esri).

Hubristic and techno-utopian, McHarg’s emphasis on creating a rational, systematized design process expanded the fields of landscape architecture and environmental planning, pulling practitioners out of gardens and small parks and into territorial-scale design.

Alongside Rachel Carson’s classic *Silent Spring*, *Design With Nature* helped activists translate the energy of the 1960s into a string political victories in the 1970s, including: the National Environmental Policy Act (1970), the Clean Water Act (1972), the Endangered Species Act (1973), CERCLA (Superfund, 1980), and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency and the White House Council on Environmental Quality (1970). Much of that regulatory regime remains intact today, creaking under the weight of the contemporary ecological challenges it was not designed to solve, yet indispensable to the broader aims of environmental stewardship and climate action.

The Woodlands

In his professional practice, McHarg worked on planning studies commissioned by state and federal agencies, including the Plan for the Valleys in Baltimore County, Maryland—which became a critical precedent in neighboring Montgomery County as it developed its growth-management regulatory regime—and a borough-wide land-use plan for Staten Island in New York. That plan, only partially implemented, was held up after Hurricane Sandy as an exemplar of how the area could have avoided the worst impacts of the storm.

McHarg also built a number of highly influential, if only partially realized, projects, including Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, the environmental resource plans for Amelia and Sanibel Islands in Florida, and, perhaps most famously, The Woodlands in Texas.

The Woodlands, Texas. (zeesstof/Getty Images)

Thirty miles north of Houston, The Woodlands is a master-planned community developed by George Mitchell, a Texas oil magnate who, among other things, invented the technology now used for hydraulic fracturing gas exploration, otherwise known as fracking. It was one of 14 communities funded through HUD's Title VII "New Towns" program, and the only one to become a financial success—the others either failed to develop outright, or cycled through various ownership changes and bankruptcies before being built out in their entirety.

Incorporated in 1974, The Woodlands was organized around McHarg's ecological goals—namely the conservation and restoration of the area's hydrological system to manage flood risks—and HUD's social goals—namely to build a mixed-income city where an otherwise more exclusive suburb might have emerged. The Woodlands developed in three phases: the first overseen entirely by WMRT, the second proceeding according to plan but without the firm's direct involvement, and the final phase more or less following the standard suburban development guidelines of the time.

Though designers often point to it as perhaps the clearest realization of McHarg's ideals in the built environment, those histories tend to flatten the story, treating it either as an ideal model for suburbia or, being a suburb, as something counter to McHarg's notions of designing with nature altogether—one more greenfield development in an endless line of beautiful, sprawling works of suburban development.

The project became a launching pad for the careers of Anne Whiston Spirn—then an employee of McHarg's and, eventually his successor as chair of Penn's landscape architecture program—and Colin Franklin, who'd go on to co-found the award-winning landscape architecture firm Andropogon with his partner, Carol.

People tend to ignore the rest of McHarg's built and speculative work. There was the Modernist, master-planned capital city of Abuja, Nigeria, and a ludicrous zoo designed at the behest of Iran's soon-to-be-deposed shah (a project that would ultimately lead to McHarg's ouster from WMRT). This is, in part, because the durability and impact of his work—of any designer's work—is always much smaller and less ambitious than they or we might have imagined in the moment. Design practice is a fraught, imperfect enterprise, shaped more by clients and capital than by careful analysis or creative thinking.

Also, the technocratic lurch of landscape architecture was driven by McHarg: our unrelenting, and perhaps misplaced, faith in data and rigorous analysis to move decision-makers, and the instrumental nature of our professions, steered by real-estate developers and the neoliberal land development machine to focus more on designing luxurious parks in our wealthiest communities than on designing with nature, however fraught that concept might be. Indeed, much of landscape-architecture theory and practice since 1969 can be read as either an endorsement of McHarg's legacy or a critique of his ideology and methods.

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At Penn, we are preparing to celebrate this milestone with a new book, a series of associated exhibitions, an international conference (all titled *Design With Nature Now*), and the public launch of a new climate and design research center bearing McHarg's name. In the book and exhibitions, we feature recent landscape architecture projects that engage large, complex sites and pressing socio-ecological issues, seeming to reflect a McHargian ethos of stewardship.

These works span large-scale landscape conservation and restoration; climate adaptation and mitigation; rapid and informal urbanization; post-industrial cleanups and revitalization; and green infrastructure and water-resource management. The selected projects are imperfect—but, we've found, they are a good place to start thinking about where we've been since 1969 and where we might go by 2069.

Design With Nature now—and in the future

But it's where we are today—within sight of decarbonization, adaptation, and purposeful, planetary design—that interests us most. This anniversary has forced us to ask ourselves: what are the most pressing social and ecological challenges of our generation(s)? Where do planning and design fit within them? How might we imagine a different, yet equally ambitious, agenda for the design fields in this contemporary context? Those questions have led us toward what might be considered the biggest planning and design idea of the last century: the Green New Deal.

Whatever form the GND eventually takes, it will be realized and understood through buildings, landscapes, public works, and the built environment. And this has forced us to view many of these projects as prototypes for a Green New Deal future that's yet to come.

The Great Green Wall of Africa, a community agriculture and rewilding project stretching east to west across the continent's sub-Saharan zone, is a model for international, grassroots-driven environmental design at the continental scale. An Energetic Odyssey in the North Sea, a megaregional energy-infrastructure plan to accelerate the transition from fossil fuels in Northern Europe, is a model for designed decarbonization. And the Healthy Port Futures project in the Great Lakes, which repurposes mud and sediment dredged by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to build new shoreline amenities and habitat, is a model for rebuilding the economy of Rust Belt cities through environmental restoration.

As much as our work around this anniversary has been about what it means to design with nature now, we've already turned our focus to what it might mean to design with nature next, in the near and distant future. This required us to look back, again, at the moment and the movement that gave rise to McHarg — one that was led almost entirely by young activists. And we cannot help but see the parallels between his era and ours, and we cannot help but believe that this rising generation of designers and planners, increasingly and rightfully radicalized, will do what our presiding and retiring generations could not: to design a better, more just, and more sustainable planet.

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