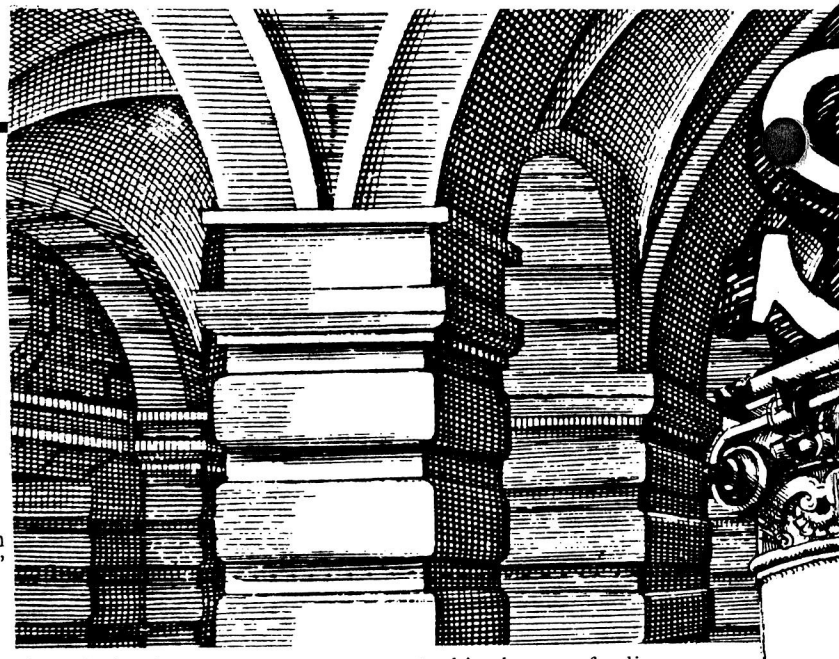
by Tom Bender



Jill Stapleton

I.

Sitting down to write this morning, I've become aware that my perceptions have made another distinct shift over the last few months. Seeing a full-page "definition" of a.t. in a government proposal, I flashed back to Schumacher's four-word definition —simple, sustainable, small and non-violent. I realized that my own sense of "appropriate technology" had shifted to "what follows naturally in the absence of special conditions favoring largeness, concentration and exploitation." A.T. does not need our close attention now. It will flower whenever it is not crushed. It is the favoritism towards bigness, and its causes, that now needs our attention and action.

The words of Frances Moore Lappé and Joe Collins ring ever clearer—"The introduction of *any* profitable technology in a society riddled with inequality only worsens that inequality." What must now be dealt with is not legislation and subsidies favoring a.t., but correcting and removing the regulations, subsidies, practices and beliefs based on exploiting people, resources, and our future for the benefit of a few. A token federal solar tax credit is fine, but in its next breath Congress turns around to deregulate oil and hand the oil companies a *$45 billion* windfall. A battle of subsidies and legislation is a battle of power, and without enough of us knowing how we're being milked and bilked; who's doing it, how and why; how power flows and is exploited in our society; and how to create alternatives, we don't have a mouse's chance in an elephant dance to have any effect.

What we're concerned with is a good society and how to obtain and sustain it. Our development of technological alternatives has revealed two important things. It has shown how technological choices have been exploited by decision-makers to serve the benefits of powerful and wealthy interests. And it has made it clear how technologies have been developed and the institutions of our society reshaped specifically to further the domination of wealth and power.

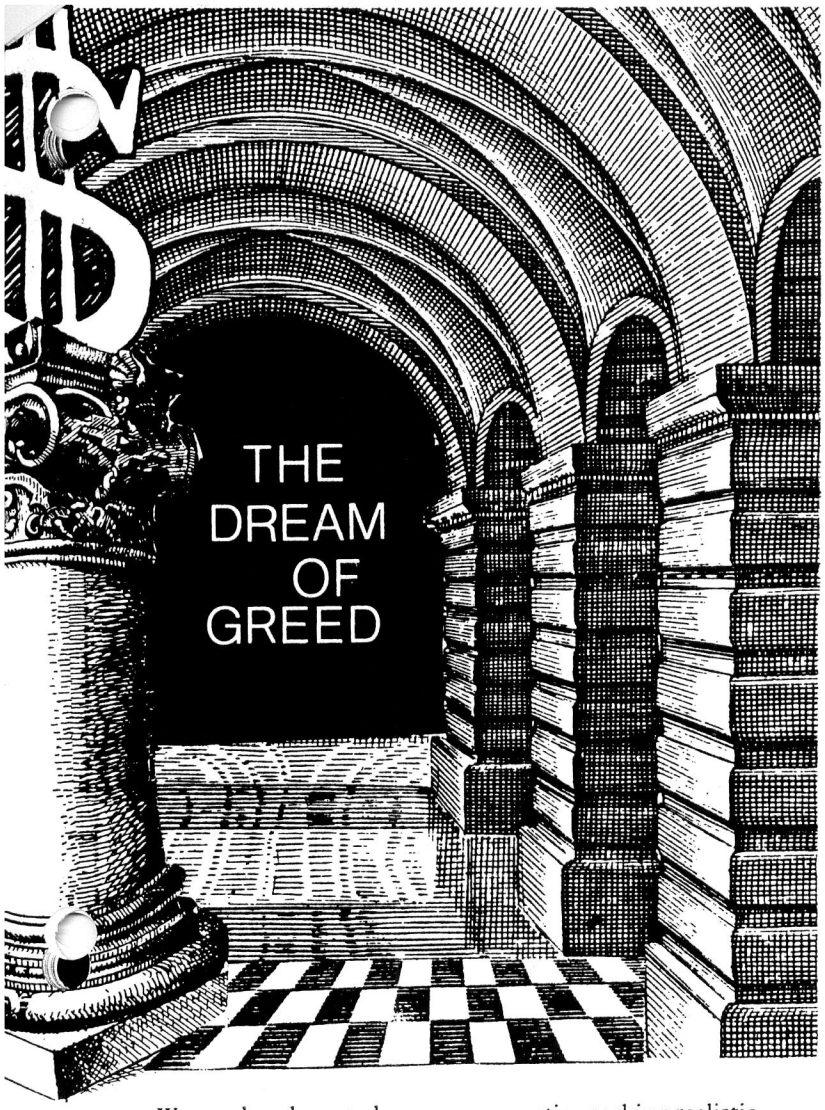
Nuclear power has been consciously promoted to provide subsidized energy to continue automation and elimination of jobs to undermine unions. Below-parity farm price supports have been shown to have been a specific action directed to force into bankruptcy small farmers without access to tax favoritism of large farmers. Health insurance has made the doctors wealthier, not the patients. Credit buying has raised prices by almost 20 percent—that's quite a service to the shopper. We have had the livelihood of a third of our farmers taken away by legislative edict. We have had citizen leaders assassinated by our government's FBI and CIA agents. We have supported fascist dictators and murdered democratic leaders of other countries. There is much that does not show in our newspapers and TV, and much that needs fundamental change.

A single company (GM) has the power to blackmail the railroads into purchasing their locomotives or lose the shipping of 40 percent of all autos built in the country, and to repeatedly buy off anti-trust suits by the Justice Department. Fifty companies (that's the equivalent of *one* per state) now control 90 percent of the profits in food manufacturing in the U.S. The largest two—Unilever and Nestle S.A.—are not even U.S. companies. That concentration of power is a threat to every citizen. Ironically, that power represents and has been built by our own money. We are having our land, our livelihood, and our freedom taken from us and given into the hands of an elite and unscrupulous minority who have shown again and again that they seek only their own benefit and are callously indifferent to the rights and needs of others.

But in the flowering of every dream lies the seed of its own downfall. The maturing of Corporate America has made its culmination ever more apparent. And in the act of ruling America, the rulers have shown their hand. With visibility comes understanding and reaction. Already strong and healthy manifestations of alternate dreams are emerging that can restore balance to our society. Our first task is understanding—as free from our own preconceptions as possible—both the realities of what exists and of what can be. And with it comes our main task, the construction and evolution out of the different beliefs, understandings, dreams and fears that each of us hold, a truly democratic, egalitarian and sustainable society that raises our spirits rather than our debts.

The debates and feelings that run high between Capitalism and Socialism and Democracy and Communism and Left-Wing and Right-Wing and Broken-Wing are largely manufactured and hollow struttings, seeking small differences where sameness predominates. A bureaucracy, whether corporate or governmental, is still a bureaucracy. Do they differ, or do they share being a problem? Is Capitalism or Communism better to live under, or have they both dismal records of being merely concerned with materialistic expansion of our society? Are the huge farmer's co-ops that have squeezed other farmers out of business any different than Corporate America? Is or isn't there a fundamental difference between a Ma and Pa grocery, a Plaid Pantry and a co-op, all of which sell at the same scale and prices? Is making-a-living self-employment Capitalism the same as making-a-killing Corporate Capitalism? If a Right-Wing group grabs the issue of controlling government spending before a Left-Wing group, does that make the idea suddenly evil? What differences are there between a nationalized industry and a government-regulated monopoly? Our simple ideologies don't work.

Any institutional system grows lax and sloppy and fossilized over time—regardless of its ideology or initial behavior. A renewal process and change from one institutional form to another seems essential, as in any living system. A mixed political/economic structure, keeping alternatives alive and flourishing side by side, is probably valuable to keep each element lean and strong. Citizen participation always seems to fall off when problems are under control—why not? Red Bologna would have no pressure to be exemplary if all of Italy was Communist—would it continue as well with its problems largely solved? The success of the Revolution in China has bred new problems, as has the success of Capitalism in the U.S. When we talk of politics, we find it hard to talk in the same breath of art, poetry, music, dance, architecture, gardens or beauty, yet the political/economic structure is the structure that makes the other achievable, or even thinkable.



We need perhaps to be more pragmatic—seeking realistic solutions to our real problems free of ideologically colored glasses, and looking at the reality of proposals rather than their labels or sponsors. We need to continue our stumbling way step-by-step to awareness of more basic causes of our problems, and in turn to the vision to find clearer, more workable and effective solutions. It's getting time to move the game onto the other players' turf. It's *our* turf, really, and we want it back.

It's curious, in a way, to have come full circle to the old "Capitalist Greed" and "class struggle" territories. Yet it's coming to those arenas now with documented evidence, the self-proclaimed words and deeds or our business and governmental leaders, and real-life proof of the failures of our accepted traditions. We have a clearer sense of that politics of power and how it has taken advantage of us, a broader and experienced range of alternatives, and technology and energetics to support new ways of doing things. We're finding, it seems, that the technology of a sustainable society and the power to exercise it must be sought together.

II.

I stopped writing here last night. The above seemed true but incomplete. Corporate America, and exploitation by the ruling class of Americans have definitely been central mechanisms in the deterioration of our society, and need to be dealt with. But that doesn't reach deeply enough into the problem. Why have we allowed such things to develop and prosper? Why have we not been galvanized into indignant reaction at past exposure of these activities?

It is, I think, because we have been guilty of the same dreams. Haven't we all sometime imagined what we would do if we had a million dollars—and had no qualms about that being more than we need, about the effects of having so much more than others, or about where the wealth would come from? Most of us have prospered (in small degree relative to the corporations and the wealthy, but prospered nonetheless) from corporate exploitation of other material and human resources. We have been, if anything, admiring and envious of the greater success, luck, or ability of others to achieve what we have only dreamed.

But now the implications of dreaming those dreams are becoming apparent as a result of their successful pursuit. And it is only now, as we begin to reject such dreams personally, that we discover their hold, discover alternate dreams, and discover what they can do to resolve our intractable problems. Nuclear energy could only be successfully dealt with when we had moved beyond the dream of limitless comfort and ease it promised. And that happened only when the limitations of that dream and the consequent side-effects of its means became apparent. The same is true of wealth-based economics.

To change the means we must change the ends. Within the system we accept, there are no significant alternatives. Our only real alternative is to accept a different system, serving different goals and arising from different dreams.

Greed fails as the basis of society as its consequences become known. Greed means the eventuality not only of combative and exploitive personal relations but of great inequities of wealth and power, and the end of a democratic society. It makes impossible humane cities, socially benign transportation, or respect and loving care for non-productive elements of society and nature, and so on. . . .

Our failures in resolving such unsolvable social problems are tied to our unwillingness to dig deeply enough into their causes. Doing that we will find, as Bologna, Italy, has found, and as others are finding, that new and effective answers arise easily from new assumptions. Good transportation will come only when we put humane cities above the profitability of the auto industry. That means we stop trying to *accommodate* the auto and its destruction of our cities and start to locate business, home and shopping to avoid need for transportation, and then regulate the auto into its proper place relative to other transit. The automobile won't go away on its own. There's too much powerful self-interest behind it.

We'll find, as countries such as China have amply shown, that to eliminate poverty you must improve the lot of the poor, not improve the lot of the rich with the assertion that the wealth will "trickle down" and improve the lot of all. Wealth is *relative*. It is not how much you have, but how much *relative to others*, that makes you powerless or powerful or distributes power equitably in a society. And counter to our development claims, the productivity of the poorest and most backward sectors of a society can be improved most inexpensively and most easily—if what we *really* want is *their* well-being. So far we haven't.

Our modern cities seem to be endlessly in the midst of one crisis or another caused by striking taxi drivers, firefighters, garbage collectors, teachers or some other group that has realized the ability of *any* element to paralyze a complex and interconnected modern city. We seem unable to do anything but capitulate to their demands or engage in a long and bitter combat. Yet if we didn't believe so strongly in greed ourselves and sympathize with the strikers' attempts to exploit their power, we could easily resolve our dilemma. If we believed that equity of income and wealth was reasonable, we would have massive public support against any contract agreements paying more than the average income in the city, and equally strong support for raising incomes below that average. We would learn quickly the effectiveness of practicing *Top-Down Equity*—throwing out politicians, business execu-

tives and others who demanded or accepted more than that average. "If they can't live on what an average New Yorker (or Alabaman, or teacher, etc.) makes, how can they claim to be competent to represent us in Congress (or City Council, or school board)?" It's much more reasonable to lower the income or wealth of the few wealthy to achieve equity than to increase the income of the many poor—and much more realistic than to depend on "future economic growth" to make us all equally wealthy.

The alternatives to greed as a basis for our society are equally obvious and ancient—Equality, Respect, Justice, Moderation and Honesty. We're learning, in the effects of their absence, their necessity for the survival and well-being of our society.

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