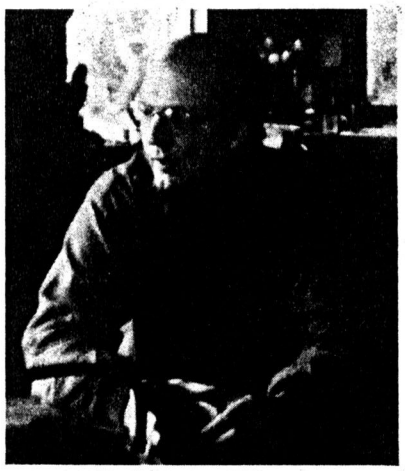
TOM BENDER



I first became aware of Tom Bender twenty years ago via his groundbreaking Environmental Design Primer, *demonstration Ouroboros House, and later* RAIN Magazine, *an environmental publication. Tom now practices architecture and strategic planning for social institutions. Marcia Mikesh and I visited Tom at his home on the northern Oregon coast.*

In* Environmental Design Primer, *along with ecology, Buddhist economics, thinking small, information environments, shape, space, and the sacred, you discussed feng-shui, which put you ahead of the pack.

I was probably the first person in the English-speaking world to consider feng-shui to be of more than historic interest. I had started an Asian Architecture course at the University of Minnesota, and found mention of feng-shui in my studies. The next summer, I was studying solar energy as well as reading Ernest Eitel's 1911 book, *Feng Shui*. One morning, I opened Farrington Daniels' book on solar energy and found a map of the earth showing the electromagnetic fields induced in its crust by solar radiation. I suddenly realized that there *is* a geophysical basis for this ancient Chinese practice. From that, I assembled a whole progression from the geophysical energy fields to how they affect us physically. I think feng-shui is going to be increasingly important in time. Just to realize that our emotions leave an active imprint on a place changes our whole relationship with the world outside our skin.

When did you create the Ouroboros House?

In 1972, we wanted to do something *real* with the introductory Architecture course we were teaching. Students wanted to do something of value. People needed to be able to touch and kick real alternatives to know what worked. Engineers believed that you couldn't solar heat a house in Minnesota. We looked at it differently, and said, "You can't heat an *uninsulated* house in Minnesota, *but* if you superinsulate it, sink it down into the warmer earth, use insulating shutters, have both passive and active solar gain, and use sun reflection off the snow to double the solar input, you can get something that works." And, for good or ill, five years ago we drove across Minnesota and counted about eight Ouroboros houses along just one highway; it's developed into a Minnesota genre. Ouroboros was not a demonstration of solar energy; it was a demonstration of *integrated* design.

How did you come to Oregon?

In 1974, Governor McCall's office asked me to come out to Oregon and work on energy research. I ended up staying. We moved to Portland and started publishing *RAIN Magazine*. After a couple of years, we accomplished our goal with it and wanted to start doing instead of talking. This house was my first real chance to design a building which could put together many of the pieces we'd talked about.

How do you see the current "ecological architecture" movement?

I'm pleased with its achievements, but deeply worried about its direction. All we accomplish by reducing energy use in a building 50% is an illusionary 25-year respite, as long as we're not dealing with population increase at the same time. We've already exceeded the levels of resource use that can be sustained worldwide, and we're making no effort to deal with either the realities of population or our own greed, or the underlying insanity and physical impossibility of limitless material growth.

Which are much bigger issues than Green Architecture...

We absolutely need green architecture. We need similar improvements in all aspects of our lives if we are going to sustain anything near the physical quality of life that we've been having. But those efficiency gains are a one-shot opportunity. Every year that we wait on dealing with the other issues, we're undercutting ourselves and lowering the quality of life we can sustain. Eco-building needs to address basic issues like population, economics, limitless growth, and the spiritual and psychological dimensions of sustainability. Otherwise, in 25 years we're back to a world with *twice* the people starving and *less* we can do about it.

How do we deal with these basic issues?

The root issue is our sense of being separate from Creation, from the rest of the universe, and believing that we are not bound by the physical laws that underlie it. Limitless growth in material things is impossible. In terms of population, all you have to do is project for a few generations, and there is no room to stand. It's pure insanity. Belief in it focuses our lives on things which are directly harmful to us and all life. We need to rediscover the concept of "enoughness."

I think we all have a real emptiness inside, that we're not getting rewards from what we do, from our work, from our relationships with other people, from being a part of something meaningful. Consumerism—"having more"—is the only thing presented as some sort of replacement satisfaction. And it doesn't work.

In Seattle last year, at the Building with Value Conference, I sat through several presentations on energy- or resource-efficient buildings. I was shocked that our house, which we built 17 years ago, was not only equal to what is being done today, but is pointing 180 degrees away from where most of them are headed.

What do you mean?

First, most of those houses are starting from the standpoint of saying, "We're going to design something that looks no different than what everybody has." They should be saying, "The potentials of eco-building are 100 times what people have now; let's build something where people can feel the difference!"

Secondly, many "recycled building products" are band-aids that justify harmful cultural practices. Perhaps instead of recycling pop bottles into carpets that make people sick, we shouldn't drink so much pop!

I compared the floor structure in our house—wood beams and 2x6 decking—with the floor in one of these resource-efficient houses. They used almost the same volume of lumber! Theirs had taken short-rotation lumber, chopped it up, and made OSB beams and all this reconstipated stuff full of glues. The result was so ugly that they had to cover it on top with this recycled popbottle carpet. It was so ugly from below that they had to use recycled-newspaper sheetrock to cover it and then recycled paints to cover *that*.

We used local wood. Using it directly, we've got a finished wood floor on the top, with just linseed oil on it. On the bottom we've got a finished wood ceiling that will be beautiful for 500 years. Since then, we've followed through to demonstrate that long rotation (240-year), old-growth forestry practices can *double* actual timber production and generate an amazing 10-20 times the net economic yield of the industrialized forest practices underlying the so-called "resource efficient" house construction.

Finally, in this house we set out to go beyond resource efficiency to create a place for the soul, a place with silence and simplicity, a place where it felt good to live, connected with the world around us. Using simple, local, often recycled materials effectively was a *means* to that greater end, not an end unto itself.

I kept quiet about my real intentions with this house for years, because it didn't matter what I was after; what mattered was what resulted, the effect it had on people. And then people kept telling us, "The energy in that house is just incredible!" They picked up on exactly what we set out to do. To know that we can make a place with a soul is vital to healing the "diseases of the spirit" so widespread in our culture.

M: I loved the part of your book,* The Heart of Place, *where you discuss the sense of power in buildings.

We have little concept of what life in a sacred society is like. I have only an inkling of the power that is there, and how incredibly different it is than what we're used to. And I know that when I was travelling years ago, I could *taste* the greatness of good places. The more we try to achieve that, the stronger it gets.

The direction our culture's been set on is to consume, to destroy all other life, and to bring all the energy, all our resources into the impossibility of just expanding ourselves. That makes us the biggest cancer on earth. But the sense of being *part* of creation, not just seeing all that stuff out there as separate from us, is life-centered. Being part of all creation—evolving and creating new things and bringing energy together for new places, communities, and cultural patterns—is inspiring.

What we're going through is one of the hard tests of evolution; living through the pain of a death-oriented culture. It has caused the absolute need for us to re-experience and re-create our values and goals from scratch in ourselves. It's so much harder that way, but stronger—like a sword forged in the fire. With it, the opportunity is there to create a future which is immensely powerful, unprecedented, and wonderful!

Tom Bender has recently self-published a delicious book called The Heart of Place: Creating a Sustainable World, *which you can order from him for $15 ; at 38755 Reed Rd., Nehalem, OR 97131.* **-CV**

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