REMEMBRANCE

A Few Choruses Low Down, but Not So Blue for Ian

By Laurie Olin

THE PUBLICATION OF *Design with Nature* forever changed the field of landscape architecture. The book, its ecological point of view, its rational method, and its author also had a significant and positive effect on my own life and career. I first heard of Ian McHarg when architecture classmates from Seattle stayed at my apartment in New York City in 1966. They were traveling to and from the Delmarva Peninsula for a landscape architecture studio at Harvard, where Ian was teaching while on sabbatical from the University of Pennsylvania. I was somewhat taken aback that they were making a plan for an entire peninsula that encompassed large portions of two states.

I first heard McHarg speak in Seattle and met him in March 1971 while teaching with Grant Jones at the University of Washington. He had come to give the John Danz lectures, which consisted largely of excerpts from *Design with Nature*.[1] The three lectures were titled: "Man, Planetary Disease"; "An Ecological Metaphysic"; and "Design with Nature." He was spellbinding. His presentation of the problems arising from our ideology, politics, and habits of practice was persuasive. Like many others, I got it. Ian was at loose ends during the day between his evening lectures and social events, so he came over to the school and hung out in our studio. Up close he was charming, warm, and kind to the students, who were preparing a landscape master plan for Bainbridge Island. He was an astute critic and generous to Grant and me. A year later, I went off to Europe to work on a landscape history of southern England and to study the sociology of the public realm of Rome.

By happy coincidence, I joined the Penn faculty in 1974, at a time when the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning had a bumper crop of natural and social scientists in addition to landscape architects, architects, and planners on its faculty. The curriculum was ambitious, wide ranging, and exhausting, but exciting and remarkably productive in its research, teaching, and production of future educators and practitioners who departed to all parts of the globe, spreading the message of *Design with Nature*. Since then, ecological analysis—the integration of data by overlay techniques, and an interactive matrix-based method for planning and design at a range of scales as advocated by Ian and in our curriculum—has seeped into the working methods of design practices, teaching curricula in academic institutions, and public agencies around the country and the world.

Ian was twenty in 1940, and World War II had begun. His youth was put on hold while he blew up bridges as a commando behind enemy lines. Afterward, he was part of a generation that wanted to fix things, to not make the mistakes of previous generations.

Marxist and Freudian thought, which had been influential in intellectual endeavors for several decades before the war, were displaced by a new perspective: structuralism, which provided meaning and methods in disciplines ranging from linguistics and literature to philosophy and ecology, even economics and design, through the 1950s and 1960s. The intellectual, academic, and professional world of the postwar years was imbued with instrumental systems thinking and a belief that reason and rational methods must be applied regardless of topic and field. McHarg used his graduate study at Harvard to give himself a crash course in science, sociology, and urban planning theory. He was determined to develop a landscape planning method and practice that was objective, not subjective; that was as rational and replicable as the hard sciences, not intuitive and willful—"not like the design of ladies' hats," as he would bellow. Step by step he developed the curriculum at Penn with the aid of research money that allowed him and his colleagues to consider the problem of human habitation and the most fundamental issues of community planning and design at a scale from neighborhood to physiographic region.

In concert with a number of natural scientists who had become public figures, McHarg used national television to advocate for environmental planning. There is no question that his rhetoric, performance, and publications had considerable influence on the creation and early years of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Water and Clean Air Acts of the Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon administrations in the United States. The problems he raised and attempted to address—issues related to health, safety, settlement, resources, ecology, and resilience—are still the most important problems we face, and seem even clearer and more desperate today than when he was at his most strident.

Occasionally people ask me what the department was like, or suggest to me that they think McHarg was unsympathetic to design. It is simply not true. Others have speculated that Bob Hanna, Carol Franklin, other design practitioners, and I were something of a design antidote to the so-called method. In fact, with Ian's support and conviction we were trying to demonstrate that science and ecology were not antithetical to design, but underpinned it when well done—that we were actually part of the follow-through.

He sought to clarify this in a book extending his ideas to human ecology, but the planned "Design for Man" volume never happened, in part because of the intractable difficulties inherent in social science. In the final analysis, landscape architecture is not a science. Like architecture, it is a useful art, one that employs the findings and knowledge of science along with knowledge of art, craft, design, and construction to address human needs in social environments. We knew that, and we discussed ad nauseam how our students at a certain point had to strap all of their analysis to their backs like a parachute and jump, hoping for a soft landing, not a crash. It informed their choices as ethical professionals, regarding costs, safety, health, and environmental outcomes. McHarg's ideas were for guidance and to be used as a checklist for responsibility, not a set of rules to limit imagination, and as a constraint on foolishness and ignorance, not on creation.

Interestingly, I found that the overlay method of examination, comparison, and interaction between various factors and topics—natural, social, historical, theoretical—could be as stimulating and useful in building up and creating a scheme through additive considerations as it was in digging through history and natural factors to produce suitability matrices. In over two dozen projects with Peter Eisenman, I explored using overlays of information in a forward-projecting manner in an effort to find alternative design structures, formal and artistic solutions to complex planning and design problems. Examples of my built and unbuilt work range from the Wexner Center at The Ohio State University and Rebstock Park in Frankfurt, Germany, to the City of Culture at Santiago de Compostela in Spain. After many somewhat

experimental projects, I also came to find natural processes and ecology to be powerful metaphors that have been enormously helpful and inspirational in my work. Several of my most recent projects have derived from careful considerations and analysis of ecological history to produce both an understanding of a place and situation and complex and responsive physical designs. The recently completed University of Washington north campus residential community in Seattle, Apple Park in Cupertino, California, and OLIN's current and ongoing Los Angeles River Master Plan and its pilot projects exemplify this approach.

In the past two decades a number of critiques have been leveled at McHarg and *Design with Nature* that are misplaced and often as ill-informed as the denigration of Frederick Law Olmsted and his parks by a recent generation of professionals. Most of the criticism of McHarg, however, has focused on the means, methods, and data in the work, arguing that they are outdated and simplistic. There is some truth in this, for structural systems of thought are inherently political and moralistic; they inevitably raise ethical issues, whether in science, the humanities, or the professions. Debates within the department and in his own office over planning and design often centered on social rather than biological issues, particularly fears of determinism derived from particular methods of responding to data, the data themselves, the costs and benefits resulting from the relative weight assigned to various factors, and the role of imagination, politics, and choice in human decisions. Unquestionably, the technologies used for remote sensing, mapping, and digital processes and computation have become more sophisticated. In the social sciences, likewise, quantitative methods have evolved, as have concerns for complex and vexed human relationships, economics, and all manner of groups not considered fifty years ago. Nevertheless, Ian's fundamental insight and approach, despite his method—imperfect as all forms of research inevitably are—frames landscape and regional planning today. For all the developments in geographic information systems, no one has shown that he was working on the wrong problems, or that those problems are not still vitally important. As well, his critics have underestimated Ian's responsibility for creating the professional context in which landscape architects and planners now operate; today's practitioners are focused on similar concerns and are using the technology that he promoted and encouraged.

Ian was a force who changed our perspective forever, but also a deeply human and contradictory person. Difficult as he could be at times, he was extremely loyal and devoted to friends and family and fiercely proud and protective of his faculty, quarreling and making up with them socially and privately, in reviews and in faculty meetings—all in an endless effort to improve our work, our lives, and the planet. One of my fondest memories is of him standing atop a log, backlit in the blazing sun, wearing pajama bottoms and holding a cigarette in one hand and a hose in the other, watering the giant kitchen garden on his farm in Marshallton, Chester County, Pennsylvania. Sheep, pigs, and Highland cattle wandered about in the background as he drenched the rank and jumbled masses of plants and hummed a favorite Coleman Hawkins tune. Ian always understood that humans were part of nature, and that only through ecological understanding and constructive action could we save ourselves and have a good life.

Laurie Olin is one of the most renowned landscape architects practicing today. From vision to realization, he has guided many of OLIN's signature projects, including the Washington Monument grounds in Washington, DC, Bryant Park in New York City, and the Getty Center in Los Angeles. He is emeritus professor of landscape architecture at the University of Pennsylvania and former chair of the Department of Landscape Architecture at Harvard University.

NOTES

[1] Ian L. McHarg, *Design with Nature* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Natural History Press, 1969).