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INTR 310

Journal Entry

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Ken Yeang: Theorist, Ecoarchitect, Master Planner, Revolutionary

In our group case study we investigated Ken Yeang, who is a self-described "ecoarchitect". He considers matters of the environment to be ethical concerns that affect the well-being of the greater ecosystem. This outlook has shaped his career and practices over the last several decades. Yeang's work has been so foundational that he is often referred to as one of the founders of the sustainable design movement--a revolutionary, for all intents and purposes. Similar to McLennan's principles outlined in our text, Yeang follows an ethos that focuses on innovative design. For Yeang this means perceiving human and environment as inextricably linked and conflating the well-being of both. This philosophy of environmental stewardship shows itself frequently in Yeang's work, both in the professional and academic spheres. As the sustainable design movement continues to grow and mature, Yeang remains a major player by contributing novel ideas and concepts to physical green building design, propagating these ideas in his lectures and books, and continually pushing the boundaries of what true green design can accomplish.

As has been well-established, Rachel Carson's ground breaking 1960s book *Silent Spring* brought environmental concerns to the forefront during a time of civil and political unrest. Carson pulled the curtain back, so to speak, on the notion of resource exhaustion and taking nature for granted. Though this may not have been a wholly new concept, it had not entered the public knowledge base or discourse until Carson used images and gave language to the phenomenon. By the early 1970s Ken Yeang, a Malaysia native, had earned his degree in London from the Architectural Association. He further went on to complete his PhD work on Ecological Planning and Design (McManus, 2012). Though environmental awareness had increased, the sustainable design movement was still in its infancy and wouldn't gain momentum until closer towards the end of the century (McLennan, 2004). Rather than build off a pre-

existing field, Yeang had the opportunity to help pioneer a path for and nurture the growing sustainable design movement. Yeang's doctoral work spurred his work with green design theory further, and by the mid-90s his dissertation was adapted into a book for widespread consumption. The theories outlined in that work have since become considered foundational to the field of green building design and earned Yeang the esteem of a green movement revolutionary (Patterson, 2013).

"Ecologist first, architect second" is the mantra bannered across Ken Yeang's website. These simple four words reflect the mentality with which Yeang approaches all of his projects. Best known for his "bioclimatic" skyscraper, Yeang doesn't fully accept the buildings as a sustainable means of production. Though he may not necessarily agree with the current societal system, Yeang acknowledges that it is better to work within it rather than oppose it by walking away:

We should not build tall unless we have to. My rationale for looking into this building type is that the tall building type is a built form that will not go away overnight. It exists for many prevailing urban and land economic reasons. If this built form shall be with us for a while, my contention is that we should not negate them but on the contrary seek to find ways to make them more humane to inhabit and find ways to make them as green as possible. If all the green designers of the world negate this built form, then who will make them as green or pleasurable to inhabit as possible? (Patterson, 2013)

Yeang's rationale has led him to produce contributions such as bioclimatics, green aesthetics, context-specific design, and "eco-mimicry"--similar to biomimicry, but takes a more holistic perspective rather than trying to imitate one aspect of nature. Bioclimatics is just one of concrete example of the many deliverables Yeang's philosophy has elicited and added to the sustainable design movement. And yet he is unsatisfied--Yeang has referred to the movement as still in its infancy with much further to go even for a practice like bioclimatics (Patterson, 2013).

In terms of theoretical contributions to sustainable design, the ecoarchitect has made many and only continues to venture further. Perhaps most fundamental is Yeang's belief that ecological issues are necessarily ethical issues (kenyeang.com, 2014). Questions of the environment, resources, and humanity's place therein are not couched in terms of economy or

practicality. Yeang holds that environmental issues breach moral boundaries and compel humanity to justly treat the planet in the same way we treat other people with a certain ethic as a matter of human rights. Though not explicitly stated, this attitude implies that Yeang is attempting to articulate and advocate the "personhood", so to speak, of the environment as a living system. If we accept the notion of the environment as having intrinsic qualities that entitle it to certain rights and give it agency, then humanity cannot treat the environment as an object or infringe on said agency. Rather humanity must interact with the environment as a living force and recognize certain boundaries.

Themes of environmental stewardship are recurrent throughout sustainable design. McLennan parallels these same concepts and articulates them more distinctly as respect for place, people, wisdom of natural systems, etc. (McLennan, 2004). Yeang as an early theorist for these principles was revolutionary in many ways; but more importantly his work continues to be carried out by modern designers. Contemporary adopters of ideologies such as Yeang's encourages the community to continue pushing expectations and refine best practices. Engendering the mindset of sustainable design and perpetuating its essential tenets is invaluablely beneficial to sustainable industries and practices. Businesses and designers have the ability to make giant strides in tackling environmental issues with direct actions, but they also provide valuable alternatives for consumers as well as act as role models for other industries. Though Yeang may contend that sustainable design is still in its infancy, McLennan's account shows just how far it has come over the past few decades (McLennan, 2004) and is hopeful for the continued growth of sustainable principles.

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