



How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built

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Buildings have often been studied whole in space, but never before have they been studied whole in time.

How Buildings Learn is a masterful new synthesis that proposes that buildings adapt best when constantly refined and reshaped by their occupants, and that architects can mature from being artists of space to becoming artists of time. From the connected farmhouses of New England to I.M. Pei's Media Lab, from "satisficing" to "form follows funding," from the evolution of bungalows to the invention of Santa Fe Style, from Low Road military surplus buildings to a High Road English classic like Chatsworth—this is a far-ranging survey of unexplored essential territory.

More than any other human artifacts, buildings improve with time—if they're allowed to. **How Buildings Learn** shows how to work with time rather than against it.

How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built Details

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From Reader Review How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built for online ebook

Mike Violano says

Author Brand of Whole Earth Catalog fame explores the history of buildings and rebuilding in this readable survey of structures. From homes to commercial buildings Brand proves his thesis that form follows use and users over time. The evidence on Main Streets around the world surely supports the idea that business reshapes buildings as their tenants and retail uses evolve.

Brand also takes a few punches at celebrated architects including I.M Pei and Frank Lloyd Wright although each man has left quite "usable" structures behind and shaped the history and practice of modern architecture for home and commercial use. Brand's punctuates his bias with the statement that "in the 1980s there were more malpractice lawsuits against architects than against doctors."

Fun for anyone with an interest in architecture and the bibliography (although a bit dated) is a great way to continue reading on the topic for research or pleasure.

Amanda says

I was the nerdy little girl that checked out books of floor plans from the library - like 10 books at a time - and just went home and *looked* at them. Picked out features I liked in a plan, looked at how a person or a family would use a space in terms of both furniture and movement. Thought about elevation and sunlight.

And majored in English in college, mostly because the math required by architecture degrees was intimidating, and architecture students were intimidating. Also, I didn't want to **MAKE** buildings, I just wanted to **TALK** about them. Someone heard me talking about all of this and give the math excuse and said, "Frank Lloyd Wright was crappy at math too, you know." I'm sure they said other things, but I didn't hear them, because the thought, the mere *mention* of Prairie School will derail my brain and take it over.

This book was fabulous and made me regret for brief (but recurring) moments my path in higher ed. However, its very presence was encouraging that I can still be well-read and informed on the topic, that there is a place for everyone in the built environment to foster understanding and look with new eyes on the things we construct and inhabit (for many values of "construct" and "inhabit"). Huh, guess that lit degree wasn't useless after all?

The only reason this isn't 5 stars is because I didn't like the wide layout of the book. It was kind of floppy and hard to get my mitts around, and though it provided space for a LOT of photos and drawings.

Kendra says

This book is super fascinating, well written, and clear - it's about how buildings change over time and how architects can better adapt to that process of change. I want to read an updated version! The parts about MIT are showing their age, especially because Brand can clearly claim prescience about the Stata Center's roof leaking.

Go find the dead tree version though - the e-book formatting for Kindle is terrible.

Jesse says

Took me months to slowly absorb this but in the process it has completely changed the way I think about houses, buildings, commercial space, urban space, architecture, and construction, probably forever. As a rank amateur in that field, I needed the best kind of introduction, and this certainly feels like this was it.

Alex French says

Just as awesome as I hoped when I put it on a 'to read' list years ago.

Has changed the way I'm able to pick apart many houses I drive by in NH, and think about houses that I'm very familiar with.

The suggested reading in the back put half a dozen new books on Amazon wish-lists for me.

It would be interesting to see updated info/ideas, particularly covering green/sustainable building practices.

A lot of the ideas are applicable to many areas of interest, including programming, enterprise IT, and organizations of all sorts.

Du says

This book had a lot of potential. I don't know why, but I couldn't enjoy the text. The illustrations and images were great, and the landscape orientation was very useful for review the evolution of structures, but the words on the page were useless. The idea behind the book, the evolution of buildings, is really cool and I would like to read more on the subject. I wonder if I have have read too many books about buildings and how the built environment affects people that this was too basic for me.

Overall, not peeved that I read it, but happy that it was a lazy Sunday in front of the wood stove, and not some overly complex read, that didn't satisfy.

Jocelyn says

This book helped me think about buildings in many ways I'd never considered before. This should be required reading for architects, anyone interested in urbanism, and especially anyone in a facilities role at a company. I'll quote the author's summary of the book:

"The argument goes as follows. Building are layered by different rates of change. Adaptation is easiest in cheap buildings that no one cares about and most refined in long-lasting sustained-purpose buildings. Adaptation, however, is anathema to architects and to most of the building professions and trades. And the

gyrations of real-estate markets sever continuity in buildings. The building preservation movement arose in rebellion, deliberately frustrating creative architects and the free market in order to restore continuity. Focus on preservation brought a new focus on maintenance and respect for humble older buildings brought investigation of their design wisdom by vernacular building historians. The same kind of investigation can be made of the persistent change, mostly amateur, that occurs in contemporary houses and offices.

With that perspective backward in mind, it is possible to rethink perspective forward and to imagine designing buildings that invite adaptation. Doing it right requires an intellectual discipline that doesn't yet exist. The study is worth undertaking because, more than any other human artifact, buildings excel at improving with time, if they are given the chance.

And they are wonderful to study. All dressed up in layers of dissimulation, buildings are so naked."

Michael Nielsen says

Jane Jacobs is exactly right about this: "A classic and probably a work of genius."

Kristian says

If you are an architect you should lose your license for not having read this book. Anyone interested in building, architects, contractors, home-renovators, property managers, real-estate agents, DIY weekend warriors, all of you need to read this and better both yours, your clients, your renters, and your buildings lives... This book puts into wonderfully written word why european cities have evolved the way they have, and why nearly every new construction area in America seems like a joke. Old buildings will set you free. Brand also outlines several concepts and ideas that are currently being touted by current green and sustainable progressives, yet this book is over a decade old, and doesn't just use buzzwords to get his ideas across. There are complete and excellent examples, points and counterpoints to all the arguments and ideas he presents. Seriously, this is a great book for anyone to read, but especially those directly in contact with any part of the building or remodeling industries.

Keenan says

Buildings are meant to be occupied: this is the credo for this picture-filled book. Too often are high-class buildings designed with nothing but their external appearance in mind with little regard for future functionality. Too often residential buildings are built hastily and with little communication between people in charge of the structure, services, and space, resulting in maintenance costs that eventually overshadow the initial building cost. The question worth asking is: what kinds of buildings have stood the test of time, are worth investing in rather than letting fall apart?

This book does a great job constructing an overarching narrative answering this question with enough little tidbits of insight and fun examples in between to keep the reader engaged. Coming into this with very little real estate or building background, I feel I have a bit more of a toolkit that'll be handy whenever I move into a new place or renovate an old one. Ultimately, for a book with such a title that suggests a very wide scope, the buildings within are very US- and England-centric; I look forward to reading the Oriental version of this

book, ?????????? (I assume)

P.S. Who are these people that say "good for a lazy Sunday afternoon"?! Don't be fooled, this is a hefty book, and taking your time with the references will take a good weekend :)

edh says

This is my reading reaction I posted to my blog: <http://schoolingdokus.blogspot.com>

From my last post - this was the only book referred to in the New South Wales matrix that I hadn't yet read. So I set out to grab a copy of *How Buildings Learn* and discover more about its metaphor for a potential library future.

I think I have always been interested in architecture - take me to any city and I am perfectly happy wandering around to see what I can see in the streetscapes. I knew why I had this interest after a 1997 college guest lecture by James Howard Kunstler. As deeply ashamed as I was at the audience, some of whom booed his talk and belligerently challenged both his ideas and authority in the field, I had a growing sense of excitement and identification. Kunstler was my kind of guy - someone who had figured out that people's relationships with their surroundings profoundly affect their sense of development as a people. "Is this a place worth caring about?" he shouted, showing slides of all-too-familiar suburban landscapes where big box stores held dominion over the horizon and token landscaping replaced once thriving & complex ecosystems. It's no wonder young people feel alienated and isolated, he claimed, pointing to the lack of sidewalks in housing developments and the proliferation of bland "places" that resemble nowhere in particular.

His ideas resonated with me and I was grateful to find the words for things I sensed but was not able to articulate. I found this to be true of Brand's book as well: although one can read this book through the photographs, illustrations, and captions alone, the narrative Brand created is a good one indeed. My favorite reading "moments:"

He quotes from Jane Jacobs on the costs of new construction: "Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must come from old buildings." (p. 28) This quote faces two photos - one of the carriage-style garage where Hewlett-Packard took shape in 1939, and the modest interior of a 1970s garage in Palo Alto where Steve Jobs & Wozniak invented the Apple computer.

In a strange way, libraries are always old buildings because we store the past - we are the metaphoric "old building" that provides a foundation for today's thinkers to build upon.

On p. 188, Brand points out the difference in philosophy of an architect who thinks of a building as a way to manipulate the power structure of those who inhabit it, and the actual inhabitants who will inevitably shape it the way their lives evolve: "A building is not something you finish. A building is something you start."

Libraries are changing organisms just as our users are changing organisms. Our future depends on being flexible, modular, and providing the raw space in which change can flourish.

"Anticipate greater connectivity always."

Beyond being an excellent example of Strunk & White style, this simple declarative sentence is what we

should do for our institution as a whole and for the learners that come through our doors. Brand uses this as an introduction to a paragraph on the Berkeley's Wurster Hall conduits, built into the fabric of the building anticipating lots of lovely coaxial cable for television in every classroom. Instead, it proved to be a great way to network computers as the Internet revolution arose. What else could it have connected? Had this empty, "useless" space not been provided, there would have been no opportunity to help the building keep evolving with its inhabitants.

Architecture turns out to have a lot in common with libraries. We deal on a human scale, and help people create places worth caring about, worth inhabiting, and worth growing.

Michael says

A great book about architecture, construction and (a little) interior design. This book, while not about computing, can serve as a reference for how to (and not) build software that can evolve. Brand's book is a wonderful companion to Christopher Alexander's classic books on architecture and pattern languages.

Angela says

Random twitter title

Kind of applies to UX.

Dianne says

You will love this book if, like me, you think that modern and postmodern architecture has gone terribly, terribly wrong. (Conversely, if you worship Frank Gehry, I. M. Pei, and their ilk, you will probably be offended.) Stewart Brand argues convincingly that the buildings that survive are those that can be flexible enough to adapt to the changing needs and tastes successive generations of inhabitants. He is particularly trenchant in his criticism of the overprogrammed, over-designed, sculptural architectural buildings (he calls them "magazine architecture") that are often obsolete before they are completed, and he points out that, Frank Lloyd Wright's opinion notwithstanding, it is not in fact a sign of architectural success if the roof leaks!

Also be sure to check out his very original comments on "low-road" buildings, those whose designs are so throwaway that successive inhabitants can and do feel utterly free to knock down walls, cut through floors, and otherwise jerry-rig them to adapt to current needs. It's a brilliant exploration of an often neglected but probably ubiquitous subset of buildings.

Dale says

Stewart Brand's thinking about architecture seems to have two basic elements: a strong influence from the design patterns approach of Christopher Alexander, and Brand's own interest in the time dimension. Much of

the book is infused with deep contempt for the practice of architecture as it has become in the past century. He reserves special scorn for Frank Lloyd Wright and for contemporary 'magazine architects'. Brand's view, hardly controversial, is that architects should focus on designing buildings that *work* instead of buildings that merely photograph well. Part of making a building that works is designing it in such a way that it can evolve over time as the occupants' needs change, or the occupants themselves are replaced.

Don't get me wrong: this is not a 'negative' book. It is filled with insight, ideas, and suggestions. And many of the photographs are fascinating, showing buildings at various times in their history, evolving, always growing, sprouting new facades, new floors, new rooflines.

I wish that I had read this book when I was much younger. It might have saved me from a couple major real-estate mistakes. Now that the housing market is in such disarray, reading and understanding this book at a deep level might be very beneficial for those young enough to benefit from buildings that will last a lifetime or more.
