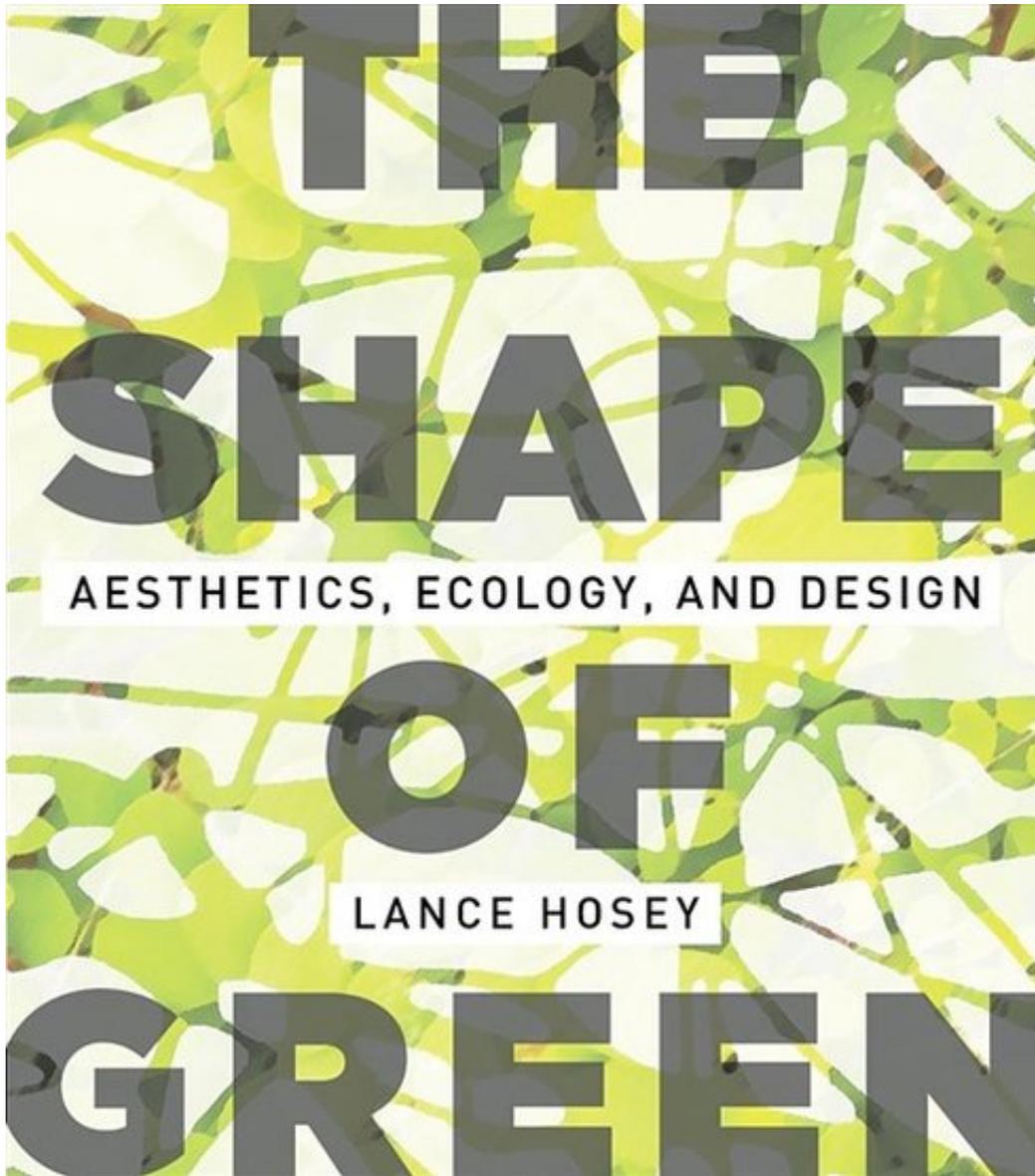


## The Shape of Green: An Argument for Beauty (Book Review)



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Buckminster Fuller, who is not remembered for being an aesthete, wrote: "When I am working on a problem, I never think about beauty but when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong." But many of us involved with teaching or writing about sustainable design dance around the issue of beauty. TreeHugger was founded by Graham Hill on the principle that sustainable design has to also be good design, so with [a few exceptions](#) from TreeHugger Sami, we have been pretty consistent in avoiding the hemp and mud, and have tried to always make the case that green design still has to be good design. But beauty: that is taking it to a different level.

Architect Lance Hosey has tackled this issue in his important new book, [The Shape of Green](#). He suggests that you cannot have sustainability without beauty.

Long term value is impossible without sensory appeal, because if design doesn't inspire, it is destined to be discarded. "In the end," writes Senegalese poet Baba Dioum, "we conserve only what we love." We don't love something because it is nontoxic and biodegradable,- we love it because it moves the head and heart..... When we treasure something, we're less prone to kill it, so desire fuels preservation. Love it or lose it. In this sense, the old mantra could be replaced by a new one: If it's not beautiful, it's not sustainable. Aesthetic attraction is not a superficial concern- It's an environmental imperative. Beauty could save the planet.

Beauty is a very strong word that we often avoid using. Steve Mouzon [addressed the issue recently](#), about why he uses lovable instead:

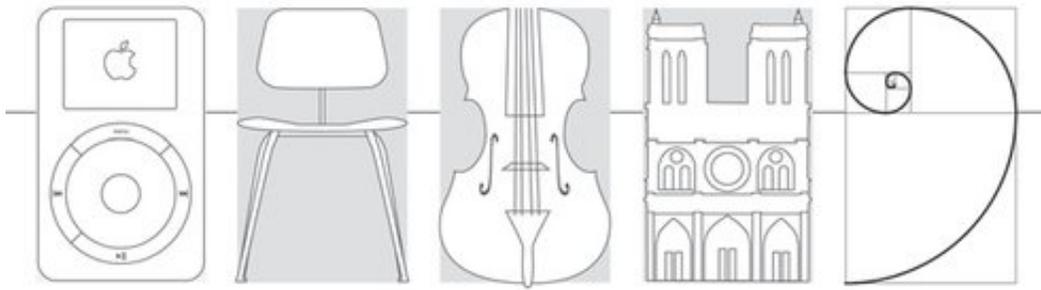
Many of my colleagues who are classicists have long insisted on beauty as the highest standard, whereas many of my colleagues who are Modernists have long disputed that stand, preferring grittier or more industrial aesthetics while claiming that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. We'll never get agreement between these two groups on beauty. Both of these groups recoil, however, at a term so unprofessional as "lovable." "That's barely a step above 'cute,' or even worse, 'precious,'" they might say. But ask any non-architect, and they have no problem at all talking about lovable buildings and places, and they'd really like it if we were to design more of them.

I don't think Lance Hosey would have time for this; he sets a very high standard. He is concerned that we are instead settling for Style, a very different thing.

The most familiar attempts to bring style to sustainability have become aesthetic cliches. Hemp shirts, rattan furniture, unbleached paper, wood pulp walls and wheat-board cabinets suggest that "earth-friendly" should look earthy.

This is not a difficult book to read, but it is a difficult book to review, it covers so much territory, there is so much in it. As an example: I have spent pages explaining why living in small spaces works in a city; he does it in a few sentences that could be a book on their own:

Downsizing homes won't work unless they offer more to homeowners. "Everybody hates the Calvinist sacrifice, they just don't want to hear of it" , architect Andres Duany told the New York Times. McMansions have served a perverse purpose, he argues, by attempting to replace amenities that have disappeared from public life- an exercise room substitutes for a park, a home theatre for the Main Street cinema, the great room for the town square. Going small can succeed only if these missing pieces of the townscape reappear. Shrunk structures must accompany more active communities, and conversely, building smaller might actually encourage more social interaction- and healthier lifestyles- by nudging people out into public space. Smaller has to be better for the planet and for people at the same time.



© Lance Hosey, after Lidwell, et al, *Universal Principles of Design*

Then there is the lengthy discussion about what makes things beautiful, like proportion, tactility, smell. While the iPod is up there among those beautifully proportioned objects, he's not a fan because of their lack of repairability and durability. "The company creates products people want but can't keep, and a love that won't last is heartbreaking."



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I have been working on this book review for a very long time, and do not think I have done a very good job of conveying its significance. It's hard to be an objective reviewer when Lance loves so many of the same buildings and objects that I love, whether it is the architecture of Lake | Flato or Keiran Timberlake, or even a [wooden radio by Singgih Kartono](#). I have been teaching sustainable design for five years and have always said that I am still looking for a good definition of it, and for a book that might serve as a textbook on the subject. This isn't the case anymore; first there was David Bergman's [Sustainable Design: A Critical Guide](#) which was a great introduction.

The Shape Of Green is much more than an introduction; it deals with the fundamental issues that I could never quite express to my students about the importance of aesthetics, design and yes, even beauty, to green building. I could never quite justify why I would post some projects on TreeHugger and skip others that might have a higher LEED score. After reading the Shape of Green, I am much more confident in saying that if it doesn't move the heart, it doesn't move the needle on sustainability.

*TreeHugger readers can get a copy of The Shape of Green at a 30 percent discount. Simply head over to [Island Press](#) and use the coupon code **2Hug**.*

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