

Recycle this Book...Please!

"Cradle to Cradle"
reviewed by Howard Fienberg
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William McDonough and Michael Braungart open *Cradle to Cradle* by informing the reader that "this book is not a tree." Using no wood pulp or cotton fiber, the publisher used synthetic paper made from plastic resins and inorganic fillers. The result is a waterproof, "durable" (and in some places, recyclable) book which can "be broken down and circulated indefinitely in industrial cycles—made and remade as paper or other products." Readers will be glad to know that the book can be reused, even though its ideas cannot.

The book is dominated by concerns and rants in the typical environmentalist vein: hidden toxic chemicals; scarcity of natural resources; and overflowing landfills. The authors speak fondly of the theories of Thomas Malthus, Paul Ehrlich, the Club of Rome and Rachel Carson, nearly all of which has been disproved. A cursory glance at a tome like Bjørn Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist* might have led an intelligent editor to conserve the precious materials and energy involved in producing the book and discard most of the pages before publishing even began.

Not all the pages, mind you, since there are a few interesting ideas buried inside.

Braungart is a chemist and McDonough an architect. Both wish to change how we manufacture and produce (and how we live and consume). They see "environmentally friendly" production as really nothing of the sort – instead of striving to be environmentally "good," businesses concern themselves, at best, with being "less bad."

This leads them to their criticism of recycling. They criticize the concept and the terminology, preferring the more accurate term "decycling" since the process reduces the quality of the material over time. To them, recycling is a feel-good exercise which helps consumers avoid tackling the 'real' problem, which the authors think is over-consumption. Unfortunately, the authors fail to dig into the issue further, never assessing the energy used and pollution produced in the process of recycling.

Following their vocational instincts, the authors target structure and design. Their criticism of architecture's "universal style" leads to criticism of the universal design manufacturing solution – designing for a worst-case scenario so the product will always operate with similar efficiency. The resulting products are "alien" to the environments in which they are used and contribute nothing positive to the environment.

To counter this, they propose ways to integrate buildings with nature. Soil and plant life should be planted atop buildings to provide insulation and reduce carbon dioxide levels at the same time. Architects should build with glass so that workers

and residents can always see and feel connected to nature and the surrounding environment. The authors' ideal buildings would be powered by a self-sufficient source that returns to nature whatever it removes. McDonough and Braungart envision people working and living happily rather than sulking in fluorescent-lit cubicles and dull grey domiciles.

The authors' overall vision would require more than just remaking products and manufacturing to bring it to some semblance of fruition. It would demand a massive societal upheaval. Cities could not be maintained. These ideal buildings take up vast amounts of space and must be surrounded by wilderness, so each building would have to be in the middle of nowhere. The infrastructure to connect such installations in even the most primitive fashion would be almost immeasurable in size and cost, not to mention the pollution produced in laying it out.

Despite the authors' desires to make residents and workers happy by immersing them in nature, they don't actually seem to care about people or what people might actually want. In all their pages reverentially noting the "diversity" and "efficiency" in nature, they never once mention the diversities and efficiencies of the free market—humans' right to choose.

Comfort is irrelevant. Never mind that the plant roofing scheme would either call for a magnificently reinforced barrier or require building residents to put up with any number of "natural" pests burrowing their way through the attractive soil and into the buildings. Or that locating a building amidst a jungle-scape would make stepping outdoors downright hazardous to humans. Or that their proposed sources of energy range from the so-far ineffective solar and wind power, to models which, "like trees, produce more energy than they consume"—a typical description of a perpetual motion machine.

These two authors are worse than pie-in-the-sky environmentalists. At least most utopians do not insist that their solutions are practical and down-to-earth. As such, it should not surprise the reader that the book reads like a tract from the *Summer of Love*. In all the hand wringing about nature, there is not one mention of biotechnology or genetically modified organisms, "synthetic" creations with the potential to save so much of the "nature" the authors love. In the real world, it is scorching hot today. Rather than melt while I take in nature, I'm running my air conditioner full blast. In a little while, I'll pop open a "synthetic" aluminum can of cola. When I'm finished, I will toss the can in the recycling bin. It is no utopia, but it is comfortable for now.