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Contact: Carissa Matthews
(315) 443-3507
cmatthews@syracusecoe.org

Cook + Fox Founding Partner Speaks on Biophilic Design

What is biophilia and how do we apply that concept to the design of buildings? For many in the construction, design, and building professions, that question is a timely one requiring thought about our interaction with our natural world. Richard Cook's plenary speech at Healthy Buildings 2009 addressed precisely that question, challenging those in the audience to think more broadly about the effects that the building industry has on the environment.

Richard Cook is a founding partner at Cook + Fox Architects, located in New York City, and has dedicated his practice to solving the issues surrounding the creation of environmentally responsible, high-performance buildings. In many ways, Cook's presentation dovetailed with the points made by the earlier plenary speaker, Robin Kimmerer, a self proclaimed botanist who discussed the differences between Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Scientific Ecological Knowledge.

Cook opened by relaying a story about his conversations with clients in corporate America and stated that those clients were more interested in the concept of recruitment and retention of the best possible talent than hearing about the research and data surrounding green building they could acquire themselves. Cook supported this statement by discussing the difference between himself as an architect and those scientists at the conference who are tied to the quantifiable knowledge of the relationship between health and productivity.

He prefaced his presentation by saying, "[For me] It's about human emotion, we really know something about this that we find hard to quantify. I'm going to talk more about love, human emotion, connection to place, and connection to people than hard data." He continued, "the most sustainable building is one that people love," tying the relationships between the natural world and the built world together, in descriptions of human emotion and the connection a person feels to their place and other people. Cook used E.O. Wilson's definition of biophilia as the "innately emotional affiliation of human beings and other living organisms."

Cook's presentation aimed at providing concrete examples of projects and work completed by his firm that used the principles of giving back to nature represented by the concept of biophilia. The projects he presented, including the Bank of America Tower at One Bryant Park, the Elie Tahari Showroom, the Offices of Cook + Fox Architects, and the Live, Work, Home housing competition entry for Syracuse, New York's Near West Side, all exhibited the concept of using architecture to mimic nature. In some instances Cook described, initial designs by architects promoted more interactions with nature. As in the Cook + Fox Offices, "what we saw right before our eyes was life following life, and a simple move of installing a green roof led to an increase in the plant and animal life and biodiversity within the city."

"Most people on earth now live in urban areas," Cook said, "[The majority of the population] has crossed from a rural to an urban species." Now, as Robin Kimmerer said, "what can we give back?"

Many members of the audience had positive reactions to Cook's plenary presentation. A former classmate of Cook's, Steve Busa of Ashley McGraw Architects, P.C. in Syracuse, New York, stated, "I loved Rick's ability to integrate architecture with some of the biomimicry examples and I'm glad to see he's doing something for Syracuse."

Randall Korman, a Professor of Architecture at Syracuse University who also taught Cook, added, "He's the kind of person who really leaves an impression on you... what Rick represents is the kind of conscience that we all have to have about issues of sustainability, energy conservation, green design, and biomimicry; all those things that he is advocating in his own work are things I think the profession as a whole needs to begin to adopt as guiding principles. He doesn't just speak to those issues, but he builds to those issues and he builds at all scales. What you saw today was the same set of principles applied to a single family house on the Near West Side of Syracuse that were applied to a 70 story building in Midtown Manhattan. It tells us that at the very heart of the issue are core principles that we just simply need to adhere. Those core principles have a long tradition that go back to indigenous cultures and the people that lived in the landscape and used that relationship effectively. This is opposed to a contentious relationship that we have had with the environment for a number of years."

-Nicolette Feldser, Ashley McGraw Architects, P.C., HB2009 Ground Reporter

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