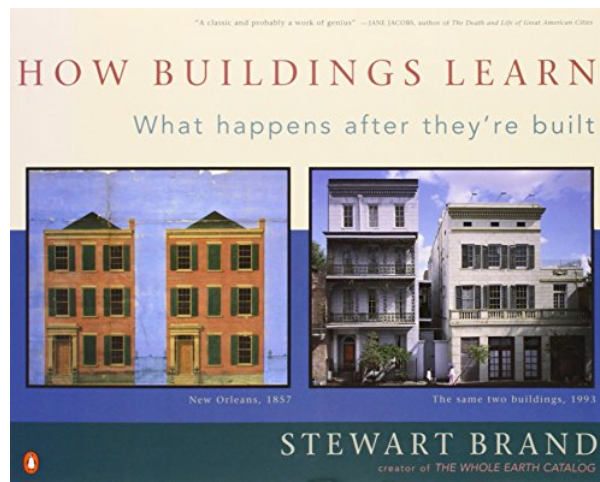


# HOW BUILDINGS LEARN: WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THEY'RE BUILT BY STEWART BRAND



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"A classic and probably a work of genius" — JANE JACOBS, author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

# HOW BUILDINGS LEARN

What happens after they're built



New Orleans, 1857



The same two buildings, 1993



STEWART BRAND

creator of *THE WHOLE EARTH CATALOG*

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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.

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From Publishers Weekly

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53 of 55 people found the following review helpful.  
excellent, thought-provoking, calm

By Greg Wilson (gwwilson@interlog.com)

I've hesitated to review this book because I'm personally suspicious of glowing praise. However, this book deserves it. Brand's starting point is the observation that most architects spend most of their time re-working or extending existing buildings, rather than creating new ones from scratch, but the subject of how buildings change (or, to adopt Brand's metaphor, how buildings learn from their use and environment) is ignored by most architectural schools and theorists. By looking at examples (big and small, ancient and modern), Brand teases out patterns of re-use and change, and argues (very convincingly) that since buildings are going to be modified many times, they should be designed with unanticipated future changes in mind. Of course, the same is true of programs, and I found again and again that I could substitute the word "program" for "building", and "programmer" for "architect", everything Brand said was true of computing as well (but much better written than any software engineering polemic I've ever read).

30 of 30 people found the following review helpful.

This Book Effectively Merges Technology with Preservation

By Kiwibird

Stewart Brand's *How Buildings Learn*: What happens after they're built is as much a reflection of his life as it is about architecture. This potent clearly written essay provides valuable insights for a wider ranging audience while poking fun at established norms in the information age. Depreciatory of modernism casting doubt on the success of popular monuments paying homage to their creators, Brand does not limit his criticism of Wright for *Falling Water* in southwestern Pennsylvania or I.M. Pei's *Media Lab Building* at MIT. The strength of the book is the candid and thoughtful approach, interrelating complex issues with simple strands. Weaving a tale of old stuff in a new world, Brand proposes that buildings are most useful to their occupants and neighbors when they adapt. He assures that change will happen and that the only enduring monuments are those that can transform with time. Brand relies on a variety of primary and secondary sources and reinforces his examples with candid photographs, often visually comparing and contrasting to make his points. For each of these archetypes he tests the building against its function to perform basic living needs. He candidly makes observations without concern for political correctness within the broader architectural community.

Proposing six shear levels within a building based on their ability to temporally adapt, *How Buildings Learn* uses Site, Structure, Skin, Services, Space, and Stuff as a highly successful outline in delivering its message (p. 13). One source attributes this paradigm to that developed by British architect and historian F. Duffy's "Four S's" of capital investment in buildings. The site is eternal, yet often ignored by architects. The structure is most permanent defining the form and lasting 30 to 300 years. The skin is the part the architects get to play with. The services change every 10 to 15 years and, for ease of adaptation, should be kept separate to allow slippage from structure. The space (interior partition and pedestrian flow) and people's stuff change continually at the will of the occupants. After defining these layers, Brand then maps how buildings acclimatize over time based on their architecture.

The architecture is divided into three paths: low road, high road, and monumental. As a counter-culturalist, Brand observations should surprise no one that those dysfunctional places revered by society adapt the worse while despised "low visibility, low-rent, no-style" structures are functional, cost effective, and adapt easily to change. Contrasting the "temporary" World War II government warehouse *Building 20* at MIT to I.M. Pei's *Media Lab* on the same campus, Brand illustrates his points with human testimonies and photographs. Though scheduled for demolition a number of times over the decades, *Building 20's* adaptable character has resisted. On the contrary, it appears the only forces retaining the overly designed and dysfunctional *Media Lab* are economic and social: the millions of dollars expended for its construction and the people that approved the funding for a monument to its designer. High Road buildings are high maintenance, described by Brand as a "labor of love measured in lifetimes." Citing original work by the Duchess of Devonshire, he attributes the character of these buildings to "high intent, duration of purpose, and a steady supply of confident dictators" (p. 35).



Unlike Low Road buildings that demonstrate value through utility, or High Road buildings that endure for their beauty and majesty, the worst buildings for adaptation are Famous buildings. For this arena, Brand has a target-rich environment. One book reviewer describes these buildings as "ignoring time, while time does not reciprocate." Because of its leaky roofs, Falling Water becomes, "Rising Mildew" and a "seven-bucket building" (p 58.) Famous buildings cannot adapt. They either exist as monuments to their creators, requiring significant investment to preserve, or as relics on the landscape succumbing to the forces of nature disintegrating into the landscape upon which they sit. Brand applied a similar logical approach to contrast exposed building elements. The Eiffel Tower, though despised by the locals at its inception, now stands as a monumental icon to the technical advances of the early twentieth century. The structure is beautiful in the nude. On the contrary, the exposed systems on the twenty-first century Pompidou Centre - originally celebrated for innovation and creativity - are now rusted and cracked. Without intervention, Famous buildings are destined to return to the landscape from which they were created.

How Buildings Learn mirrors Brand's interest in preservation and high technology. While one might interpret preservation and modern construction materials as diametrically opposed disciplines, Brand allays these concerns. The chapters on Preservation and Maintenance allude to the desirable attributes of quiet, populist, victorious, and romantic. The space materials create environmental stewardship through their speed, efficiency, strength and effortless implementation. Traditional or "vernacular" materials will be touchable and aesthetic but come at a higher price. Smart materials, created from advanced processes, are cheaper and may provide the economic incentive to preserve an old building that might otherwise succumb to the financial pressures created by vernacular restoration. Brand suggests that future buildings will learn more quickly. He uses computer advances in sensory and motor response as metaphors; however, does not suggest to what part of his six "S's" illustration this prediction relates.

As a matter of fact, Stewart Brand has a history of predicting technical change and has built a contrarian consulting organization around this ability. Unlike most management consultants, yet consistent with How Building Learn, Brand helps companies adapt - designing for impending change instead of planning for a strategic future outcome. As Fortune magazine paraphrased him, "If mind-boggling change is the only constant, focusing on the avoidance of major blunders yields better results than the single-minded pursuit of the big win."

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Great insight for architects

By john elliott

As a graduate architecture student i can honestly say this book and insight have shaped the way I think about buildings and the projects I work. The different mindset the author presents in this book really can change the built enviornment we work and live in.

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