

Datebook

Jon Carroll:
Petraeus was just
a fool for love like
the rest of us **F10**

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Bill McDonough and his firm worked on UCSF Medical Center at Mission Bay, set to open in 2015. Inset: The firm's research building for NASA at Moffett Field, named Sustainability Base.

PLACE By John King

Next step for green pioneer

Leader in sustainability reaches from S.F. to Walmart to NASA

It happened decades ago, and what's done is well past done, but William McDonough still grows spirited as he recalls the specter of Richard Meier looking over his shoulder.

McDonough was a master's degree student in the School of Architecture at Yale University; Meier was a revered modernist with a refined palate of white metal and clear glass. McDonough was working on a design for what would be a solar-heated house in Ireland, and Meier was underwhelmed.

"Richard Meier told me, 'Young man, solar energy has nothing to do with architecture,'" McDonough recalled this week, leaning forward conspiratorially in his firm's small San Francisco office. "He put me in a quandary: What am I supposed to do?"

The answer has proved to be expansive: buildings and products and an overall quest for what might be called "sustainable abundance" — a world where the growth of cities and societies is beneficial to nature, rather than destructive to the environment. McDonough, 61, has created the equivalent of a multiplatform brand in Earth-friendly design, forging partnerships with the likes of Brad Pitt and Walmart at the same time he presides over a 25-person architecture firm in Charlottesville, Va.



Cesar Rubio / William McDonough + Partners

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Green pioneer sets sights on global goals

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McDonough's varied worlds overlap this week in San Francisco. On Thursday at Moscone Center, he will give a concluding speech at Greenbuild, a conference with 35,000 attendees hosted by the United States Green Building Council. On Wednesday night, by contrast, he's the subject of a fundraising tribute for his Cradle to Cradle Products Innovation Institute; tickets start at \$1,000 and the master of ceremonies is Susan Sarandon. He will be introduced by Meryl Streep, who has known him since their days at Yale.

Decision makers

But to McDonough — who is on Walmart's advisory board and has been involved with the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, since 2002 — environmentalism will be embraced only if the message resonates with decision makers and the public.

For instance: "I don't say 'sustainable.' I say 'sustainable growth.' It's an active thing," McDonough said during an interview Monday morning before heading off to give a talk to North Face employees on his design philosophy. "Sustainable" sounds boring, not fecund, not jazzy and cool.

His riffs can take a glib turn, as when he describes how "before we talk about ecosystem design, we have to talk about ego-system management." But veteran practitioners of "green" design praise McDonough for his early ability

William McDonough

1951: Born in Japan. Father is a languages officer in the U.S. Army.

1976: Earns master's degree from Yale School of Architecture

1981: Opens design firm in New York.

1992: McDonough and German chemist Michael Braungart release "The Hannover Principles," a nine-point philosophy with such targets as "eliminate the concept of waste."

1996: Dean of architecture at University of Virginia. Charlottesville remains his base after he steps down in 1999.

1997: Gap building opens in San Bruno.

2002: Publication of "Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things" by McDonough and Braungart. Redesign of Ford Motor Co.'s River Rouge plant outside Detroit includes a 10-acre living roof, the nation's largest.

2006: After Hurricane Katrina, Brad Pitt and McDonough found Make It Right to help New Orleans' flood-ravaged Ninth Ward. The target is 150 new houses; as of August 2012, 86 have been built.

2009: Cradle to Cradle Products Innovation Institute established in San Francisco.

to interest corporate clients in a field that practitioners such as Meier dismissed with a shrug.

One example is in San Bruno, where McDonough's firm designed an office building for Gap Inc., which opened in 1997 with energy-conserving touches that include a 70,000-square-foot roof



William McDonough calls Sustainability Base at Moffett Field "NASA's first space station on Earth." Its most unusual feature might be its water recycling system.

covered in native grasses. Such features now are relatively common on new green buildings; then, and on that scale, they were all but nonexistent.

'Significant pioneer'

"Bill really was a significant pioneer in this world," said William Leddy of the San Francisco firm Leddy Maytum Stacy, known for its emphasis on sustainable design. "He's a good salesman, charismatic and well spoken, and that's part of his strength."

The San Francisco office of William McDonough + Partners opened in 2006, a ninth-floor perch on Post Street with tall windows that let in air and natural light. This is the only outpost beyond Charlottesville, and it has led to such local projects as a new research building for NASA at Moffett Field that opened in April and bears the name Sustainability Base.

Though McDonough describes the curving silver metal structure as nothing less than "NASA's first space station on Earth," most of the conservation measures are found in other green buildings, from sun shades and solar

panels to the use of native landscaping. The most unusual touch is a "forward osmosis water recycling system." Recycled water is purified to the quality level of drinking water, although state regulations allow it to be used only for such purposes as toilet flushing.

McDonough acknowledged "toilet to tap, that's a PR problem," but pointed out that full reuse is allowed in Singapore ("they call it 'new water'") and suggested that the NASA building's innovation might someday be accepted here: "We're doing what Buckminster Fuller would have called 'anticipatory design,' getting ahead of the curve."

Cradle to Cradle

Other local projects include the block-long UCSF Medical Center at Mission Bay, which McDonough's firm worked on in association with lead architect Stan- tec. It is set to open in 2015.

But the initiative that seems to stir McDonough's enthusiasm the most is what he calls Cradle to Cradle design.

The concept was devel-

oped with German chemist Michael Braungart, a longtime associate. It seeks to go beyond recycling toward a world where products can be composted when no longer needed, or taken apart, then put to new use — an endless loop that McDonough likens to a natural forest's ability to maintain itself in perpetuity.

The phrase "cradle to cradle" is now trademarked, and there is a certification process similar to the Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design rankings, or LEED. But where LEED has gained traction — many cities, San Francisco included, require that large new commercial buildings be LEED certified — Cradle to Cradle remains a niche designation used by relatively few manufacturers.

"McDonough's right that we need to make products as environmentally benign as possible but ... I haven't heard much about Cradle to Cradle" as an industry standard, said James Russell, author of the 2011 book "The Agile City: Building Well-Being and Wealth in an Era of Climate Change." For starters, "Figuring out the

entire life-cycle of a product has proven to be really difficult to do."

Certification

With the Cradle to Cradle Products Innovation Institute, the subject of Wednesday's fundraiser, the hope is to structure and distribute the certification process in such a way that it can be put to use by product designers across the spectrum. The institute is based in San Francisco and exists in part because then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2009 challenged McDonough to make the review process into a widely available tool.

As far as McDonough is concerned — and this is a hallmark of his career — large-scale transformation is just around the corner.

"I'm 61. I've been doing this 20 years," he said of the effort to think at a systemic level beyond the design of individual buildings. "It'll take another 20 years, I know that."

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