

BOOK REVIEW

Robert Wolf's - Building the Agricultural City A Handbook for Rural Renewal

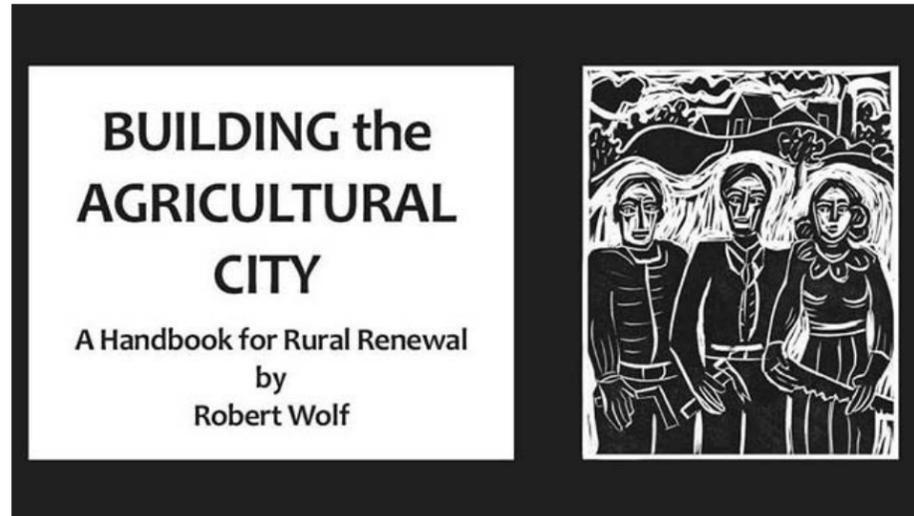
John E. Peck - Executive Director, Family Farm Defenders

In mid December, on a birthday getaway to Viroqua WI, I stumbled upon Driftless Books and Music in a newly converted tobacco warehouse. Amidst the dusty tome-laden aisles was a modest display featuring the latest pithy handbook from Robert Wolf. Given the bioregional renaissance underway, it was heartening to find such a practical guide in a town otherwise known for its "Keep Calm and Paddle" t-shirts, homegrown programming from WDRT community and the Driftless Cafe's award winning local foodie chef, Luke Zahm.

Wolf is a prolific writer. His latest work invokes Lewis Mumford and E. F. Schumacher - among many others - to advocate localism as an antidote to globalism. The book's first half is devoted to laying out the intrinsic instability and brutal exploitation of capitalism.

In many respects, American's Midwest - like the Global South - has been exploited and victimized by outsiders, an ugly process that has been going on ever since Columbus blundered onto the shores of this continent and was "discovered" indigenous peoples. Sadly, even as our communities languish under this extractive jackboot, many rural people have also been left mentally colonized, thinking that there is no alternative but empty promises offered by corporate technocrats. Factory farms, supermax prisons, high voltage powerlines, toxic dumps, frac sand mines - all have been offered on a silver tongued platter to folks in the Driftless as an economic panacea for a downward spiral they did not even create.

On Jan. 20th,
I was back in one of my favorite



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bioregions, attending the "Industrial Agriculture in the Driftless" conference in Boscobel where Dr. John Ikerd's Keynote addressing the economic colonization of Rural America again touched on so many of Wolf's themes.

Thankfully, for the crowd of close to three hundred there were many practical solutions offered similar to those outlined in the second half of his book. Mark Shepard of New Forest Farm and author of Restoration Agriculture - Real World Permaculture for Farmers was in the audience, as was Peter Hardin, the intrepid gadfly editor of Milkweed newspaper and family dairy farm advocate.

On the panel were such inspirational voices as Mary Dougherty of Sustain Rural Wisconsin Network which has successfully passed local ordinances against factory farms, and Mike Mueller from the Driftless Back to the Land Cooperative which is pasturing pigs as an alternative to swine con-

finement. Wolf argues that the true solution to our (mal) development problem is found in the agricultural city. Those familiar with the history of urban farming will know this is not such a oxymoron - even Charlemagne mandated that gardens and livestock be kept within city walls as a medieval variant of what we would call today food sovereignty.

Wolf offers modern day examples such as The Plant in Chicago and Growing Power in Milwaukee, but I think his real point is that grassroots initiatives are not just a technical problem - they are as much a social challenge. This "city" is also not the one we normally imagine - full of gleaming skyscrapers, numbing congestion, violent inequality, and squalid slums. It is more culturally cohesive, intentional, and democratically driven - like the ancient Greek polis, the Iroquois Confederacy, or modern Sweden's eco-municipalities.

How does one combine a regional identity with political empowerment? Wolf suggest that a loose network of decentralized participatory institutions - think land trusts, and conservation easements, community banks and local currencies, renewable energy and worker owned cooperatives - will be the key to a more productive, creative and resilient alternative to corporate globalization.

This might remind one of Elinor Ostrom's work (the first woman in 2008 to win the Nobel Economics Prize) who argued that cooperation is not only more socially equitable and ecologically sustainable than competition, but is often more efficient and productive too.

How could that be? Well, when communities choose to perceive their ongoing exchange of goods and services as not just atomized interactions but as part of longer term relationship then it makes sense to look at how best to restructure the economy in a more collective commonwealth fashion. (For more on this, I suggest reading John Restakis' great book, Humanizing the Economy, Cooperatives in the Age of Capital, which Wolf also references) Of course, those building a better world around a mutual aid economy can not rest on their laurels. Without



AUTHOR ROBERT WOLF

Robert Wolf is a writer and founder of Free River Press, a nonprofit publishing house whose primary purpose is to gather people without literary ambition into writing workshops to document their lives. With a diverse background of work and travel, Wolf has spent much of his life in search of the American scene - iconic American figures and regional folkways. Wolf's book *In Search of America* chronicles his travels and experiences in search of a vanishing America.

In Building the Agricultural City, A Handbook For Rural Renewal

Source: www.dragonflybooks.com/event/DragonflyBooks-DecorahIA

In *Building the Agricultural City*, Wolf demonstrates the need for rural Americans to work cooperatively to create self-reliant, decentralized economies. Designed as a tool to promote collaborative economic development, Wolf and several Iowa and Wisconsin collaborators are working to develop tools and systems to give the Driftless region greater self-sufficiency.

Wolf addresses the constraints that must be faced in the design of a self-reliant economy and uses *Building the Agricultural City* to focus on the design process that can increase regional self-sufficiency. Though designed as a tool to promote cooperative economic development in the Driftless region, the model Wolf proposes can be constructed in any region small enough for its people to have a common identity sufficient to encourage collaboration.

oversight and accountability these "alternative" institutions can also be corrupted.

Those of us who were at Standing Rock last year with indigenous water protectors will never forget that the State Bank of North Dakota used public money to finance the crackdown against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) Protest. Same goes for supposed farmer co-op like Land O'Lakes that are actively working against their own members by pushing force trade deals like the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) that allow them to import cheaper dairy byproducts rather than pay a fair market price for fresh domestic milk.

The ultimate challenge For those trying to create an agricultural city in the Driftless bioregion or anywhere else, the challenge lies not just within transforming people's own heart and minds. There are also powerful external forces - the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) come to mind - that will work hard to crush such an effort, especially if it were to provide an inspiration for other oppressed communities. Effective grassroots solidarity between bioregional communities and across artificial borders will then be the true test for sustaining such a project into the future.