

Breaking the Barriers

by John F. Rohe

This book was ten years in the making. It is about barriers. Not physical barriers. Not gates or fences. It's about the imperceptible barriers within and between us. So while it is not about stone walls, it has much to do with stonewalling.

Invisible Walls is subtitled "Why we ignore the damage we inflict on the planet ... and ourselves." The adverse effects of our technology often loom far beyond our perceptive abilities.

Why do well intentioned folk act in seemingly counter-intuitive ways toward our successors? Why do we respond to threats of global warming by demanding larger gas guzzling SUV's? Why do our zoning laws become the template for low density, land consumptive, auto-dependent, urban sprawl? Why must our economic policies be based on growth, and more growth, when no one would reasonably claim a finite planet can accommodate perpetual exponential growth? Why do we shrink from population policies when no one truly believes the earth can continue to support more people (presently the net gain is 230,000 people per day)? Why do we stock pile more nuclear waste, when there is no known plan for safe disposal? Why do we adopt policies explicitly against the interests of our children and grandchildren?

Might these policies be the handmaidens of a mean-spirited, heartless plot against our children? Or are they just the actions of a misguided, albeit well-intentioned, ideology on the other side of our Invisible Walls?

The author, Peter Seidel, would seem to lean toward the latter, although in some cases he tends to believe the truth resides somewhere in between. Seidel labels certain

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beliefs, such as the notion that "guns don't kill, people do," as "willful blindness." As to other beliefs, Mr. Seidel adopts a more conciliatory attitude. Our ideologies, our educational systems, and our media reinforce attitudes and beliefs on a daily basis. These beliefs are often unexamined. And they operate against the future.

The thesis progresses from ourselves, to our social life, and then to our organizations. The book fashions a set of solutions. It sets forth a framework to analyze the root cause of our harmful activity.

Invisible Walls is organized in four parts. In Part I, entitled "Our Ancient Brain," the author identifies limitations in our ability to comprehend the future. Perceptions distort reality. Moreover, our instinctive and "ever-compelling primary drives" tend to ignore environmental casualties.

Part II is entitled "Our Modern Society." Through specialization, we cultivate a narrow focus, and thus fail to account for casualties beyond our purview, along the path of our so-called "progress." The author carefully weaves ethics and values into Part II.

In Part III, the author looks at our "Organizations." In setting the stage, Seidel points out that "in human society, structured organizations are needed to enable people to do the things they cannot do as individuals or informal groups. Although essential for a civilized society, organizations, in pursuing their interests, often come in conflict with each other and endanger the welfare of our species and the planet."

And finally, in Part IV, Seidel discusses possible "Solutions." Here the author summons an insight into the effect of our actions. Solutions are going to require a more panoramic education and a deeper insight into the potential for harm. He builds an ethical framework on which to construct the solutions.

The reader might wonder why Mr. Seidel, the architect, would undertake the ten-year study to write this book. Might he be responding to a client's rejection of environmentally sound architectural suggestions? When prudent recommendations are declined, this architect might not be content to just fashion a building to

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the owner's needs. He also "designs" an outline to diagnose the more deep-rooted problem.

A recurring theme in Seidel's diagnosis is reminiscent of C.P. Snow's *Two Cultures*, and Edward O. Wilson's *Consilience*, as he points to our inability to comprehend the whole. We become specialists in our chosen endeavor. "It is far easier to become a successful expert than a competent generalist. All of this encourages us to become a society of individuals who are narrowly trained, each pulling on his own oar with no idea where he is headed." (p.128.)

Valuable quotations from venerable authorities blend with the author's down-to-earth, plain-English gems in this book. For example, in Seidel's words: "Our brains are proving to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they have brought us many wonderful things, such as bread, cars, airplanes, penicillin, air-conditioners and literature. On the other hand, they have given us weapons with which we can destroy each other many times over and has started a process that is rapidly

eroding the earth's ability to support life." (p.303.) *Invisible Walls* is a timeless study of our most cherished — albeit destructive — beliefs.

This long-awaited, well-researched and thought-provoking book merits attention as it diagnoses our routinely harmful, yet unexamined, convictions. As unsuspecting minions, we harbor, protect and promote these convictions.

If you seek a book with the literary elegance of Rachel Carson, then stick with Rachel. No current authors will compare (Mr. Seidel included). But if you seek an insightful, down-to-earth study of ourselves, and our destructive habits, you can find it here.

The magnitude of Mr. Seidel's solutions yields an insight into just how formidable our task will be. Thus, he aptly concludes with this poignant admonition: "get to work."