Value

An answer to Jean-Pierre Protzen's article, by Christopher Alexander

The discussion which Jean-Pierre has begun, in his article "The Poverty of A Pattern Language", cannot be usefully continued at the level at which it has been begun: with the detailed examination of minutiae, until the fundamental issues in the debate, the difference in underlying assumptions, are made completely clear.

I believe that the criticisms which he has raised follow inevitably, from certain assumptions which he makes about the world. These assumptions concern the role of value, and its relationship to facts. Further, I believe his assumptions in this sphere to be wrong.

I shall therefore do my best, in this article, to lay out the most crucial difference between his point of view, as I understand it, and my own.

I believe that Jean-Pierre holds the view, that propositions, statements of fact, lie in one realm of discourse, commonly known as the discourse of science, and that values, lie in another different realm of discourse. Further, I believe that he holds the view that while values are of immense importance, they are nevertheless, personal, and that differences in different people's values can therefore not be reconciled by appeal to any one fundamental value, but only by conflict, and argument, and compromise.

This point of view is entirely consistent with the overall mechanistic view of the world, which has been growing in strength since the time of Descartes. It is true that it does not entirely exclude value from the realm of discussion, as positivism does. However, it does maintain that value is purely personal and cultural, and not connected, in any deep way with facts or discussions of fact.

I shall label this point of view neo-positivism. This view has been greatly influenced by Kant, and has been proposed, and discussed extens-

The Poverty of the Pattern Language

Part II   by Jean-Pierre Protzen

The 253 patterns included in "A Pattern Language" do not all share the same status. "Some are more true, more profound, more certain, than others." A varied number of asterisks used by the authors identifies the status of each pattern. Of those patterns marked by two asterisks, the authors say, "...we believe that we have succeeded in stating a true invariant: in short, that the solution we have stated summarizes a property common to all possible ways (emphasis theirs) of solving a stated problem. In those two-asterisk cases we believe, in short, that it is not possible (emphasis mine) to solve the problem properly, without shaping the environment in one way or another according to the pattern that we have given--and that, in these

ively by Churchman, Rittel, and many others.

I believe this point of view has arisen in a serious attempt to combat the fact that positivism essentially excludes all mention of value: excludes it from discussion. But while allowing discussion of values, indeed even focussing on it very intently, it is still essentially positivism, and does nothing to help us out of the mechanistic barbarism which positivism creates in society - except

cases the pattern describes a deep and inescapable (emphasis mine) property of a well-formed environment."

Now, this is no modest claim, and in the face of it, the readers or the potential users of the proposed pattern language are certainly entitled to expect that--as stated by Edgar Singer--the claimants have done the best that inquiry can possibly accomplish, i.e., that before reaching their conclusions they have exposed their ideas to the most severe test imaginable.

What is the evidence offered in favor of the various patterns? Does it stand up to Singer's criterion? Lets look at some examples. "Sheltering Roofs," pattern no. 117 (two asterisks): the problem part of this pattern states "(1) if the roof is hidden, if its presence cannot be felt around the building, or if it cannot be used, then people will lack a fundamental sense of shelter."

Two kinds of evidence are used to support this view.

First, three sources are quoted --one referring to Western cultures, the other to the U.S.A. and the third to France--which assert that pitched roofs are the strongest symbols of shelter. The authors are aware that this evidence in favor of pitched roofs "can perhaps be dismissed on the grounds that it is culturally induced." A second type of evidence is therefore introduced.

Only this second kind is no evidence at all. It is a list of three characteristics the authors assert "A roof must have in order to create an atmosphere of shelter."

"1. ....The whole feeling of shelter comes from the fact that the roof surrounds (emph. theirs) people at the same time that it covers them...."

"2. Seen from afar, the roof of the building must be made to form a massive part of the building...."

"3. And a sheltering roof must be placed so that one can touch it--touch it from the outside...."

that it does, admittedly, help to foster respect for values (note the plural), and does in this sense, help to create respect for people different from oneself.

My own view is entirely different. I believe that differences in values, can be resolved by appealing to one central value (note the singular). I believe, indeed, that this central value, lies behind all things, which we may call the one, the void, the great Self: I believe that every person is connected to this value, and is capable of making contact with it, to a greater or lesser degree, by awakening his own consciousness: and that connection with this one value, provides us all, with the ultimate basis for our actions, and for our actions as creators, artists, architects.

This point of view is commonplace in many traditional societies: it was the normal point of view in western society up until the time of Descartes or slightly later. It was the normal point of view in Islamic society until the eighteenth century; it is today, still the point of view found in zen buddhism, in sufism, and in many other less "sophisticated?" cultures.

These two views, both centrally concerned with value or values, differ, mainly, then, in the fact that Jean-Pierre believes that there are as many values as there are people: while I believe that there is on value, which we can choose to connect to, or not, as we wish.

The essence of Jean-Pierre's criticism of our book, A Pattern Language, is I believe simply this: He is offended, perhaps deeply offended, by the underlying theme, present in the book, namely, that matters of value can become objective, and can, by implication then, be appealed to one great central value. All his criticisms, in one way or another, cry out for pluralism, argue that there are many values, that it is impossible to find one value, and that any body of knowledge which draws its strength from an appeal to one value, must, ipso facto, be wrong, and "poverty-stricken".

I believe the very opposite. Namely, that if we hope to make progress in any thing, which has a value component, we will only be able to do so to the extent that we believe in this central value, however dim or distant it is: and that naive pluralism, or neo-positivism, is incapable of making any useful progress in almost anything that concerns design, or creation, precisely because of the position it takes.

Before I try to make this clear, I should like first, to dispel some of the more obvious objections, which might be raised against the notion of one single, central value or ground.

The most obvious objection, is that this is likely to lead to fascism, or that it is an oppressive attempt by some people to "lay" their values on others. And related to this, is the second, also obvious objection, namely that this point of view is disrespectful of cultural differences, and is potentially racist or imperialistic.

Of course, the view that there is one value, does not contain such an obviously ridiculous component. The view that there is one value, clearly recognises that we all have different backgrounds, different natures, different histories, and different preferences. There is nothing in this one value, which will try to make each person more like another. The one value, only requires that each person become more like himself, closer to his own self. This is of course deeply satisfying, and admits of vast differences between people, and vaster differences between different cultures. At the same time, there is a recognition though, that as we become more true to our selves, more like our selves, we do, without intending to, approach one another, because within all of us there is that element, that water, that void, in which we are very similar indeed, not with respect to our outward preferences (TV v. Hamburgers, v. Baseball), but with respect to our essence, with regard to the transparency we reach, the extent to which we manage to be united with the Divine void. Of course, this process is very difficult: it takes all one's life to do it; and one becomes more alive, more awake, to the extent one manages it. But certainly there is no superficial sense in which we become more similar, by going on this path. And those people who, seeking this path, do become very similar in some obvious outward way, (cultists, sectists), are usually very far indeed from the path itself, because they are so concerned with appearance.

Having removed, I hope, the most obvious argument-provoking objection to the view that there is one central value, we may now go on in a fairly objective spirit to compare this view with the view that there are many many values, as many as there are persons, and that there is no central value which we can rely upon, or appeal to.

Here in the College of Environmental Design, we are concerned with architecture, planning, and environment. I should like to compare these two views, then, in so far as they bear on the conduct of architecture, planning and environmental design.

The crux of my argument is simply this: although either of these two views, the many-value view, or the one value view, could be all right in theory, in practice it turns out that the one value view leads to results, and allows us to go deeper and deeper into what we are doing, while the many-value view, leads to a lot of words, and simply does not help us to reach better deeper results: in building, planning, or managing the environment.

I should like to make it clear, at this stage in the argument, that I believe the many-value view, the neo-positivistic view, is extremely widespread, in the world today, especially in academic circles, and that it has arisen precisely as the scientific world view, has met, collided with, the need to design things, which is an activity not covered in any obvious way by science.

I believe that it is not only theorists in our college, like Jean-Pierre and Rittel, who are neo-positivists, but that very many members of our faculty, implicitly, or explicitly, also hold this view. It is the view which is held by the super-technologists, when they try to graft high technology, and industrialisation, onto the process of building design. It is the view held by pluralistic planners and planning theorists. It is the view held by "urban designers", or by big-time architects, who do things that they don't quite believe in, for money, or for fame, or because the client wants it.

It is, in short, the view that is held by anyone who does not base his actions, totally, utterly, on the realm of feeling.

The reason for this situation is very complicated. At one time, in preCartesian western thought, and in mainstream Islamic thought, it was considered natural that the view of the universe, however scientific, and powerful it was, must at the same time also be a view which held feeling in it, a view which included the self of the perceiver, as an essential part. In these pre-scientific cosmologies there was no rift between fact and feeling, between fact and

value, because people made pictures (theories), in which the two were united.

However, during the period from 1600-1800, roughly from Descartes to Leibniz, God was taken out of the world, and replaced by an endless, isotropic, homogenous universe, represented by a geometric structure, in which value had no natural place: indeed, it was value free, and value could not be related to it, in any sensible graspable way.

We have grown up with this scientific heritage. Trying to be good scientists - or at least believing in science - we have accepted the idea of a world picture, without value in it. And yet we face a paradox, as architects, planners, faced with human decisions, decisions about the structure of our world every day, we patently face the issue of value constantly. Trying to keep faith with "Science", and therefore accepting the idea that there is no one Value essentially connected to the structure of things, we replace it with the idea of many values (little v), and try to let these little v values take the place of a world in which fact and value are united.

But this cannot be done. If the conception of value which we have, is purely personal, treats each person's values as interesting, deeply important, but arbitrary things, not essentially connected to the structure of things, we still flounder about in the value free structure of science, trying artificially to graft on the little v values, which individuals have: and then we dignify this patchwork, and call it a theory.

Myself, as some of you know, originally a mathematician, I spent several years, in the early sixties, trying to define a view of design, allied with science, in which values also were let in by the back door. I too played with operations research, linear programming, all the fascinating toys, which mathematics and science have to offer us, and tried to see how these things can give us a view of design, what to design, and how to design.

Finally, however, I recognised that this view is essentially not productive, and that for mathematical and scientific reasons, if you like, it was essential to find a theory in which value and fact are one, in which we recognise that there is a central value, approachable through feeling, and approachable by loss of self, which is deeply connected to facts, and forms a single indivisible world picture, within which productive results can be obtained.

This is the crux. Many people recognise that architecture and planning are in bad shape, because our towns and buildings are unpleasant, inhuman, ugly, and so on... Most of us are struggling with this, in one way or another - both those of us who practice as architects, and those of us who work on design methods, on the human processes of planning. But in every case, we must ask: how much progress does a particular theory make, in helping us to move; helping to get results about design; helping to design buildings which are indeed more human, which allow the human soul to rekindle a flame. If a theory does not do this, does not appeal to intuition or feeling, then it is a lousy theory. I have gradually come to espouse the view which I have explained here, not because I am a religious person, or because I have a predisposition to think religious thoughts, but because I find, speaking as a scientist, and as a mathematician, that this is the only kind of theory which actually gets us anywhere.

Let me now try to outline, point by point, the various ways in which the one value theory is productive, and deep, and the many-value theory shallow, and unproductive.
1. Since the one value theory gives each person a criterion for what is good and what bad (based on his own feeling), it is possible to make progress. Since we can tell the difference, intuitively, between good phenomena and bad phenomena (at least roughly, and as a matter of degree), we can try to find out what characteristics are possessed, typically, by the better ones, distinguish the better ones from the worse ones, and we can therefore learn something about how to make the better ones. On the basis of the many-value theory, we cannot identify some things as better, and some as worse, and we cannot therefore make any progress towards making the things which are better. This difference applies equally to buildings, social structures, industry, political structures, ornaments: all the things which environmental design is concerned with.
2. Specifically, as witnessed in "a pattern language", it is possible to identify large numbers of characteristics which can be reused. Neo-positivism cannot obtain fruitful results like this, because it will not permit these results to be obtained: it excludes them by philosophical fiat.
3. Of course, the fact that we can learn something, within the one value theory, and not within the many value theory, does not mean that all the things we posit in the one value theory, are immediately correct. Thus, for instance, many of the patterns defined in A pattern language, are clearly incorrect, or only partially correct. But, once again, within the one value theory, we can appeal to our own intuition of the central value, and discover to what extent these patterns are correct or incorrect, in different circumstances, and try to do better. The one value theory therefore gives us a basis for discussion, and a basis for criticism.

The many value theory, although it seems to generate a lot of heat and talk, gives us no basis for useful discussion, because it does not allow that something might be more right, or more wrong. All that one can say, within the realm of the many value theory is 'Personally I don't agree". This is as interesting as it might be for someone to say "I have a stomach ache this morning," or "I feel happy". It is very important as personal information, but it leads nowhere as a productive, oriented development of skill or mastery in design.

In line with this observation, you will find that Jean-Pierre's criticism of A pattern language, is always a meta-criticism: it is a criticism of method, philosophy, but never deals with the concrete patterns themselves, in a positive sense, only in a negative sense, because a person immersed in the many value theory cannot allow himself to make any general statement about what is good in the environment.
4. Within the many value theory, it is necessary to exorcise all words like "beautiful", "good", "better", "valuable", because according to this theory there are no legitimate concepts of this kind that make any sense in public discussion.

Notice, for example, how Jean-Pierre carefully calls the apartment in Genoa a "successful" space, protecting himself by this neutral and uncommitted word, against accusations of making value judgements, while sneaking the value judgement in, anyway, by the back door. Are we to accept the statement that this apartment is good or not, as an objective matter, or merely as a personal judgement? If it is a personal judgement, the whole argument which surrounds it makes no sense. If it is intended to be a tentative statement of fact, then we must admit the presence of some one value, which is being appealed to, that Jean-Pierre recognises, and talks about in the belief that we will also recognise it.
5. The many value theory in its extreme, encourages, fosters, even insists on a highly nihilistic "you do your thing, I'll do mine" kind of argument, which can lead nowhere. For example, I had the following interchange with a student a couple of days ago.
She: I believe it is meaningless to design buildings as drawings, as we do in Wurster, because a drawing of a building is not a building.
Me: Does this mean that you think we should teach at least some class-

es where you learn design by actually building things?

She: No, not at all, I was merely commenting on the fact.

Me: Are you saying that some of the instruction here is irrelevant, and empty of content?

She: Yes, certainly; (laughs and nods from several listeners).

Me: Then you are implying that something should be done to change it?

She: No, not at all. That's simply the way it is here. I accept all of life as one great learning experience, and I accept what Wurster has to offer as part of it.

Me: You criticise the teaching here, yet you do not wish to imply that it should be improved.

She: That's right.

In this astonishing conversation, there is an obvious confusion. If I read it right, the person concerned recognises, intuitively, the difference between right and wrong, but has been so brainwashed by the many value theory, in which serious discussion about right and wrong is not permitted, that she prefers to accept "things as they are".

6. Of course, in the design studio, this kind of thing happens constantly. Students are confused, angered, by the fact that instructors are not willing to take a final stand on anything. Or rather, to be more accurate, each instructor takes his stand on his own thing, but there is a general refusal to admit these various "stands" might be scrutinised in relation to one another. Natural politeness makes this almost necessary, once things have reached the extreme stage which they have reached. So long as most people are connected in some rough way to the one central value, then no one of them is so way out, that it becomes embarrassing or offensive to question what he is doing. But after fifty years of neo-positivism and many value theory, people are in such entirely different corners of intellectual space, are so committed to their divergent and unconnected values, that it shakes a person's whole foundation, to confront him with the one central value.

Living under this cloud, all discourse becomes essentially impossible, because each of us has to tread so lightly that we cannot confront each other on almost any matter. That is why discussion about the architecture curriculum, and discussion about architecture itself, have almost disappeared from our college. After a few years of the many value theory, you cannot afford to have all these discussions, because they become socially unacceptable, too painful, and laden with danger.

In contrast to this situation, the one value theory, allows discourse, allows agreement to be forged, allows discussion because you are not threatening a person's whole cognitive existence every time you raise objections, but merely appealing to his own version of the one central value, which he has access to, just as much as you do.

7. Finally, the one value view, because it is centrally connected to feeling, allows us to express feeling in our work, makes the feeling something essential, and above all, permitted. Thus for example, within this point of view, because there is an ultimate identity between the one value and the feelings we experience deepest inside ourselves, we shall naturally be led to discuss questions like: "What kinds of tiles or ornaments are most profound?", "What kind of construction details allow a building to be made with deep feeling?", "What kinds of political process, in a neighborhood, will allow the people of the neighborhood to shape the neighborhood according to their own culture, with their own spirit?", "What kinds of production process are compatible with the well-being of the craftsmen who produce the materials?", "When does a building have the power to touch us deeply, and how can we make a building like that?". and so on.
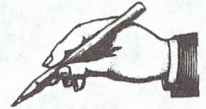
The many value view does theoretically permit, and even encourage discussion of feeling. However, since it has to maintain the artificially aloof posture created by "scientific discourse", that small v values are personal, and not essentially related to facts, the feeling of the thing made is only rarely allowed to come to the fore. Of course, in the debate about small v values, people are allowed, even encouraged to express their various different feelings. But somehow, in spite of all this therapy style expression of feeling, actual works with powerful feeling, great works in which the human soul recognises itself, are simply not being created in our age: because the many value viewpoint just is not deep enough to allow an artist to approach the depth of feeling which is required.

By contrast, in the great medieval period of christian art, and in the great period of islamic art, the artists were able to express such immense feeling because they worked, day after day, year after year, progressively modifying what they did, pursuing the kinds of actions, the states of mind, which were able to allow this feeling to come to light. This was a skill, a craft, a mastery of great order: it could only be reached by patient confrontation, every day, with the extent to which processes, procedures, ways of working, were able to come closer and closer to the One, allowing all other ineffective processes to drop away. It was clearly recognised, in those times, that it was only by constant, daily appeal to the One, that progress could be made in the artist's work, so that finally, after years and years, great results could be reached. In this sense, the central value played the same role for the artists and craftsmen of those times, as "empirical truth" has played in our era for science. It is only by constant appeal, by hundreds and thousands of people, day after day, to this constant, sharable criterion, that progress is made. To make things which are deep, it is necessary to have a comparable shared value to appeal to, so that one can improve one's works.

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