

Concrete

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Opinion: On Concretization

When the whole world seems on the verge of being engulfed by the stuff, and all day long you are unable to escape its cold, gray atmosphere in Wurster—why celebrate it as the title of your newspaper? Because Concrete isn't.

As one of the editors of this paper, I would like to initiate a type of column that has heretofore been missing—pure opinion. I think Concrete has gotten off to a good start and the response and participation of the people in the College has been phenomenal. There are nonetheless a lot of things that could be improved and many important issues that don't get covered. Rather than apologize for the people who produce the paper, and only have the time and wit to do what gets done, I'd like to suggest that all of those who see things wrong or missing should do something about it. That's the way the paper got started, and that's the way it's going to survive.

Some of the mysteries about Concrete should be dispelled. We hope to be receiving regular funding in the near future; in the mean time we are depending upon the generosity of the Dean's Office and the Architecture Department. This does not signify that we are an extension of the administration—in fact we are expressly partial to the interests and needs of the students and staff.

The editing and production of the paper are done in a cooperative fashion (occasionally referred to as democratic anarchy); the work is unpaid and voluntary. Most of the decisions are made collectively, although there have been occasionally instances of tyranny. The paper operates out of room 403, where it is edited on Wednesday nights, typed on Thursdays, and pasted-up on Thursday nights/Friday morns. Nobody is responsible, but somehow the paper always gets assembled. Production and contributions (writing and art work) are open to everyone.

Some questions: Why isn't the Landscape Architecture Department represented in this "college-wide" publication? Why haven't we heard anything about CASA and BEDSA? Who is

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The Poverty of the Pattern Language

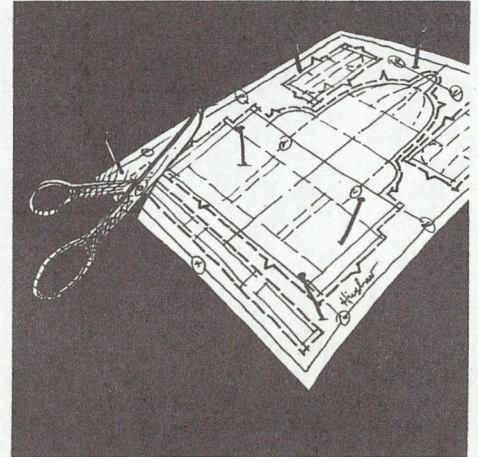
Review by J.P. Protzen

Christopher Alexander, et al., "A Pattern Language, Towns, Buildings, Construction", Oxford University Press, New York, 1977. (\$27.50)

Shocked by what they see to be the brutality and fragmentation of our built environment, the inhumanity and unnaturalness of modern architecture, and the incoherence of present-day society, the authors of "A Pattern Language" have set out to devise a theory, "The Timeless Way of Building"; and a practice of planning and design, "A Pattern Language", by which our towns and buildings would become "alive" and we would feel "whole" and human again. "A Pattern Language" is meant to be a sourcebook in which designers can find practical advice of how to repair any portion of the environment. The advice comes in the form of patterns, each of which describes a recurrent environmental problem and the solution to this problem.

About the nature of these patterns the authors make two major claims, neither of which, I will contend, is valid. First, it is asserted that in any pattern the solution to a problem is described "in such a way that you can use this solution a million times over, without ever doing it the same way twice." (Emphasis here and in following quotes are mine.) The solution merely "gives the essential field of relationships needed to solve the problem, but in a very general and abstract way - so that you can solve the problem for yourself, in your own way, by adapting it to your preferences, and local condition at the place where you are making it." Thus, the solution "imposes nothing on you."

Secondly, although they believe that for some patterns they have succeeded in stating "a property common to all possible ways of solving the stated problem," the authors assert that "... the patterns are ... hypotheses, all 253 of them - and therefore tentative, all free to evolve under the impact of new experience and observation." And just as the hypotheses of science, the patterns are subject to testing, to ascertain if the "empirical questions center on the problem - does it occur and is it felt the way we have described it? - and the solution -



does the arrangement we propose in fact resolve the problem?"

As to the first claim, it is simply not true that the patterns allow you to solve problems according to your preferences. The patterns, if applied, do indeed impose very specific and detailed solutions, and they leave no significant choices to the users of the patterns. (The etymology of the word "pattern" is the ME patron from the Latin Patronus, meaning protector.) In each pattern, the solution to the problem dealt with is presented in the form of an instruction "so that you know exactly what to do, to build a pattern." Furthermore, patterns are not isolated entities. Each pattern is connected to other patterns "above", "beside," and "below" it. That "means in practical terms that, if you want to lay out" a particular pattern, "you must follow not only the instructions which describe the pattern itself, but must try to embed" this pattern in those connected to it.

Let's take as an example the design of a common space within a house. According to the pattern language it should be, among other things, at the heart of the activities, should have varied ceiling heights and a ceiling which is vaulted; should have window seats, light from two sides and wooden windows with small panes; it should have alcoves and a fireplace, soft walls, half-inch trim where different materials meet, a soft tiled floor,

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(patterns, from pg.1)

and a host of different chairs. All this is very well for somebody who likes the atmosphere that is conjured by these patterns, and I am sure that for such people no two spaces designed according to these patterns need ever look alike. An infinite variety could indeed be achieved. But what kind of choices does this language offer to those who do not appreciate gingerbread dollhouses? What kind of options does it leave to those who find virtue in a common space that is large, generous, and unadorned; a space with uninterrupted walls, level floors and ceilings, no nooks, no crannies, no trim; that has a terrazo floor and a glass ceiling, the orientation of which is not confused by light from two sides; and which has no window, neither to the inside nor to the outside, and no fireplace? (This is a rough description of an actual common space in a turn-of-the-century flat in Genoa, Italy, where a friend of mine used to live. It had none, absolutely none, of the solutions called for by the pattern language. It nevertheless was an extremely successful space in that it did allow all those things to happen that according to the pattern language ought to happen in common spaces.)

People with such desires will either not see any differences between any two designs produced by the pattern language (no more than a "pattern language" educated person will see differences between two tract houses by a particular developer), or, if they do perceive differences, they will certainly label these differences as trivial or incidental. In this sense, the same pattern applied a million times will always produce the same design. By staying within the pattern language you will never be able to produce a design that is radically different from the design of any other pattern language user.

This should not, however, come as a surprise to anybody, since it is no more than a tautology. If, as the authors say, the solution part of the pattern contains "... those essentials which cannot be avoided if you really want to solve the problem", then, obviously, when using the pattern you cannot solve the problem in an essentially different way. (Is the phrase "really want", the catch by which you will be reprimanded for not seriously wanting to solve the problem whenever you propose a solution that is radically different from that of the pattern language?)

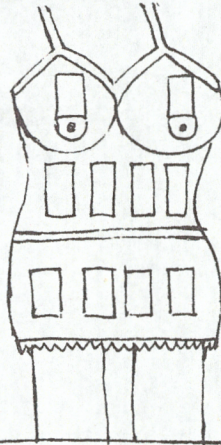
And when the authors say "... of course, if you want to change any pattern, change them", they did not mean that you could come up with a solution that is essentially different from anybody else's. For The Timeless Way of Building says that "...in a healthy society there will

be as many pattern languages as there are people - even though these languages are shared and similar." This kind of society has room only for differences that do not matter, but not for dissent.

Ironically, the authors, who set out to castigate the oppressiveness of the pattern imposed on us by the canons of modern architecture, the greediness of developers, the conservatism of financing institutions or the efficiency mindedness of the building industry, have created in "A Pattern Language" a planning practice which is even less amenable to essentially different ways of building the environment than the practices it hopes to replace. Just as before, everything is patterned, from the family picture stuck into the frame of the mirror to the structure of the world government(!), except now the patterns all come from the same perspective, the same worldview... a worldview that is traditional and romantic, white and bourgeois. (The pictures which show "archetypal examples" of the patterns illustrate this point. A great many of them show medieval towns, English cottages, Swiss farmhouses, paintings by Bonnard, etc.).

Although the argument, thus far, has revealed some very concrete consequences of the pattern language, it has been on a formal level and has not touched on the stuff of the patterns, their empirical content and its truth. This is indeed a formidable question in the face of the authors' claim that "(m)any of the patterns here are archetypal - so deep, so deeply rooted in the nature of things, that it seems likely that they will be part of human nature, and human action, as much in five hundred years, as they are today." Is this truth amenable to corroboration, revision or refutation through empirical research?

I shall argue in the second part of this article that the authors' contention - that the validity of patterns can be empirically tested - is at the least, a questionable proposition.



ZP

(arch., from pg.3)

some vain superiority to trade." (Jenkins, Architect and Patron)

The concept of profession in the practice of architecture today is something of a Hollywood movie set—all front, no substance. Using the Greenwood model of professions, we see that the central concept in defining a profession, a systematic body of knowledge and a theory as a basis for decision making, is weak and perhaps non-existent in architecture. The authority of knowledge has been lost in an epistemological struggle for supremacy between the concepts of artistic insight and technological knowledge. In order to survive despite this internal struggle, professional societies had to be formed, laws and codes to protect the public health and safety had to be enacted, and lofty sounding codes of ethics were incorporated onto the by-laws written to appease an intolerant public. Despite all the professional trapping the architect has attained, he has little basis for calling himself one.

For all that he is not, the architect is certainly an elitist. The same economics that completely control what he does, also control who he does it for. Architects have always been comfortable with defining their clients as the one who pays them. For some time prior to the 19th century, the patron, in the highly personal and often informed interest that he took in the work he commissioned, maintained some balance in the proceedings. Unfortunately with the advent of the middle class building committee and more recently, the corporate board, it often becomes very difficult for the architect to place his allegiance. In such situations, the standard, good-business response has been to design for the cover of the "glossy magazines" (i.e., his peers). The public that lives with his creatures is never taken into account.

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