

**Christopher Alexander:
The Search for a New
Paradigm in Architecture**
by Stephen Grabow.
Boston: Routledge &
Kegan Paul, 1983.
Hardback, \$30.00. Illus-
trated, 352 pages.

Modern architecture is in a state of crisis. Volumes and volumes have been written cataloging the sins, omissions, and failures of a style of design that is not even a century old. Robert Venturi, in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, effectively read its obituary seventeen years ago. Others still dispute its supposed demise. About one thing there is consensus, however—that neither modern architecture nor its heir-apparent, “post-modernism,” is up to the task of providing *uplifting* environments. Where, then, can we look for a new direction in architecture? Who can give us insight into why modernism has failed and how our environments *can* uplift us? Most importantly, how can we generate an architecture that promotes productive human interaction and increasing contact with the human spirit? Any attempt to answer these questions must be systematic, comprehensive, and practical to enable us to, as the Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck has said, “get closer to the shifting centre of human reality and build its counterform.”

Stephen Grabow, Professor of Architecture at the University of Kansas, has written a unique biographical study of Christopher Alexander, a scientist/architect searching for the answers to these questions. The book chronicles the twenty-five years of Alexander’s work, with a heavy emphasis on two ideas that serve as a thematic structure. The first is Thomas Kuhn’s notion of the structure of scientific revolutions as it applies to architectural theory. The second concerns the link between theory and practice—a link so important to Alexander that he is a licensed contractor, the only one on the Architecture Faculty at the University of California, Berkeley.

The creation of beauty is the focus of the book, and indeed, of Alexander’s work. Alexander is quoted at the beginning as saying “I am trying to make a building which is like a smile on a person’s face, and which has that kind of rightness about it....Admittedly it is somewhat nebulous put that way, but knowing the incredible way you reverberate when a person smiles at you, and how you feel, and the opening and relaxation which takes place—in that person and in you—and you actually imagine simply trying to do that, then it is an accurate description. It is not simply a metaphor.”

Combining excerpts from lengthy interviews with Alexander and considerable documented research, Grabow traces Alexander’s personal history and unique background to set the stage for a description of his controversial work. Alexander grew up in a variety of “timeless” places in Europe, and began to ask at a young age if beauty

could be scientifically described. He was trained as a mathematician at Cambridge University, and as a result brought a disciplined approach to his study of architecture—something relatively rare in the field. His first attempts at a scientific articulation of beauty were basically extensions of the existing paradigm in architecture. In *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* and *Community and Privacy*, Alexander charted the elements that make up a design. He later recognized, however, that *elements* are only “things,” and lack the ability to express the complexity of reality and what it is that underlies beauty.

With the idea that *patterns*, not things, constitute the vitality of our environment, Alexander and his colleagues at the Center for Environmental Research began to shake the existing paradigm. The most controversial idea to come out of their work was that patterns of human habitation were generated by a set of *objectifiable rules*, that these rules had to do with human cognition, and that they were not new, but that they had gone unrecognized by modern architecture. *A Pattern Language*, published in 1977, is the cataloging of these patterns. It is based on patterns found mostly in pre-industrial, traditional societies.

A central thesis of Alexander’s work is that “...the sense of being completely alive has a clear phenomenological counterpart in space.” We are all aware of places that have this special character—a window alcove, a wooded country lane, a sunny courtyard. Subjective as our feelings for these spaces may seem, Alexander builds a strong case for objectifying “moments of local resolve.” These moments occur when form appears most perfect and nature seems to be revealing itself most fully, as in the breaking of a wave or a flower blossoming. Fact (science) and value (art) are two ways of looking at space, but it is the *same* space. For Alexander, this “unity of space” requires a theory in which value and fact are one.

Searching for a universal theory brings Alexander in company with many leading scientists in quantum physics, mathematics, chemistry, as well as musicians, historians, theologians, artists, and mystics. In the chapter “The Bead Game” Grabow describes Alexander’s allusion to Hesse’s imaginary game in which all these forms of creative endeavor can be represented in a single way. This oneness of form Alexander sees having a geometrical structure. His twelve criteria—including solid boundaries, repetition, slight irregularities, ambiguity, inner calm and balance—bear little resemblance to the “pure geometries” of the Modern Movement. The importance is in their relationship and in their ability to

generate an infinite variety of life-giving forms. Out of these twelve properties, the one that is fundamental is the concept of centers. Compared to the grid-like structure of our present environment, identification and nurturing of loci would go a long way toward creating a unified world view; however, this again indicates the necessity for new methods of building, politics, etc. Changes this vast seem distant. But certainly Alexander has laid the groundwork for this new view.

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The Passionate Life

by Sam Keen. New York: Harper and Row, 1983. Hardback, \$14.95, 174 pages.

The idea that we pass through different stages and structures of growth in a lifetime is an idea with a solid history, and—judging by both the quantity and quality of recent contributions to the field—a bright future. In fact, developmental psychology has become a field so vast, expressed through so many different theoretical and methodological approaches, that in Ken Wilber's words, "only the broadest and most general conclusions can at this time be drawn." Philosopher Sam Keen shares this sense of the hugeness of the field and of the inability of any single map of development to fully capture the richness, novelty, and meta-rationality of being (and becoming) human. That he does not consider the task hopeless is evidenced by his new book, *The Passionate Life*, in which he speaks not only of the stages of human life but of their goal: "We age," Keen proposes, "to become lovers."

Keen speaks of human development in terms of *where* that development is going and *why*, which distinguishes *The Passionate Life* from such popular books as *Passages* and *Seasons of a Man's Life*. Keen believes these books are unfinished insofar as they begin by using the metaphor of "life as a journey" but fail to carry out the logic of this metaphor. "They describe stages and movement that have no point," Keen writes, and are thus unable to deal with aging in terms other than as a decline of vitality. Keen argues that aging can be seen and experienced as a "triumph of human potency," but not when the *telos* of life is considered, implicitly or explicitly, to be death. Death may be the end of life but not its goal or purpose. Keen holds that it is the *unfolding of eros* that most informs the human journey through what he considers its five major (and metaphorical) stages: Child, Rebel, Adult, Outlaw, and Lover.

Keen talks about these stages in metaphoric terms to avoid the pitfall of reifying his map—having it confused with the territories it points to. Metaphor also keeps the reader from concretizing the

Throughout the book, Grabow gives us a lively account of science and art in process. All the doubts, mistakes, and endless investigations leading up to the triumph of discovery are exposed. What comes through is a picture of a person who cares deeply about the form of the physical world, enabling the beauty of spirit to shine forth. Whether his insights are enough to resolve the crisis of modern architecture remains to be seen. □

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stages as absolute chronological guideposts applicable to an abstract "everyperson." Developmental language is tricky enough, Keen feels, with its tendencies to over-stylized and rampantly proliferating stage-structures (and its tendency to suggest that human development is exclusively linear). Because all life maps are provisional, and composed of metaphors, and because "all metaphors are revelatory and inaccurate," it is important to mix metaphors in discussing life stages to avoid "orthodoxy, literalism, and tyranny." Keen makes clear from the outset that his approach is normative rather than descriptive, philosophical rather than empirical.

Still, Keen argues for an appreciation of progression in consciousness, for the processes by which material from one level is integrated and subsumed by a next stage, which emerges as antithetical in many ways to its precedent. While Keen doesn't use Hegelian dialectical language, his descriptions of development have the flavor of Hegel's thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad, as well as of what Hegel called *aufheben*, the movement by which a prior level is simultaneously annihilated and preserved by the more comprehensive level which follows. Keen keeps the dialogue one between a "Hegelian" appreciation of the sometimes sweeping-overview nature of the process (in which every stage is a moment in an overall dynamic of growth), and a "Kierkegaardian" acknowledgment of the elegance and ontological *raison d'être* of the "life" of each life stage.

What makes *The Passionate Life* such compelling reading is that Keen precisely avoids the abstract metaphysical terms I have employed in the previous paragraph, giving us instead a view of development as a story, almost as a novel in which we see our lives cast in terms of extraordinary fiction. He looks first at the mode of the Child (dependence and lack of self-consciousness, bonding with the matrix, playful sensuality and exploration) and shows how it is followed by the counter-dependence and

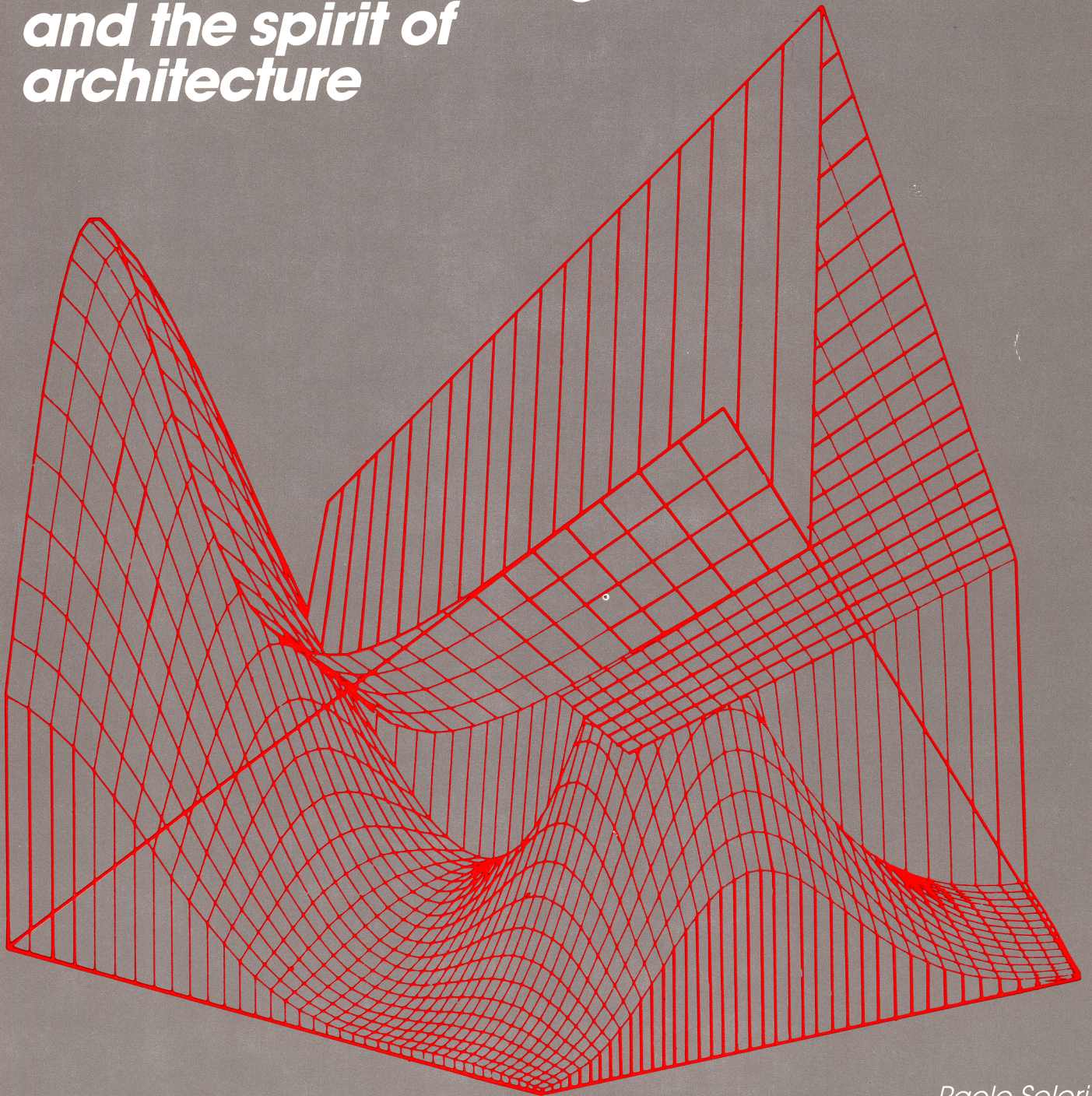
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*consciousness, design,
and the spirit of
architecture*



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