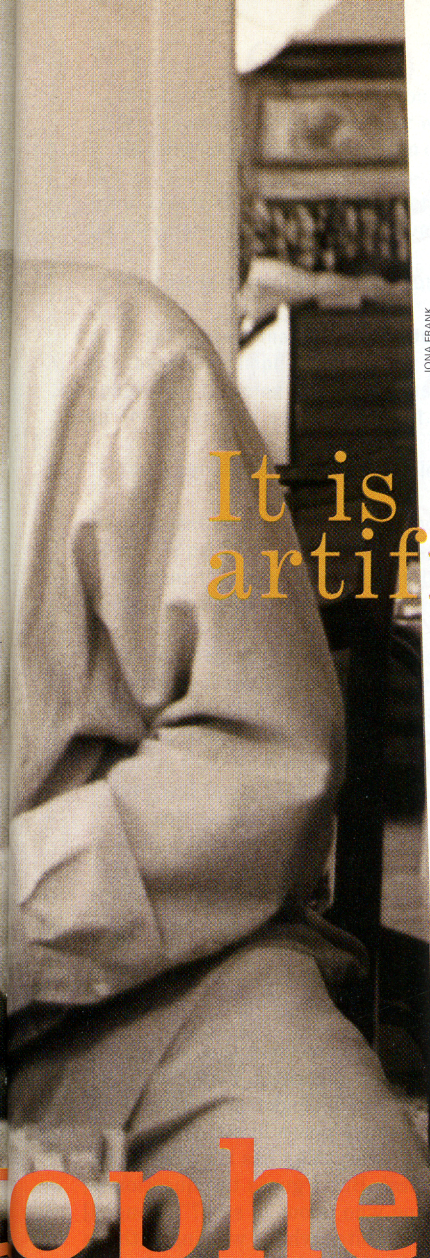


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JONA FRANK

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Christopher Alexander

by Tom Price The ideal of the architect dates from the Renaissance when the imperfect state of the arts of building and design required a single talented figure to integrate painting, sculpture, engineering, construction and politics. Architectural theory in this century, however, has been dominated by the famous International Style with its emphasis on exploiting the characteristics of building materials such as glass and pre-stressed concrete, and a totalistic approach to

design that looks marvelous on paper but treats the use of structure by its human inhabitants almost as an afterthought.

With nearly half the world's population living in cities, the importance of architecture and the built environment is increasingly important—it shapes our individual psychologies and the forms of our society. Yet today, very famous architects are involved in projects that provide useless foundations staffed by the idle rich something irrelevant to do with their money, like Los Angeles' new Getty Museum. When it comes to addressing the real problems of the built environment, prominent architects are about as useful as tits on a bullfrog. Los Angeles is stretching all the way to Las Vegas in a hail of gunfire and a pallor of smoke and people are excited about a museum?

Perhaps the most significant thinker to directly address these problems is the contemporary architect Christopher Alexander. Alexander was born in Vienna, Austria in 1936, and raised in England. After studying mathematics and architecture at Cambridge University, he obtained his Ph.D. in architecture from Harvard. He has been a professor of architecture at the University of California at Berkeley since 1963.

Alexander believes that designers should begin not with an overarching, totalistic concept then realized in stone and concrete, but rather with a concern for the small-scale needs of human beings. Alexander maintains that if these needs are consistently met in the right way, then the design of any structure will emerge organically.

Alexander's most famous book, 1977's *A Pattern Language*, is organized like a mathematics textbook. Propositions about the elements of building and their relationship to human use are presented in boldface, each followed by a page or more of discussion. The first propositions are those of the largest scale: "What should be the proper mixture of sizes of cities in a region?" "How should urban and rural land be apportioned?" **The book moves onward to smaller-scale propositions:** "What are the characteristics of a pleasant pedestrian street?" "What are the requirements of a bazaar?" **It finally reaches the simplest:** "How high should a window be?"

His books make up an ongoing series which begins with *The Timeless Way of Building*, followed by *A Pattern Language* and *The Oregon Experiment*. **Alexander's new book, *The Nature of Order*, spans four volumes and is scheduled to be published next year by Oxford University Press. The book is in the same series and is intended to be a comprehensive philosophical statement.** ●●●▶

Architects have become

Could you summarize The Nature of Order, and say something about how your work has changed over the years?

Well, I am a general contractor now and I have been building fairly steadily for about 15 years in addition to my theoretical and design work. It is very controversial for an architect to get his hands dirty and actually build his designs. The first book I published in this series, The Timeless Way of Building, is really a poem about a way of life and a way of being, in which a person is free, and what the environment can do to make that possible for all of us. But my new book is very different. It is much more tied down empirically. The first volume [of The Nature of Order] is about the concept that life is in all structure and that there is such a thing as living structure. Organisms, communities and even quite unimportant things all have degrees of life. Certainly buildings do and must be judged by that.

Now, it is one thing to assert that, but it's quite a different matter to actually lay it out in a concrete fashion theoretically and practically so that it is well-defined and replicable, so that one can have discourse about it, and so that it becomes a real element of our scientific world picture. There is a hint that life that occurs in structures in our world—in a gate, or in a roof or in a street—is actually connected to something inside us. Any poet would probably admit to that, but as a scientific proposition it's totally hairy and mind-boggling.

This idea of living structures seems like a poetic leap, because there is the more definite biological notion of life, whereas we wouldn't talk about a building or a plaza as "living." Are you equating the two conceptions?

I am asserting that living structure, or life, is a more general concept than it was thought to be. The definition of life that was current in biology around 1950 was never a very good definition. If you had said to a biologist in 1950, "What is life?" he would have given you all kinds of crap: "It's a machine that is capable of self-maintaining, self-replicating, self-organizing." It was a mechanistic view, but in fact very puzzling if one started to ask questions about it. What about the beach? It is an ecological system. You've got water, birds, the little things running around in the sand, and plants in the dunes. Is that a living system? With the growing interest in ecology during the second half of the century, one had to say, "Of course that is a living system." [Yet] it doesn't meet the criteria of life that had been coined in this mechanistic notion of what is an organism.

It is quite clear that there are huge parts of living systems that are inorganic in the traditional sense—grains of sand, rocks, sea water, and for an architect, a retaining wall on the beach that's a few planks of wood and some concrete. But somehow [the retaining wall] is playing a role in the way the dunes interact with seagulls and sandpipers and so forth. Is it part of a living system? Yes. Is it alive? Well, no. How could it be, it's concrete? So you start getting into these weird questions.

paper-pushers. They do all this stuff on tracing paper, and blueprints, and CAD systems, and hand it to other people to e

I am part of general movement that is radically re-examining those questions. I am convinced that our mechanistic/biologist definition of life was just a temporary phase in our understanding. When I say everything has life in some degree, it is radical. But I guess the question is, "Who is the one who is out of step?" [Laughs] Am I the son of a bitch who is walking with his left foot instead of his right or are the others? I think time will come down on my side.

In addition to your principle that life is an intrinsic part of all things, you add that there are objective values and that everyone has intrinsic knowledge of these values. You introduce this in The Nature of Order by saying that you can show groups of people paired photos of different environments and ask them, "Which one has more life to it?" and find general agreement. You are saying that deep down we all know what this indefinable quality of life is, at least as a practical matter, we know when it is present and therefore we should be able to seek it in a building or a workplace. This is far out of step with contemporary thought. This thrusts you into the position of being a philosopher.

Yes, that is very hair-raising, and certainly has not been popular. It scares the shit out of people, and angers some people. Obviously it has to be understood in the context of cultural variety and individual variety. There isn't any weird fascist core to this. Value being relative to culture and relative to the individual is obviously fundamental to the way things really are. Nevertheless, I am asserting that what is valuable is a real



The north facade of the West Dean Gardens Visitor's Center in West Sussex, United Kingdom, 1996.

thing, and not just some opinion, not a political matter, and not a matter of taste. It is a colossal change in the way we perceive the world. In a way it is the most drastic thing in the whole spectrum of the four books of The Nature of Order.

If you assert that there are objective aesthetic values, it is a small step to assert that there are objective moral values.

Oh, that is a small step. I absolutely agree with that.

And if you assert that there are objective moral values, the strong implication is that human beings are capable of agreeing on the forms of their society and are capable of self-government.

Yes, I agree with you in principle.

This perspective has much in common with the strong picture you paint in A Pattern Language, a picture of an environment that people interact with in a way that is necessarily politically different from what we've got now.

Very much so. In my work there is a different concentration, a different distribution of money and power that is implied. Because my assumption is that the distribution of money, control and power that we have inherited from the 19th century and carried into the 20th with brass knobs on has got serious problems about being able to create living structure. Book two of The Nature of Order is actually more radical than book one because what book two talks about is the kinds of processes that can produce living structure, which is consistent with recent developments in biology.

There are many examples from Matisse in The Nature of Order.

And from Bonnard. I feel very comfortable there. This recently-developed movement, if you want to call it that, of complexity theory and biologists working at the Santa Fe Institute is in the same direction as what I do. New definitions of life, by the way of living systems and living process, are emerging monthly. [I have] a very loose affinity and appreciation for [Gregory] Bateson, who is a wonderful guy but very vague. I hope to be much more specific.

Nature does not exist in opposition to human activity.

What about James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis [the biological theory which conceives of the earth and its atmosphere as a living system]?

Yes, somewhat. I actually don't know much about that. I would say in principle, yes.

I think of him because you both share an interest in the English countryside, which you describe in The Nature of the Order. He makes a point in one of his books on the Gaia hypothesis about the alacrity with which certain segments of society have adopted his ideas. He thought they were rather undisciplined. I think his point is many of the people who talk excitedly about the earth as a living system are Luddites—they just want to reject what they perceive as human civilization. In fact, the very beautiful English countryside of Lovelock's youth was artificial.

Absolutely, it is a man-made thing. It is probably one of the largest structures human beings have ever made. People always talk about the Great Wall of China as the largest human structure. It is the only one, in theory, that can be seen from space. Of course England is not the only case, but it's huge—300 miles long and 150 miles wide. It is almost entirely human created.

One of my disagreements with contemporary ecologists is that they are too respectful of wild nature. They want to protect the wildness, which is totally understandable because of the rate at which it is being engulfed. But I don't think they have realized that the only way to deal with that is to take responsibility for making nature. You cannot have this hands-off thing: "We've got to protect it and leave it untouched by human hands." That's nonsense. There are steel pitons driven into the north face of Everest, Jeeps in the Sahara. There is nowhere we are not. We need to take responsibility for that.

Absolutely. It is something that we can understand, can cooperate and be partners with. In fact, it is a completely artificial line between a redwood forest and an asphalt road. One needs to understand that this is all one thing and we need to be responsible for it.

Why are architects doing what they are doing today? Of course, most of them are paid by developers and developers are there to make millions and that is about all, no matter what pretensions to responsibility they make. [But] let's leave aside who pays them. Why are they doing what they do? You say, "It is because of their visions of design." That is true up to a point, but not really the core. Almost without exception, the processes required to produce living structure are different from the ones we have in place today.

The processes of building and design?

All of it. Financing, planning, conceiving, building, participation, maintenance, every damn thing. When you start making statements about those, people really freak out. I discovered this at the university. They actually started trying to prevent me from teaching this to students. ●●●►

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You can
prove theoretically
that it is
impossible
to make buildings
that way.

Who else is working on similar things? Who do you regard as your peers? They might not even be contemporary.

Among architects, very few. For the large part, they belong squarely in the mechanistic tradition. I think a huge number of people who, in effect, identify themselves with ecology in some form are moving in the same direction that I am. I see myself as quite consistent with 20th century artists like Matisse or Bonnard.



The entrance street to Tokyo's Eishin Higashino High School on festival day, 1985.

You can't make buildings correctly unless you take responsibility for building them. Architects have become paper-pushers. They do all this stuff on tracing paper, blueprints and CAD systems, and hand it to other people to execute. If you could actually do a good job by doing that, there would be no harm. But you can prove theoretically that it is impossible to make buildings which have living structure and are genuinely adaptable to the necessities they include that way. You can't split the process into phase one on tracing paper and phase two on the building site. This is not a minor comment, this is a huge comment. So imagine the insecurity in a group of people who have grown into this, when their students are being taught this and are actually beginning to believe it. All hell broke loose.

When was this?

That began in the '80s. I had a seven-year First Amendment fight with the University of California over this issue, which I won. You start messing with somebody's process, and you're messing with their money, with their power, how they get their jobs. Yet that is the stuff that has got to be changed in order for us to produce living structure on earth.

After The Nature of Order is done, you've got another book ready to come out about a major project in Japan.

Yes. We've had to put that book on the shelf until The Nature of Order is finished. That book, which is called Battle, is about a 10 or 11 million dollar campus project. We built it, and we went as far as we could in accomplishing it at every step despite all sorts of

forces which were fundamentally opposed to our way of working and our design philosophy. It's really threatening to people with entrenched interests. At one point my client was offered some astronomical number of yen in a bag to get me out of Japan.

They must have known your work was controversial.

Yes, they did. The chief client read my book The Oregon Experiment. He had apparently been trying for about a year to talk Japanese architects into doing some sort of participatory architecture process and had met with very cynical kinds of refusal, which astonished him. At some point he found the book, got on the next plane and came to see me.

What do you mean by "participatory architecture"?

Simply that the users have a decision-making role and are involved continuously in the design process.

This is not common practice anywhere in the world?

There is a lot of talk about it and in the last decade architects have developed the most disgusting charade of giving the illusion of doing it, while actually not doing it. A lot of people might jump up and down when they read this and say, "What is he talking about? We all do it now." But what they do is this so-called design/charade thing which involves having a feel-good session with the community, a big piece of butcher's paper and some colored crayons, to make everybody feel ownership. Typically, architects will get people together and say, "We must have community participation in the redesign of this thing." The format is to get 40, 50, 60 people in a

Architects do this so-called design/charade thing which involves having a feel-good session with the community, a big piece of butcher's

resistance, usually a deep-seated certainty that this interview process was not a real situation, that it was bullshit and there was no use in trying to make yourself vulnerable by offering any real input.

That is how we've been trained.

Quite right. Or else the person in the interview felt that in fact there was nothing they could even contribute. A lot of this hour was getting rid of all this and trying to get through to the real content of what that person's feelings about the world were. Sometimes I would get quite frustrated with the interview and I would say, "You've given me all this stuff and let's just back off for a minute. We are sitting here, close your eyes and imagine in a dream that for some reason you have walked into a high school. We are in paradise. We are at a school and for some reason you are totally happy, you are absolutely what you want to be. Where are you and what do you see?" Then I would start to get fragments of stuff like, "I am walking by a little stream preparing my next class." I would cherish these kinds of things, encourage them, and try to get the person to enlarge these fragments as much as possible. Gradually we compiled all that material. It was then taken to a committee of about 10. They had a difficult job. Some of this stuff involved some pretty heavy negotiating. We said, "You've got to resolve these disagreements because until we have all these statements forming a coherent body of goals, we can't go forward." It took several months, then finally when it was all knocked into shape, they took it to the body of the school as a whole—students, teachers and staff—to be acted on.

paper and some colored crayons to make everybody feel ownership.

room, at various tables with kiddy crayons. I don't know why. Maybe it's cheap, maybe there is some deeper meaning. People are told to put down their ideas, work together to create concepts and so forth. The architect who's running it completely controls the whole situation, often orients it, steers it. Who are we kidding? This is a human community? You are going to get 60 people to sit down for a couple of hours, throw out some ideas, use some kiddy crayons, and this is supposed to be participation? What kind of nonsense is that? Where is Herbert Marcuse now that we need him?

By contrast, when we were working on this project in Japan, we must have worked with 100 people from that community. We worked with students, with teachers, with administrators, with staff. Typically with each one of these people, we started out with a one-hour interview. I conducted a lot of these interviews myself. Let's run through an imaginary interview: "How would you like the school to be?" The person says, "What is there to discuss? There is going to be an asphalt playground..." The assumption is that there is a fixed form for a project of this type and the only variation possible is in decoration. I say, "Forget about that. If you could have it any way you want, what would it be like?" I encountered tremendous

made an announcement that there were going to be no rules. The activities of the campus were going to be solely under the aegis of the constitution of Japan. Pretty amazing. In other words, when the students first started going to this place, they didn't want to leave the campus.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of your work is the implication that the problem of self-government and a self-regulating society is not a political problem but an environmental problem, an architectural problem. If your work on this project in Japan made it possible for the school to be run in a different way simply because the environment freed people to regulate themselves, that is very remarkable.

I think the interaction between human freedom and the form of the environment is absolutely gigantic. We were working on a process where people could lay out their own workspace for themselves and one of these climbing equipment companies asked, "Why don't you come down and we will do this in one of the divisions?" One of our best people went down there with an assistant. I got a call after about two days: "We are having real problems, this is an extremely hairy situation, I don't know what to do." The gist of what happened was when you liberate a work group to the extent that they can actually lay out their own workspace, you are getting involved in human interaction questions about what is taking place in that work group, who is control and so forth. What happened in this case was the manager of this group was completely fit to be tied to a tree when she saw what was happening. And she said, "This has got to stop," and stopped it. ∴∴

How was the committee of 10 formed?

The general idea was that you get people that represent the broadest possible spectrum of different issues—people that are articulate, care and are going to be willing to work at it. It was a very good committee. When they were finished, an amazing thing happened. I was thanked by one of the academic heads. He said, "When we started, we asked you to help us find a new way of life. And we realize now that all together we have succeeded." About a year after they moved into this new campus, they

Tom Price is a Santa Barbara-based writer. This is his first article for *Speak*.

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