

the 2001 *style* leadership *substance* awards *skill* *influence*

this year's winners bucked the *innovation*
status quo to make better houses.

this is our editors' choice award. This is the competition for which we, the staff of *residential architect*, are the jury. There are no entries, no official guidelines, no muss, no fuss. We simply select the architects we deem most worthy, based on our knowledge of their work. Above and beyond distinguished achievement, we search for architects who have been, are presently, or promise to become important leaders in their practice area. Consequently, our awards come in three shapes and sizes: Hall of Fame, Top Firm, and Rising Star.

The winners this year are Christopher Alexander, Hall of Fame; MITHUN Architects + Designers+ Planners, Top Firm; and Robert M. Gurney, Rising Star. Berkeley, Calif.-based Chris Alexander, author of the seminal text *A Pattern Language*, has shaped houses and architects' minds for more than 20 years. He continues to help shape the debate about what makes beautiful, functional, soulful architecture. Seattle, Wash.-based MITHUN has managed to do what few firms have accomplished: They've built a large, thriving, diverse practice devoted largely to residential architecture. Bob Gurney's triumph is his emergence as a top-flight Modernist in a Classicist's town, Washington, D.C. If you build Modern there, you can build it anywhere.

Our winners do what you do—they balance client, site, and budget—but they do it in ways we can all learn from. That's why they're *residential architect's* 2001 Leadership Award recipients. Turn the page and read all about them.



Bryce Duffy/Corbis SABA

the 2001 leadership awards

hall of fame: christopher alexander

spurred by a love of buildings and building,
alexander decoded the patterns
that make houses truly livable.

by bruce d. snider

What is architecture? What is the role of the architect in society? What is a good building? Should architects strive for beauty in their work? What is beauty? These are matters that every architect must ponder from time to time. But no architect of our time has explored such fundamental questions in greater depth or breadth, or with greater persistence, clarity, and originality of thought, than Christopher Alexander. As a theorist, teacher, author, practicing architect, and builder, Alexander has taken it upon himself to question everything, from construction details and the effects of color to the process by which a global species makes and remakes its environment and, beyond, to the objective bases of beauty itself.

Along the way, his work has informed, inspired, and provoked generations of architects. His most widely read book to date, *A Pattern Language* (co-authored with Sara Ishikawa and Murray Silverstein), has served as an essential text for architecture students, architects, and builders. Yet the book is so accessible that it remains popular among lay readers more than 20 years after its first publication and so universal that it has become a model not only for architects, planners, and homeowners but also for software developers. In his architectural practice he has shown a way to create, without being merely imitative, buildings with the richness, resonance, and life we are accustomed to experiencing only in old buildings. His analysis of the structural features of healthy communities provided the theoretical and practical underpinnings of the New Urbanism. His outspoken critique of the Modernist architectural establishment and architectural education has made him both a hero and a bete noire.

Christopher Alexander's theory and practice promote an architecture that nurtures human life.

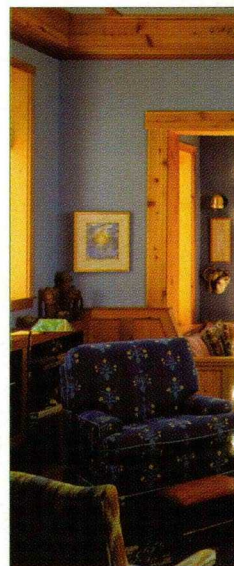
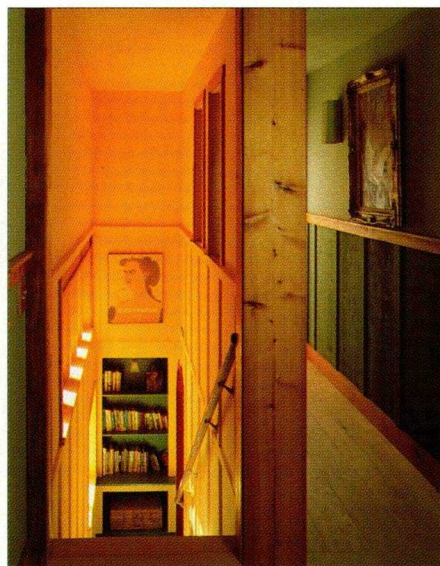
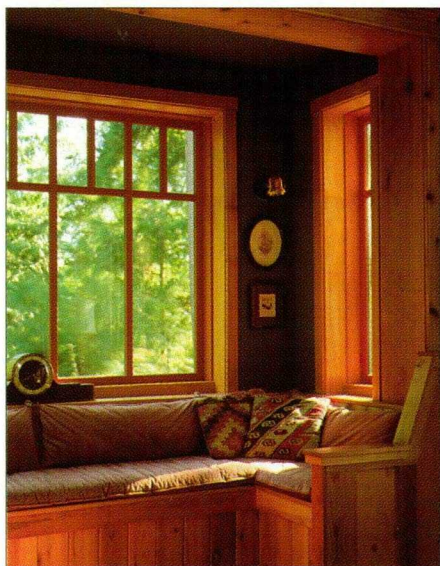
bricks and mortarboards

This is not the career Alexander envisioned when, as a young bricklayer's apprentice, he first set his sights on the profession.

"I feel that in some ways I was like a little kid," he says. "I wanted to be an architect, I went to architecture school, I found out that what I learned in architecture school was nonsense." At Cambridge University in the 1950s, he remembers, "The air was thick with Van Doesburg" and a doctrinaire Modernism that struck Alexander, who also studied mathematics, as the height of absurdity.

"I went through the Cambridge School of Architecture almost in a state of desperation," he says. At one point, assigned to design a house—and knowing that his notion of a proper building would provoke only ridicule—Alexander pulled what he remembers as a rather juvenile prank. Idly doodling "some Mondrian-esque lines" on paper, the thought occurred to him: "I'll just put a glass box around this and I'll call it a house." Summoned later to speak with the director of the department about his work, he feared he had earned himself a ticket home. But the director issued no reprimand. As Alexander remembers, "He walks up to me, puts his arm around my shoulder, and says, 'Chris, my boy, this is exactly what we want.'" When the meeting ended Alexander phoned his father and reported, "This is a lunatic asylum."

Rather than destroy his interest in architecture, however, Alexander's architecture school experience only spurred him to dig more deeply into the matter. After graduating from Cambridge, he says, "I had kind of an instinct about the U.S. I



the 2001 leadership awards hall of fame: christopher alexander



In siting a building, Alexander asks, "What is the most beautiful spot?" Then he builds around it, not on it. "You are actually shaping the garden before you're shaping the house," he says. In this and every subsequent stage of a project, Alexander insists that architecture must evolve on the site rather than on paper. "You can't have a successful building in which every part is appropriately unique unless each part has the opportunity to take shape fairly close to its production."



decided, 'I'm going to go to the U.S. and I'm going to figure this thing out from scratch.' I went to Harvard with that goal: What is architecture? And I began with anthropology, because I knew that there were so many cultures around the world that had created so many beautiful things." The work Alexander began at Harvard led to a Ph.D. in architecture, a professorship at the University of California at Berkeley, and a career-long pursuit of the universal principles of life-sustaining design.

building blocks

Alexander's process was not merely to catalog what he saw, even the best of it. Rather, it was—and remains—to identify structures and environments that foster objectively measurable positive effects, distill from them the essential qualities that make them work, and develop systems to produce buildings that embody those qualities. It is a deceptively simple approach. Yet it has been remarkably effective at making explicit the unwritten rules that underlie generation upon generation of building around the world.

His research also shed light on what remains perhaps the central paradox of architecture in the late 20th and early 21st centuries: why, with more and more trained architects in the world, we seem less and less effective in creating an environment in which people feel comfortable, whole, and happy. A period that has produced a wealth of inspired buildings has also brought a coarsening of the common fabric. Alexander's effort to decode the universal grammar of design was motivated by his sense that it was being flouted or ignored by an architectural profession that elevated individual artistic expression above all else.

"The idea that a few people are sort of priests of architecture has wreaked havoc," Alexander says. "It has served architecture very badly indeed." From the second half of the 20th century, academic architecture has occupied many of the brightest minds in the field in a closed con-

versation among architects and critics. The result has been self-consciously avant-garde or ironic work that has drifted further and further from the straightforward needs of the people who will use it. "It is the desire to be remarkable that removes things continuously from our ordinary lives," Alexander says. And because the desire to be remarkable has come to rule our built environment, "we are constantly trapped in places where we cannot be ordinary human beings." Meanwhile, the public's desire for buildings they can relate to is served largely by mass-market kitsch traditionalism, the architectural equivalent of junk food. Skilled architects who wish to address the needs of their clients in a direct, unself-conscious way have often had to go outside their training to do so.

In a day when architecture is viewed, taught, critiqued, and consumed primarily in the form of two-dimensional images—including photographs in magazines like this one—the photographic image exerts a tremendous influence on the actual design of buildings. But the qualities of a captivating graphic composition are quite different from those of a deeply livable environment. For more than 30 years, Alexander's work has challenged architects to delve deeper, to serve the needs of the body and spirit in a way that photography cannot capture, a way that must be experienced directly. Architects recognize this quality in the special places and buildings in their lives, Alexander says, "but for 60 or 80 years, it has not been on the agenda. It's a private feeling people have, but it's not an acknowledged 'this is what we ought to do when we build.' It's crazy, really, that the thing that is the core of all architecture should be, at least for our time, so elusive."

Alexander's work has made this essential quality less elusive than it once was, and less likely to be dismissed as a historical artifact. "I think Christopher Alexander is probably the most important theoretician on architectural



In his practice, Alexander strives to set aside any preconceived images of style, working instead to render a version of what he calls "the archetypal living building. You have to carry this in your belly or in your mind as a general example," he says. To create buildings with their own sense of life, "you eliminate your egotistical desire to impose yourself on the building."

the 2001 leadership awards hall of fame: christopher alexander



design of the present day,” says architect and educator Edward Allen, author the classic textbook *Fundamentals of Building Construction*. Alexander’s analysis of past and current architectural practice, Allen says, has been “not only deep and important, but also largely correct. He doesn’t bat a thousand, but he has undertaken such a vast scope of stuff, it’s astonishing how well he does bat.”

archetype casting

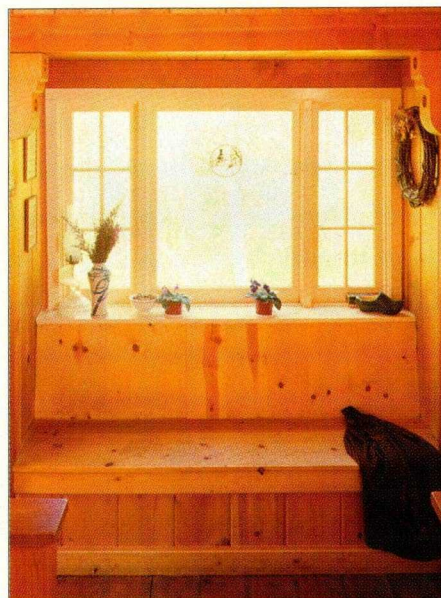
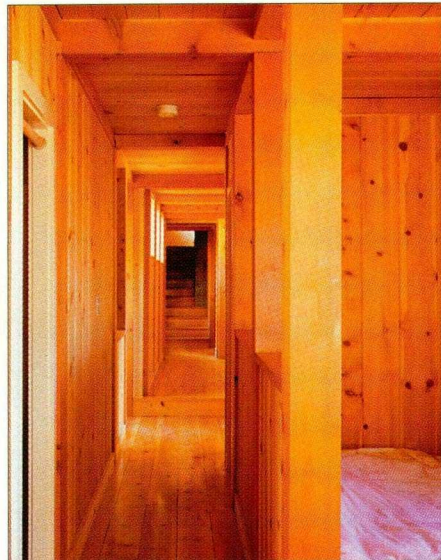
Alexander has done more than simply challenge architects to produce better work. In his books *A Pattern Language*, *The Timeless Way of Building*, and *The Oregon Experiment*, he offered subtle and powerful tools with which to do so. (An earlier book, *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*, and his soon-to-be-published *The Nature of Order* address the physical foundations of form and beauty.) New Urbanist planner Andres Duany calls Alexander “one of the most influential people who has ever been in the design world. His influence on us, operationally, has been enormous.” Sarah Susanka, whose popular books *The Not So Big House* and *Creating the Not So Big House* have appealed to both architects and homeowners in an effort to change the way Americans build, credits Alexander as the indispensable guiding light of her career.

“I consider myself one of the first generation of architects brought up with *A Pattern Language*,” she says. For Susanka, the book came along at a crucial moment. Early in her training she sensed that architecture had fallen victim to overspecialization. Architects were taught to believe that they held “special, private knowledge,” which their clients could never fully grasp. Young architects lived under an oppressive standard of “doing something nobody has ever done before, for the sake of doing something that’s never been done before.” Meanwhile, generational continuity in the trades had broken down, scattering the cultural capital once invested

in the hands of master craftspeople. “Things that were handed down from father to son and mother to daughter for hundreds of years no longer were.” As a result, she says, “people lost their confidence.”

“Alexander put forth a completely new paradigm in architecture,” Susanka says. Eschewing professionalist jargon and arcane theories, he spoke directly to the question of what kinds of places support vibrant human life. Refusing to turn his back on millennia of human experimentation, he sought answers in real buildings and real communities, and he employed a scientific approach to discerning their effects on people. “He was speaking a whole different language than anyone else had up until that point,” Susanka says. It is a language that speaks with both authority and specificity about the constituents of a healthy built environment—green corridors into urban areas, small public squares, paths that connect houses without crossing car roads, houses with cave-like spaces for small children to play in, semi-independent spaces for teenagers—a suitable habitat, if you will. *A Pattern Language* gave architects and their clients a common ground, a vocabulary with which lay people could identify what they wanted in a building, even if they had never experienced it before. “What he was doing was giving back a certain confidence,” Susanka says, “reminding people of what they had forgotten.”

Alexander’s critics have long dismissed him as a nostalgist whose work has no contemporary relevance. But while his work is replete with elements banished from the Modernist palette—he champions the use of ornament, for example—he says, “I don’t think it has anything in it that is a desire for the archaic. I view it very much as going forward.” The quality he seeks—a quality amply in evidence in his own buildings—is not the province of any style or period. His description of a visitor center he built for West Dean College, West Sussex, U.K.—“You feel that





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"The work of making a beautiful building is nearly as difficult as making a beautiful painting," Alexander says. Yet while in his lifetime architecture has often pursued other goals, Alexander has always addressed himself squarely to the question of beauty. "All my life I've been thinking about this matter; it's the way I think about building." And if building is not an act of enriching and beautifying the whole of life, he asks, "Then what on earth are architects doing?"



you're in the presence of a traditional architecture of some uncertain type"—could apply to any of his buildings. But the fact that his architecture feels pre-Modern may say as much about Modernism as about Alexander. Modernism and its offshoots may someday come to be viewed as a subordinate branch of architecture's evolutionary tree; if so, returning to the main trunk to move ahead might well at first seem retrograde.

In hindsight, this champion of timeless values in building seems to have been ahead of the avant-garde from his days at Cambridge. Modernism, Alexander notes, drew much of its inspiration from industrial mass production and the scientific theory, current during the early 20th century, that all matter could be reduced to identical repeating units. This gave rise to what Alexander calls the movement's "insane love affair with repetition." Decades later, the scientific vision of a neatly uniform underlying structure has fallen apart. "The idea of identical repeating units was a washout from the beginning," Alexander says. "All of this arose out of a scientific view of the world that was just wrong." The more closely scientists observe matter, the more they see not uniformity but uniqueness.

countless possibilities

Uniqueness is at the crux of Alexander's vision. But it is not the uniqueness of the avant-garde, of difference for the sake of being different. He draws his parallels from biological systems and computer science, each of which employs simple sets of instructions—genetic codes or software scripts—to produce infinitely varied and unique responses to data inputs or environmental circumstances. The same genetic material for, say, a tree will give rise to a distinctly different organism in each different environment in which a tree might grow. The same spreadsheet will give a different set of output figures for every set of inputs. In the realm of architecture and planning, this means that a single set of gov-

erning principles—a pattern language—can give rise to an infinite variety of design solutions, each appropriately unique to its unique circumstances.

Today's architectural avant-garde relies on computer technology to envision and engineer increasingly self-referential and abstractly sculptural buildings—dubbed "blobs" by architect Greg Lynn, a practitioner in the new genre. Alexander has embraced computer science and computer technology in a more profound way, as both metaphor and the medium with which to advance his vision of "rebuilding the earth."

Alexander's application of computer technology to architecture—to the fundamental work of design, not merely to imaging or drafting—began in the 1960s. In its structure, *A Pattern Language* bears much in common with the scripts that computer programs employ to carry out complex functions. Indeed, software engineers have adopted the book as a structural model with applications in their own field. In its nesting structure and links between patterns, the book anticipated the structure of the World Wide Web.

With the current widespread use of the Internet and computer-controlled production of made-to-order building materials, the world may have at last caught up with *A Pattern Language*. Alexander has responded to these developments with a Web site, patternlanguage.com, which offers the content of *A Pattern Language*—in the form of "generative sequences" for the creation of spaces—as a kind of open source code of environmental design. Anyone with an Internet connection can access the site for guidance in planning and building a variety of spaces: a garden, a small addition, a house, a neighborhood, an office building.

Web-based architecture may yet sound a bit ethereal, but Alexander's theory—and his own practice—are deeply rooted in the nitty-gritty of construction. For more than 30 years, his Center for Environmental Structure has served as both a laboratory for his theories and an active architec-

the 2001 leadership awards

hall of fame: christopher alexander



The quality Alexander seeks is elusive—“As far as I know, it’s never been described in print,” he says—but it makes itself known by the feelings it engenders in people. In the built environment, as in every sphere of life, “There is music that is distant from the people who hear it, and there is music that gets everyone singing and dancing.”

ture and construction firm. From its base in Berkeley, Calif., CES has undertaken projects ranging from town and community plans to individual houses in the U.S. and as far afield as Peru, Austria, and Japan. From this experience Alexander has derived one iron-clad imperative: The architect must direct the construction process. “The unification of design and construction—the willingness of the architect to take responsibility for construction and not just drawing—is probably the single most critical issue,” he says. He has pursued this approach in crafting a series of buildings that express, even through the limited medium of photography, a rare emotional depth.

“The architect as artist is the core of our activi-

ty,” Alexander says, “and I mean an artist in the sense of making beautiful things.” For architects to realize their full potential as artists, he maintains, “the love of buildings has to become a love of building.”

It is the love of both buildings and creating them that has animated Alexander’s career. But while every love bears a core of mystery, Alexander has been unwilling to let the mystery rest. By delving deeper into how the things we build can support us, enlighten us, move us, make us better, he has both enlarged and enriched his profession. **ra**

Bruce D. Snider writes for residential architect’s sister publication CUSTOM HOME.



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christopher alexander
grabs the
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top firm: mithun /
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