



Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology Newsletter

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This issue marks the start of *EAP's* 13th year. We thank the 52 readers who have renewed their subscription. Those who have not will find a renewal form inside. *Please renew!*

In this issue, *EAP* editor David Seamon reviews architect Christopher Alexander's *The Phenomenon of Life*, the first volume in his "The Nature of Order" series. Next, graphic designer Loretta Staples provides a kind of first-person phenomenology of her contrasting experiences of designing on the computer vs. freehand drawing.

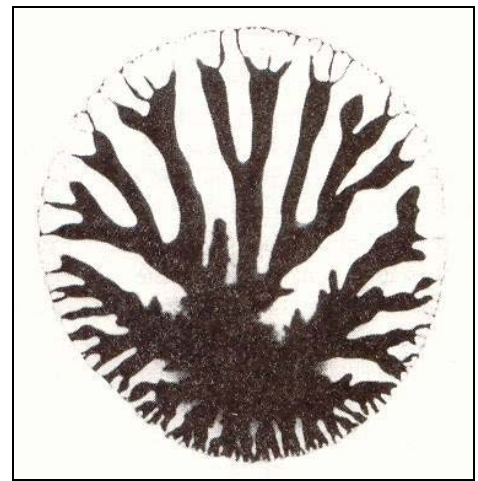
Our feature essay this issue is by lawyer and environmental activist Chris Desser, who offers a probing commentary on the nature of environmental reality and artifice. She speaks of an "experience of relationship" and indicates how the choices we make as individuals and as a global society blur the differences between artificial and real in regard to both nature and the built world.

PHENOMENOLOGY CONFERENCES

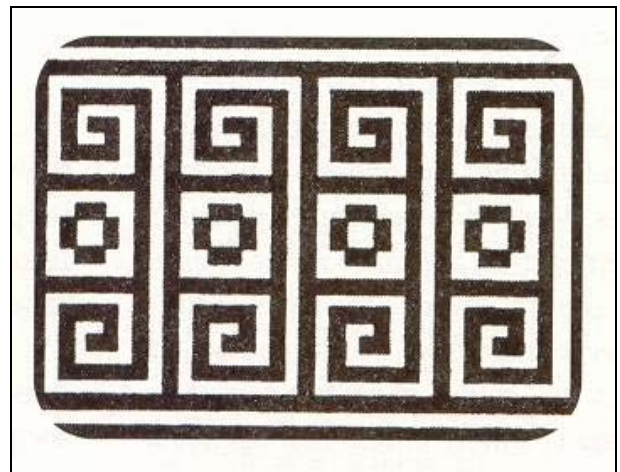
The 41st annual conference of the **Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP)** will be held at Loyola University in Chicago, 10-11 October 2002. For information, contact James Risser, Philosophy Department, Seattle University, 900 Broadway, Seattle, Washington 98122 (206-296-5473; spep@seattleu.edu).

In conjunction with these meetings will be held the annual conference of the **Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences (SPHS)**, scheduled 11-12 October and also at Loyola. SPHS is the leading academic society in the U.S. concerned with the continuing theoretical development and practical application of the phenomenological tradition to the human sciences. Contact Philip Lewin, 865 Shalar Court, Eugene, Oregon 97405 (541-485-3541; pml Lewin@yahoo.com).

Below: Two of the 15 "structural properties" that Christopher Alexander claims contribute to wholeness. From The Phenomenon of Life, the first book in his four-volume "The Nature of Order." See review, p. 4.



No. 5. Positive Space refers to the way that all parts of a well-made artwork, building, or place contribute to its beauty, life, and sense of well being.



No. 8. Deep Interlock and Ambiguity refers to how an intentional spatial and visual interconnectedness among parts joins those parts into a larger whole.

Juhani Pallasmaa, Finnish architect and architectural writer [see *EAP*, spring 2001, p. 5] sends word that his *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema* has just been published by the Finnish publisher *Rakennustieto* (PO Box 1004, Helsinki 00101 Finland).

Pallasmaa uses the notion of existential space to explore the shared experiential ground of architecture and cinema. Films that he examines include Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* and *Rear Window*, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia*, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, and Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger*. A central focus is the crucial role of architectural image in cinematic expression.

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For the past 15 years, **Kingsley K. Wu**, Professor in the Department of Creative Arts at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, has photographed, sketched, and lectured about the *Camino de Santi-*

ago, Spain's medieval pilgrimage road to St. James. He writes:

This July, my wife and I took our sixth trip to Spain. We visited San Sebastian and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. We joined some friends from Barcelona at Frómista and began our pilgrimage by walking to Carrion de los Condes the first morning out.

We had just returned from a ten-week trip to China and we felt we could handle the walk. Actually, what did us in was not so much the walking but the backpacks (for the first time in our lives) and extra luggage! So, we turned tourists and rode a bus to Sahagún to wait for our walking friends to catch up. We kept this scheme until we reached León then took a train to Santiago. Being on the "Road" was a wonderful experience, since this was the first time my wife had ever been to any part of the Camino.

"My way of commemorating the Camino is to have some of my sketches printed on note cards. They are \$6.50 per set of 12 cards (four different drawings) plus postage. If any organization or group would like to sell these cards for fund raising, I would be happy to supply sets. 1431 Woodland Avenue, West Lafayette, Indiana 47906; kwu@peoplepc.com.

BOOK REVIEW

Christopher Alexander, 2002. *The Phenomenon of Life*. NY: Oxford University Press.

For the last twenty years, manuscript drafts of architect Christopher Alexander's "The Nature of Order" have circulated informally among his students, colleagues, and friends. Now, exactly 25 years after the appearance of his hugely influential *Pattern Language* (Oxford University Press, 1977) comes the publication of his masterwork, not as one volume but four.

The first of these volumes, entitled *The Phenomenon of Life*, will be followed by book two, *The Process of Creating Life*; book three, *A Vision of a Living World*; and book four, *The Luminous Ground*. The table of contents for book one lists the chapters and headings of the three other books, so one assumes they will all be published in the near future.

As with all his work, the aim of these four books is to explore the nature of a particular kind of order that Alexander calls *wholeness*, which, whether in nature or humanmade, is the "source of coherence in any part of the world" (p. 90). Moreover, says Alexander, this coherence offers a sense of harmony, which "fills and touches us" (p. 15). He also argues that, wherever there is wholeness, there is *life*, which

involves such qualities as good health (e.g., a flourishing wetland), well being (e.g., a robust urban neighborhood with a bustling street life), handsomeness (e.g., a well crafted door), or beauty (e.g., an elegant glazed bowl, a fine oil painting, a splendid soaring cathedral).

According to Alexander, humanmade wholeness in the past largely arose *unself-consciously* through the doing of the making itself. He also argues that, particularly in the 20th century, the ability to sustain and create wholeness has largely disintegrated (according to the table of contents, the reasons for this collapse will be discussed in book two). Alexander's aim is to study and understand wholeness so that, whether in our theory or practice, we might find a way *self-consciously* to allow wholeness to arise again in our world. In short, he hopes to resurrect explicitly a way of understanding and making that in the past mostly happened tacitly.

UNDERSTANDING WHOLENESS

As a means to introduce readers to the idea of wholeness, Alexander's most important tool in *Phenome-*

Fifteen Properties of Wholeness

1. Levels of scale
2. Strong centers
3. Boundaries
4. Alternating repetition
5. Positive space
6. Good shape
7. Local symmetries
8. Deep interlock & ambiguity
9. Contrast
10. Gradients
11. Roughness
12. Echoes
13. The void
14. Simplicity & inner calm
15. Not-separateness

non is over one hundred photographs and drawings, many in color. Throughout the book, these illustrations are Alexander's primary evidence for wholeness and also his primary vehicle for demonstrating ideas that otherwise are extremely difficult to grasp. For example, in chapter two, "Degrees of Life," he provides 16 pairs of photographs, in terms of which readers are to determine for themselves which of each pair is more alive and whole and which is less so (e.g., a "road in the trees" vs. a "road in the hills," a "Bangkok slum house" vs. a "postmodern house").

Alexander's reason for asking readers to look and see *for themselves* arises from his own long experience of seeking to understand wholeness. He explains that this learning process has largely been an arduous, trial-and-error effort of examining objects, buildings, and places that appeared to have a sense of life and wholeness. In time, he came to realize that there were certain identifiable properties that appeared over and over again. He writes:

For twenty years, I spent two or three hours a day looking at pairs of things—buildings, tiles, stones, windows, carpets, figures, carvings of flowers, paths. Seats, furniture, streets, paintings, fountains, doorways, arches, friezes—comparing them, and asking myself: *Which one has more life?* And then asking: *What are the common features of the examples that have most life?* (p. 144).

CENTERS

Out of this lengthy process of study, Alexander eventually distilled 15 "structural properties" that he claims reoccur in all things, buildings, places, and situations that evoke wholeness and life (see table, left). Of these 15 properties, the most significant is number two—*strong centers*—which, in the rest of the book, becomes Alexander pivotal conceptual and practical means for clarifying and grounding the much murkier notions of wholeness and life.

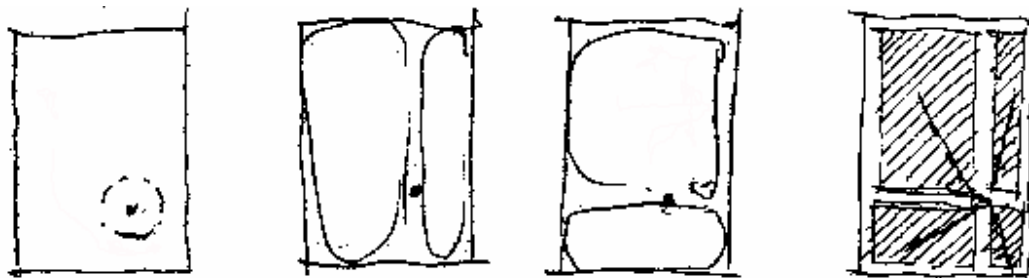
Most simply, a center is any sort of spatial concentration or organized focus or place of more intense pattern or activity—for example, ornamental shapes in a carpet, columns of an arcade, or a lively plaza full of people enjoying themselves. Whatever its particular nature and scale, a center is a region of more intense physical (and often experiential) order that provides for the relatedness of things, situations, and events (p. 85).

In this sense, the strongest centers gather what is apart and provide all parts with a place to belong (interestingly, the table of contents indicates that the themes of "belonging" and "not belonging" will become central themes in book three). Further, where one finds life and wholeness, centers are never alone but mutually implicated at many levels of scale: "The wholeness of any portion of the world is the system of larger and smaller centers, in their connections and overlap" (p. 91).

Phenomenon's emphasis on centers is not new. Already, in his *New Theory of Urban Design* (OUP, 1987) and *A Foreshadowing of 21st Century Art: The Color and Geometry of Very Early Turkish Carpets* (OUP, 1993), Alexander has developed the notion of centers in considerable detail. What is useful about his discussion of centers in *Phenomenon* is that it is simply presented and perhaps more readily understood by newcomers than in his earlier accounts.

A good illustration of this simplicity of presentation is Alexander's introducing the link between wholeness and centers. He begins by drawing a blank sheet of paper on which he then marks a single dot in the lower right-hand corner (right). He emphasizes that, when the dot ap-





pears, there is a “subtle and pervasive shift of the whole” (p. 81).

In terms of centers, it can be said that the whole sheet of paper is a center as is the dot, but Alexander also emphasizes that there are many other centers (above)—a “halo” around the dot; four latent rectangles—two horizontally sensed, two vertically sensed—that in turn evoke four corner rectangles; “rays” from the dot extending up, down, left, and right as well as diagonally toward the far corners of each of the four separate rectangles. If we tally all these centers, Alexander demonstrates that we find as many as twenty, and this in an example involving only a blank sheet and a dot!

USING THE PROPERTIES

In understanding the relative power of a particular center and the larger and smaller sets of centers of which it is a part, the fourteen other properties offer considerable assistance. For example, “local symmetries” says that the intensity of a center is partly increased to the extent it contains smaller centers arranged in locally symmetrical groups. In a parallel way, “contrast” indicates that a center is strengthened to the degree its character is different from the character of surrounding centers.

Alexander then proceeds to demonstrate how these and the other properties can be discovered, for example, in the 16th-century mosque tile (p. 198) illustrated right—e.g., the way that all parts of the design, whether lighter or darker, evoke positive space and interweave and interlock, partly through boundary lines that edge both lighter and darker portions.

In later chapters, Alexander examines how buildings and places can be spoken of in terms of centers and the other 14 properties. One of his most powerful examples is the terrace of a small Italian hotel overlooking the Bay of Salerno. In this one small place, says Alexander, there are hundreds of centers, some

more architectural and geometric (e.g., bays formed by four columns, repetition of the bays, the chamfered corners of each column, grapes growing on a trellis), others more place-grounded and experiential (e.g., tables in the

bays helping them come to life, a low wall helping the view, the trellis with vines providing a sense of enclosure).



Ultimately, says Alexander, his 15 properties are much more heuristic tools than real structures actually in the world. He explains:

...what really matters is the person’s ability to see the centers, to make more and more centers, and to make them come to life...By following the properties, even if blindly, like a mechanical tool, we gradually come to know more and more and more about the life of centers—we appreciate the way that centers interact, we learn to make the life of one center more intensive by adding, or providing other centers—and the property thus teaches us, concretely, more and more about how we can make centers come to life. This is the whole ball game in the end (n. 9, p. 242).

NOT SIGHTING THE GLOBAL?

A cursory glance at Alexander's 15 properties of wholeness might lead one to conclude that they are entirely geometric and little more than variations on standard formalist design principles like symmetry, hierarchy, rhythm, repetition, and so forth.

In fact, these properties are much more than formalist, and two of their most striking recognitions are that: (1) material and living worlds are intimately and mutually implicated in each other; and (2) space and place are an integral part of what it means to be human. In this sense, Alexander's work is close conceptual kin to: (1) architectural theorist Bill Hillier's theory of space syntax; and (2) work on the phenomenology of place, which claims the notion of place as a central ontological structure of human existence.

In regard to space syntax, it is encouraging that, in *Phenomenon*, Alexander briefly discusses Hillier's work as demonstrating, like his own, that "it is not really possible to keep function and space separate" (p. 417). In introducing Hillier's work, however, I also think that Alexander unintentionally identifies a major weakness of his 15 properties and of his wider efforts to use "centers" as the core notion for understanding and making wholeness.

As Hillier's space syntax conclusively demonstrates, the people/space intimacy, whether for buildings, neighborhoods, or complete settlements, must be understood *both locally and globally*. For Hillier, the central local structure is *convex space*—the quality of local space that relates it to its immediate surroundings. On the other hand, the central global structure is *axial space*—the quality of a local space as it is integrally interconnected with the much larger pathway fabric of which it is part.

Though Alexander briefly discusses the differences between Hillier's two types of space, he does not seem to realize that his 15 properties are largely *local* in their interpretation of wholeness. For sure, "levels of scale," "interlock," and "gradients" speak partially to the way a center relates to other centers larger and smaller (though it must be emphasized that these properties interpret this interconnectedness mostly *in terms of parts*). The much larger dilemma is the core notion of "center," which by its very nature of involving focused intensity is much more local than global in its conception and effects.

In short, I worry that, in Alexander's explication of wholeness, the underlying degree of global interconnectedness (what Hillier refers to as relative "integration") is left largely out of sight. In his discussion of art works, decorative objects, and buildings as static architecture, this emphasis on the local qualities of wholeness provides powerful insights because these things are more or less independent physical entities that do not house human lifeworlds.

On the other hand, the 15 properties may cast an incomplete understanding when one attempts to apply them to the larger-scale environmental fabric around and within which the lifeworlds of real human beings actually unfold. The failure closest at hand is the project at the heart of Alexander's *New Theory of Urban Design*—a redevelopment design for an urban district in San Francisco.

Though there is much about this urban design to praise, its major failing is a poorly envisioned street grid that inhibits interconnections and movement among its various building and pathway parts. As the *New Theory* account of this design process shows, the project participants had little conscious awareness of the crucial significance of the global structure of the district's pathway system or of how a permeable, interconnected street grid might provide a vital foundation for neighborhood activity and street life.

A WORLD MORE ROBUST AND KIND

It may well be that this lack of global pattern is a major flaw of the broader theory of wholeness that the complete "Nature of Order" will provide. What is so praiseworthy about Alexander is his willingness to continuously reconsider and revise his work, so it could well happen that in time he will reconstitute his theory of wholeness so that it places the local in relation to the global just as presently it so forcefully depicts the global as it is composed by the local.

Alexander has always been as much a philosopher as an architect, and *The Phenomenon of Life* releases his conceptual powers to their fullest extent yet. He has always sought to build as well as design and to design as well as think. The result is a remarkable reconnaissance into the nature of architecture, life, and creative will. If this reconnaissance includes an occasional misstep, as I've suggested above, the fault is small in comparison to the wealth of awareness, stimulation, and hope his designs and writings offer.

In these postmodern times of distortional postructural theories and cynical deconstructivist designs, Alexander's work is a beacon illuminating a way to make the world more robust, beautiful, and kind. Such a world is utopian, of course, and never really gained in real life. Yet books like *Phenomenon* and real-world projects like his Mexicali experiment

and Japanese Eishen School demonstrate at least a partial actualization of his extraordinary vision. In turn, this vision and work may well inspire a new generation of practitioners and thinkers, and so a virtuous circle may proceed.

--David Seamon

Slower

Loretta Staples

Staples wrote this essay while a Managing Director at Scien, a New York City e-business. She continues to study drawing and now painting. Address: 80 Charles Street, 1E, New York, NY 1001. EAP editors thank Design Michigan Director Jack Williamson for bringing Staples' essay to our attention. © 2002, Loretta Staples.

In fall 2000, I enrolled in a beginning drawing class. After 11 years designing software interfaces, I was growing weary of all that clicking and dragging. Newly relocated to New York City after four years teaching design, my days as an eBusiness consultant were now consumed by email and teleconferences.

Something was amiss in all that high-tech interaction. Some part of me had had enough. I wanted to get back to the basics. The basics of what, I didn't quite know, but I did know I was weary of the ongoing intermediation of my eyes and hands. I knew I didn't want typing or mousing or a cool blue light staring me in the face. Drawing seemed like it might be just the thing. And it was.

I drew with charcoal, soft vine and compressed—thin sticks like branches, squared off stubs, big blocky lengths of burnt wood.

Drawing was slow. Slower. Slower than the computer. Slow because of the sheer resistance of the paper, in contrast to the slipperiness of the virtual page. Slow because no computation augmented the directness of my marks. Slow because there were no undos, no control points, no show or hides, no snap-to grids, no layer management, no copy-and-pastes.

Slow because my eyes followed the edges of the forms I drew as if there were time to do so (there was time in the three-hour session). Slow because my hand moved as slowly as my eyes following the forms I observed. Slow because observation was demanded. Slow because nothing began or ended quite as discretely as the pixels I was used to editing.

Slow because the entire context of history and medium that I now engaged emerged out of a different time, a different world. Slow because in this particular setting I was allowed to dwell in the moments as they unfolded in the act of drawing. Where else in the world would I have been allowed to do so, sheltered in collective company and under the watchful eye of an unhurried teacher?

Somehow the speed of drawing always felt mysteriously appropriate. A one-minute pose yielded exactly a one-minute drawing. And the drawing felt complete in all its one-minuteness. The same with five, ten, and twenty minutes. None of my drawings felt unfinished to me.

Conversely, everything I'd produced on the computer as of late felt incomplete, as though demanding a level of polish and finality that I never had time for, ironically, despite all that computational quickness.

What was it about microprocessing speed that disincanted me? It was as though the smallness of my human effort was no match for the vast potential enabled by those ever-efficient megahertz. It discouraged me. I could never master all the computer was capable of, nor did I feel the desire to do so.

And while every artist comes to terms with the gulf between one's own creative capacities and what-the-medium-is-capable-of, somehow I'm sure that the gulf with this particular medium is unlike any other.

Then there was the out-of-the-box problem. In the year before, I'd produced a couple of computer models for sculptures I was eager to make. But for