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BOOK REVIEW DESK

## THE LAST WORD; Pattern Recognition

By Laura Miller

Feeling alienated from contemporary architecture is a commonplace experience: the pleasure that leaches out of your afternoon stroll when you have to walk along a big building with a flat, smooth, featureless front; bafflement at another magazine spread celebrating a conglomeration of soul-less boxes. So it's surprising that social critics (besides the ever-canny Tom Wolfe) haven't had more of a field day with the topic. In this underfought war, there's even a ready-made hero in the person of Christopher Alexander, an architect who was born in Vienna, raised in England and now lives in California, and is something of a prophet without honor in his own profession.

Alexander produces the kind of books every serious reader should wrestle with once in a while: fat, challenging, grandiose tracts that encourage you to take apart the way you think and put it back together again. Depending on whom you talk to, they're either canonical or completely off the reservation; among architects, he has some devoted followers and plenty of scornfully dismissive critics, particularly among the champions of the avant-garde. "A Pattern Language" and "The Timeless Way of Building," two seminal works he wrote with five colleagues, have continued to sell well since they were first published in the 1970's, but despite his position as emeritus professor of architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, their influence on his profession (outside the continuation of some of his ideas in the New Urbanism movement) has faded. Instead, laypeople use "A Pattern Language" to design their own homes, and "The Timeless Way of Building" has been a major influence on, of all things, a school of software engineering called object-oriented programming.

Even people who aren't building a house or constructing a database are fascinated by "A Pattern Language," a recipe book of "patterns," or archetypal elements that can be combined to form a structure as small as a desk or sitting area or as large as a city or region. The patterns, distilled from (mostly premodernist) examples all over the world, are what the authors believe best foster the comfort, activities and social lives of the people who live in them. To use a key Alexander word, these patterns help make a building "alive." The book is easiest to digest if you read its 253 numbered sections in reverse order, from smallest to largest, since most of the thinking on regional and urban planning reflects the starry-eyed utopianism of its day: nice, but wildly impractical, politically and economically. Some of the more nuts-and-bolts patterns, however, have become architectural rules of thumb: "Balconies and porches that are less than six feet deep are hardly ever used"; "When they have a choice, people will always gravitate to those rooms that have light on two sides." In a profession that seems indifferent to the concerns and delights of ordinary life, Alexander has always been a humanist, a proponent of window seats, sunny spots and arcades.

Last year, Alexander began the publication of "The Nature of Order," his four-volume magnum opus, the second volume of which appears next month. An unclassifiable work, "The Nature of Order" offers the results of his quest to figure out what underlying principles make his patterns work. It has some of the same qualities that make "The Timeless Way of Building" and parts of "A Pattern Language" a tricky sell to hardheaded empiricists wary of any whiff of the metaphysical. Clearly influenced by Taoism, Alexander unabashedly uses words like "wholeness" and complains of the prevailing Cartesian "mechanistic" view of the universe. "The Nature of Order" has vast ambitions; it floats a hypothesis that Alexander hopes will lead to "a new view of space and matter" and to a different conception of "the fundamentals of the way the world is made." This theory, very crudely summarized, would be based on the understanding that order is inherent in space and systems and that they are more or less "alive" based on the quality of the order they manifest.

That précis alone is probably enough to send some readers fleeing to the new Janet Evanovich novel, but it would be stupid and shortsighted to write Alexander off as a fuzzy-minded New Age philosopher. He did leave me unpersuaded that what he calls "life" is a property of the physical universe, but I am convinced, after reading the first two volumes of "The Nature of Order," that at the very least, "order" as he meticulously defines it is fundamental to human cognition, which makes it important enough. Besides, as with all of Alexander's writings, "The Nature of Order" is so firmly grounded in the visual, palpable world that it can never be accused of drifting off into cloud-cuckoo-land. And then there's his unsettling tendency to be right.

TO make his case, Alexander repeatedly uses a flexible and eloquent tool: he presents two images -- a pair of buildings or drawings or household objects or country roads -- and asks the viewer to choose the one that has the most "life." (Sometimes he asks which one is "a better picture of the self.") The quintessential pairing asks people to choose between a diner-style saltshaker and a bottle of the best-known brand of ketchup. According to Alexander, 80 percent of the people asked choose the saltshaker, and his experiments with other pairings along these lines yield similar results; when asked to pick which of two images looks most "right" in some vague way, a great majority of respondents gravitate to one -- which does make you wonder if the question really is as vague as it seems. Even if it's hard to agree with Christopher that a science comparable to physics can be created out of such responses, following his argument amounts to being shown how to see art and the world by a man with one of the most developed senses of beauty I've ever encountered. In wending my way through his image-packed books, I found myself looking harder at photographs -- of Turkish carpets, Moroccan mosaics, Japanese temples, ginkgo leaves, soap bubbles, postmodern houses, you name it -- than I have looked at anything in a long time. Afterward, I saw familiar objects and places with new eyes -- not as momentous as a new science, I'll grant you, but a revelation all the same.

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