

Prospects and Retrospects

An interview with Christopher Alexander on his new series of books, *The Nature of Order* (London, 6 November 2003)¹

Davide Deriu and Luis Diaz

Nearly two decades after he published his last major book, *A New Theory of Urban Design* (1985), Christopher Alexander is back with a new monumental work. Those who have seen and read *The Nature of Order*, a four-volume treatise published in instalments over the last two years by Berkeley's Centre for Environmental Structure, will not consider the word "monumental" an over-statement. This series of books constitutes the summa of Alexander's thought. They are the end product of a life-long activity of research in which the British architect (born in Vienna in 1936) has been relentlessly pursuing a *generative* theory of architecture capable of satisfying the complex system of human needs through a rational building programme.

Ever since he laid out this project, more than 30 years ago, Alexander has repeatedly anticipated the release of *The Nature of Order* as the culmination of his theoretical output. The publication of these volumes brings to fruition the search for a scientific paradigm of architecture that has pre-

occupied Alexander since the early 1960s, and which first found a coherent formulation in his 1970s "trilogy" (*A Pattern Language*), *The Timeless Way of Building* and *The Oregon Experiment*). The central idea of these books was that the built environment is based on patterns that can be objectively determined and defined in terms of languages, not unlike the genetic code of any living organism. Over the years, Alexander has carried out a number of experimental projects—ranging from furniture design to programmes for urban housing—in which he has sought to combine invariant geometric properties with ever-changing processes of local adaptation.

The implications of this approach for urban design were initially expressed in the influential article, "A city is not a tree."² Here, Alexander theorized the difference between *artificial* cities ("which have been deliberately created by designers and planners") and *natural* ones ("which have arisen more or less spontaneously over many, many years") on the basis of their different struc-

tural patterns. The former were shown to be the result of tree-like spatial patterns that often produced a dissociation between physical units and social systems by means of a clear-cut separation of functions. Conversely, Alexander proposed a more complex conceptual model, the *semilattice*, to understand the foundations of “natural” cities. Alexander argued that this pattern, though not as easily encompassed by a single mental act as the tree structure, would allow the overlapping of uses and multiplicity of aspects necessary in the creation of a ‘living city’.

The numerous applications of these principles on an urban scale range from the Master Plan for the University of Oregon, begun in the late 1960s, to experimental schemes in Israel, Spain and Japan. Alexander also championed the importance of user design in the generation of adaptive forms, which he tested in several projects for developing countries including India, Peru and Mexico.

Now an Emeritus Professor of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, Alexander presents the four volumes of *The Nature of Order* as independent but complementary, each of them exploring a distinct aspect of the problem of “living structure” (The Phenomenon of Life; The Process of Creating Life; A Vision of a Living World; The Luminous Ground). As the titles suggest, this is no mean endeavour. Mobilizing his eclectic identity as scientist and architect, Alexander has undertaken the task of theorizing how structures are defined, how they are generated, and how they function, while also situating this discussion within a broader cosmological framework. The built environment is discussed through the same categories as living creatures, insofar as architecture is also seen as being subject to life forms and processes.

Alexander’s quest of *wholeness* is a reaction to the perceived loss of roots in 20th-century architecture. The rational-scientific approach aims to provide, in his own words, “A complete and coherent intellectual platform on which it is possible to erect a sensible architecture”. As a consequence, the

four volumes of *The Nature of Order* (with their 2150 pages and 1975 pictures) go very much against the grain of most contemporary architectural theory. At the same time wide-ranging and far-reaching, this work can be better understood within the tradition of the classical treatises than by any other current trend in architectural discourse. Our reference is not so much to the 16th-century proliferation of building manuals (which were concerned with an altogether different kind of “order”) as to the foundational texts of the Renaissance, which Françoise Choay has proposed to call *instaurational*: that is, “those writings which have the explicit aim of developing an autonomous conceptual apparatus in order to conceive and build new and unknown forms of space.”³

In the following interview, Alexander explains and elaborates on his vision as contained in *The Nature of Order*.

Interview

You have been trying to establish a “new paradigm” of architecture since the beginning of your production as an architect, and your theoretical production in the 1960s. Do you situate your latest work in a line of continuity with your previous theories, or does it mark a departure from them?

These four books are fully consistent with my earlier books. They represent a continuation of the same line of thought and argument. Architecture has to begin with human beings. It’s about making a world in which human beings may be elevated, comforted and enabled to be what they are. It sounds naïve and quite simple, but given the actual negative effect of the political and corporate institutions of the last 100 years, it is a giant task and I am afraid it is one that very few architects have been willing to tackle or are interested in tackling. I would say without exaggeration that 80% of the architecture being produced by professional architects today is contributing to the oppression that

has been caused by the 20th and now 21st century society on people. And architects have decided very unwisely to let themselves become a major tool in the activation of that process which, through political and psychological oppression, makes a person into a piece of machinery. This is a very serious problem. It is incredible that the architectural profession has been so slow to recognize it and to deal with it.

With the series of books that came out with *A Pattern Language*, I established a basis about what kinds of things make people well in the form of buildings. That book sells more copies every year, which is an unusual trajectory for an architectural publication in modern times and clearly indicates the high level of public concern about this problem. Immediately after writing my early books, I became aware of tremendous difficulties which I had not addressed at all at that time. In the 27 years that it's taken me to write *The Nature of Order*, I have built many buildings and done projects all over the world. One might say that these books originate in a sort of dialogue between myself and the experience of these built projects.

You have long advocated a return to architectural practice as a way of "making" as opposed to an image-driven profession. Are you suggesting that the media frenzy that surrounds the stardom of architecture has had a detrimental effect on the progress of the discipline?

The idea of media attention in itself is not evil; the question is what criteria are put to the front. The criteria which should be put at the forefront of our profession are feelings of people, needs which people have, subtle adaptation between buildings, and the harmony of the landscape. All that may be summarized by the phrase "deep adaptation." Instead of deep adaptation, the current magazines focus on provocative images, and on the extremity of degree of provocation as the major criterion for publication. Of course this has a negative effect on the environment,

world-wide. All this is a peculiarity of the way in which architecture magazines survive. Since they mainly publish images, it is the images which draw the most attention rather than the actual experience created by the buildings. I don't have anything negative about the media as such, but about the particular way in which the media have conducted themselves, and how the architects have co-operated in the process of creating this strange machine. What has been happening in the recent years is that the magazines have become more shrill and more willing to lend themselves to idiotic manipulation of forms. Not that form itself is idiotic, but the particular manipulations of forms that have been indulged in recent times are damaging to people.

I still believe what I said in the past about the union of making, construction and design. I happen to be a general contractor, so of course I do that. But it's as a scientist that I am speaking. Do I believe that everybody has to become a contractor and learn to work with their hands on concrete, stone, plastic, glass, and so forth as I did? I don't know if that is absolutely necessary, but I think that one has to recognize that deep adaptation in buildings is a serious matter, and if you want to say "I'm not going to dirty with my hands that stuff", you'd better have a very clear programme about how this adapting continuity is to occur during the lifetime of making that building, otherwise you won't make a good building. These are incredibly basic, simple points, but they are not recognized by the profession. I'm quite confident that the present view of architecture will not survive, because it just doesn't make sense. You can keep a secret for a certain amount of time, but not forever.

The use of images in your books has often evoked particular states of being, modes of feeling, ways of living, etc. rather than depicting empty spaces. Can you tell us more about the function of pictures in your latest books, which are even more lavishly illustrated than your previous work?

Yes, it has been an intense preoccupation of mine. These latest books have been designed and composed by me and the amount of energy that has gone into careful calibration of these images has been very great indeed, far greater than in *A Pattern Language*. My purpose in these books is to illustrate what life is in many of its forms—especially its daily forms—to draw attention to it, to try to illuminate the origins of life that take place in these buildings and what we must do if we want to help that life to happen. Why has it taken 27 year to write four books describing this simple thing? Because the depth of resistance is so huge, and because society, infected by mechanistic ideology, has not yet recognized widely that the core of any humane architectural programme must be: THE CREATION OF LIFE ON EARTH. Once that is clear understood, and accepted, everything in architecture will change. What I have tried to do with the four books of *The Nature of Order* is to build a foundation wall that cannot be knocked down; it is a foundation of a different way of thinking about the world and I have been very careful about it, which is why it has taken so long. I want people to be able to stand on it so that they can go forward to introduce a new kind of sanity into their own work.

Let's go back to the 1960s and 70s when your project started. It seemed that back then you were part of a larger community of people, such as Jane Jacobs, who were questioning architecture and trying to connect people and spaces. Has that community vanished or simply taken another route?

I think that the developer-inspired portions of the architectural profession of the last 20 years have been brilliant at making sure that that stuff was killed. There were hundreds of people who were thinking about these matters in the late 60s and early 70s. Gradually, the programmes they were involved in were stripped out of the archi-

tectural schools and out of the profession. In Berkeley we had, among other things, a thriving group of social anthropologists who were working in the department of architecture: but gradually their efforts were marginalized, put to sleep and stopped. This was not accidental. The way architecture has been constituted since the 1990s is essentially hand in glove with the developer, who relies on images, and uses architecture as a way of increasing profit and acceptability. There are the occasional developers who have some kind of conscience, but they very easily give up. The image factory serves the ego of architects, banks, corporations and developers. But there is no doubt that the fragility of this image-factory position that has been created by force is now becoming more palpable. I believe it will crumble soon.

Let's take a more positive look at the contemporary situation. One could argue that there is, in certain quarters, a growing concern with ecological and sustainability issues. Do you see this as promising or as missing key concerns?

I see it as both. I think it is very promising because it is a serious world-wide movement, which is fuelled by larger matters, very much beyond architecture. However, I think that, as a bandwagon, it's been a bit dubious so far, its focus has been too narrow, and its orientation is too much with technical matters, not with matters of living structure as it should be. For example, the most important thing that happens to any building while it's being designed and built, and then looked after, is that it's constantly adapted to the needs and circumstances that arise. Traditional environments were incredibly good at this because their process was of a nature that did it almost without it ever having to be thought about. My personal opinion is that the profession of architecture had better move in this new direction very rapidly, learn what living structure IS, and learn to make living structure as a daily matter of course—

otherwise it will be left behind and it will simply be swept away as the horse-and-buggy was swept away by the automobile age.

Your “pattern language”, based on a fundamental respect for human qualities, has clearly evolved against the architectural establishment. What are the broader implications of this approach for the future of the profession?

The establishment is a serious, heavy-duty machine. This machine is now threatened by all kinds of things. The first thing to recognize is that, if you want to understand which things have more life and which have less, ask to which extent they communicate with your own soul. Of course, it can get very hairy; for a corporation to have to admit that such a consideration might be part of daily work could be terrifying because it's completely at odds with the way in which a modern corporation is run.

I suppose if there was one bone of contention in the struggle about what architecture really is, and the peculiar direction that it took in the 20th century, it hinges on the issue of whether there is such a thing as *truth* in these matters. Is there such a thing as goodness, adaptation, beauty, harmony or comfort created by buildings, or is that just a matter of opinion? For most of human history, it has been clear to people that this is a real question and a substantial one, and it has been the core of the art of building. But about 1970, something began to happen where architects believed that they got brownie points for doing things that were strange, different and highly innovative in some very artificial sense. So the idea was formulated that it is all a matter of opinion, everybody should do what they like to do, students should be told that they could do whatever they want.

At the present moment, the architects who get the most attention in the media are the ones who do the craziest things. This is a very unusual state of affairs; it is as

though a mass social psychosis had occurred. It is unusual for a profession to be able to create such a lamentable circumstance. What my books attempt to do is go to the roots of this kind of difficulty and lay a foundation that is solid enough to be able to go forward.

At which institutional level do you think your theories should primarily operate in order to be realized—practice, education, politics or somewhere else?

Projects! Just by building more and more things in the way in which I have been doing. The more you build in this way the more the world will take on, gradually, the configuration and the “process ability” to do it.

Changing the architecture schools is a very tough job. The schools are in a pretty bad way I must admit. I don't have in mind some sort of magic programme to change it because so many teachers are committed to deconstructivist thinking and post-modernism. I think if administrators recognize that the essential issue is ‘life’, and undertake to commit their schools to the creation of life, and gradually build new faculties who are committed to this programme, know what it means, and abandon, forever, the silly and impractical adherence to images, then it will happen. Projects again, are the best thing. If all schools base their programmes on real projects, real building work, and on the daily involvement of students in real building work, that will accomplish a very great deal, because unreality and fake ideas cannot survive easily under those conditions.. With projects, it's very easy, because all it takes is a willing client and someone—whether you call it builder, architect, architect-builder or developer—who understands this way of producing life and does his or her best to do it with their client. This can be effective and practical at every scale, from the very large project to a very tiny one.

Notes and references

- 1 An edited version of this interview, conducted and edited by Davide Deriu and Luis Diaz, was originally published in Italian by *Il Giornale dell'Architettura*, Year 3, No. 15, February 2004.
- 2 'A city is not a tree', *Architectural Forum*, 122(1), April 1965, pp. 58–62 (Part I); 122(2), May 1965, pp. 58–62 (Part II).
- 3 Choay, F. (1997) *The Rule and the Model: On the Theory of Architecture and Urbanism*, trans. D. Bratton, p. 6. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Davide Deriu teaches Architectural History and Theory at the Bartlett, University College London, where he is currently completing a PhD on photography and urban visions. He is a regular contributor to the Italian monthly, Il Giornale dell'Architettura.

Luis Diaz is Senior Lecturer in the School of Architecture and Design at the University of Brighton. He is currently researching late 20th-century housing in London in the PhD programme at the same university.