



# Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology

Vol. 24 ▪ No. 1

ISSN 1083-9194

[www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/EAP.html](http://www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/EAP.html) Winter ▪ 2013

This *EAP* starts 24 years. We thank readers renewing subscriptions and include a reminder for “delinquents.” We are grateful to subscribers who contributed more than the base subscription. Thank you!

This issue includes two book reviews and two essays. *EAP* Editor **David Seamon** discusses architect **Christopher Alexander’s** recent *Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth*, which tells the story of designing and building the 36-building, 10-million-dollar Eishin campus in suburban Tokyo. Philosopher **Ingrid Leman Stefanovic** reviews *The Language of School Design*, a primer using Alexander’s “pattern language” to think through the lived relationship between architecture and learning.

One aim of *EAP* is to present student research and writing, and this issue includes essays by Philosophy doctoral student **Matthew Bower** and Architecture masters student **Thomas Owen**. Bower considers traditional bathhouses and bathhouse rituals as they relate to sociability and “the porosity of flesh.” Owen contributes to a continuing *EAP* discussion on “architectural phenomenology” (see the fall 2012 issue) by considering how design might

move beyond visual images and contribute to a more multivalent environmental experience.

## Space Syntax & Julienne Hanson

The fall 2012 issue of the on-line, open-access *Journal of Space Syntax* (vol. 3, no. 1) is devoted to the research and writings of recently-retired architect **Julienne Hanson**, the co-creator, along with architectural theorist **Bill Hillier**, of space syntax, a theory that examines relationships among human movement, social structure, and spatial configuration (the journal contents are available at: [www.journalofspacesyntax.org/](http://www.journalofspacesyntax.org/)). This special issue reprints some of Hanson’s key works and provides commentaries. Contributors include: **Sophia Psarra** (“Spatial Morphology, Urban History and Design in Julienne Hanson’s ‘Urban Transformation: A History of Design Ideas’”); **Lars Marcus** (“Balancing Quantitative Analysis and Social Concern”); **Sam Griffiths** (“Networks, Narratives and Literary Representation: Reflections on Julienne Hanson’s ‘Time and Space in Two Nineteenth Century Novels’”); and **David Seamon** (“‘A Jumping, Joyous

Urban Jumble’: Jane Jacobs’ *Death and Life of Great American Cities* as a Phenomenology of Urban Place”).



Left: Alexander’s 1990 Eishin campus, a 2000-student college-high school. The large building, left, is the Great Hall, next to which, right, is the Public Yard and the campus lake, foreground. In the rear center is the Main Gate; to the right is the Homebase Street, along which are high-school classrooms. Photograph by Hajo Neis. Source: *ArchitectureWeek.com*. See review, p. 5.

## Book Review

# Christopher Alexander's "Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth"

---

Christopher Alexander, 2012. *The Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth: A Struggle between Two World-Systems*. New York: Oxford University Press.

---

Reviewed by David Seamon

Christopher Alexander's latest book is subtitled "A struggle between two world-systems," and it is largely the theme of *conflict*, both conceptual and real-world, that this eminent American architect and architectural theorist uses to organize the story of his designing and fabricating the 36-building, 10-million-dollar Eishin School, a 2000-student combination high school and college in suburban Tokyo, Japan, begun in 1981 and largely completed by 1990 (seven buildings remain to be constructed).

Narrative was a major presentation format that Alexander used in his 1985 *Production of Houses*, which told the story of how five Mexicali lower-middle-class families designed and built their own homes, guided by Alexander and his construction team. In *Battle*, the story format moves to center stage and unfolds through an escalating series of events that include lawsuits, under-the-table payoffs, conspiracies and betrayals by colleagues, verbal threats of families and friends of Eishin faculty, and a physical beating of the principal Eishin client by thugs hired by opponents of the project.

To conceptualize the Eishin story, Alexander identifies two contrasting approaches to design and construction—what he labels "System A" and "System B." Throughout his professional career, Alexander has sought to actualize System A—a way to fabricate buildings and places that evoke exuberance, comfort, joy, and a sense of life. System A is "concerned with the well being of the world—its land, ecosystems, and people" (p. 49). This way of envisioning and making emphasizes quality, subtlety, finesse, and adaptive structures

grounded in place and locality. The aim is creating "beauty, healing, and wholeness" for both material environments and human worlds (*ibid.*). As Alexander explains,

In *any* environment we build—building, room, garden, neighborhood—always, what matters most of all is that each part of this environment intensifies life. We mean that it intensifies human life, animal life, emotional life, the life of storms, the life of wild grasses and lilies, the life of fish in a stream, the life of human kindness in a rough place where it may not be easy to find (p. 115).

Working to undermine Alexander's hopeful System A is cynical "System B," the villain of the Eishin story and only concerned with money, power, control, and rapidity of production. Said by Alexander to dominate the design and construction professions today, System B emphasizes "size, speed, profit, efficiency, and numerical productivity" (p. 59). The environmental and architectural result is edginess, ugliness, and fragmentation. Alexander writes that because of System B:

... the architecture of the last 70 years has often been stark, homogeneous, boring to a degree that is almost frightening, very often entirely without delight and—most important—absurdly lacking the functional co-adaptation between parts that would mark it as living (p. 25).

For the Eishin School project, Alexander's actualizing the design approach of System A required an intensive long-term involvement of school faculty, administrators, students, construction workers, and Alexander's design team, members of which included architects Hajo Neis, Ingrid Fiksdahl-King, and Artemis Anninou; and structural engineer Gary Black. In contrasting his System-A approach

with conventional System B, Alexander explains that the entire design and fabrication process for the Eishin School was:

explicitly guided by the feelings of the faculty and students. It was guided by close adherence to the emotional character and feeling of the land, in every detail. It was explicitly oriented toward craft and construction which aimed at loving details that give joy to ordinary people. It aims at the idea of supporting and healing the wholeness of people, animals, and plants that live there. It depends on temporary field workshops at the site, so that craft and the making of special-purpose building elements are produced to support local wholeness, setting the context for each piece of building work, thus allowing it to become beautiful (p. 58).

In laying out the Eishin School story as it encapsulates the struggle between Systems A and B, Alexander breaks *Battle* into 25 chapters organized in four parts. Part One, “Solving the Problem of Architecture in Our Time” (chaps. 1–6), uses architectural examples from the completed Eishin campus as a means to illustrate practical, conceptual, and ethical concerns—“The Crucial Importance of Local Adaptation” (chap. 2); “System-A & System-B: A Necessary Confrontation” (chap. 3); “Inner Aspects of the Two Production Systems” (chap. 4); “The Wasteland of Our Hearts” (chap. 5); and “The Wholeness of the Whole” (chap. 6).

Part Two, “Rumblings of a Coming Battle” (chaps. 7–12), describes the programming for the campus, beginning with the dream of the school’s progressive principal Hisae Hosoi, who Alexander describes as “a man who wanted to change Japanese society’s view of education, and as someone who knew ahead of time that the buildings that would be built had to have new qualities” (p. 99). Part Two includes a chapter on a site-design process that used six-foot-high flags to lay out the 36 buildings on the 23-acre site; and another chapter detailing the process of designing specific school structures, including entry gates, high-school and college buildings, library, judo hall, and gymnasium (the last said to be “one of the largest all-wood buildings in Japan, or indeed, anywhere in the world” [p. 254]).

The most prominent chapter in Part Two is the complete Eishin pattern language (see sidebar, next p.), composed of 110 patterns arranged from largest to smaller scale, beginning with “global character of the campus” (5 patterns) and “Inner Precinct” (14

patterns), then moving through “buildings of the Inner Precinct” (12 patterns) to smaller-scaled patterns like “special outdoor details” (8 patterns) and “interior building character” (9 patterns). Alexander claims that this pattern language arose largely from discussions among Eishin administrators, teachers, and students. He writes that:

Even before we have any idea about the physical configuration of the buildings, their shape, or design, or the way these [elements] are made real in space, it is already obvious that the school is given its life to an enormous degree merely by this list of patterns (p. 151).

Part Three, “Pitched Battle” (chaps. 13–19), depicts the practical struggle between Systems A and B, once Alexander’s California firm, in cooperation with the Eishin administration, actually begins campus construction. At this point, situations and events become nasty and, at times, unbelievable (for instance, Alexander’s arm wrestling the burly construction foreman representing the big Japanese construction company Fujita Kogyo, procured in a trying series of encounters to do campus construction). Eventually, the project moves forward, and Alexander ends the book with a chapter, “Appearance of a Genuine and Living Atmosphere,” that draws on letters, film documentaries, and other testimonial evidence to claim, using an accolade from the 2009 architectural journal *Nikkei Architecture*, that the campus is a “great work” (p. 378).

In the last part of the book, Alexander moves discussion to the broader theoretical themes more thoroughly discussed in his four-volume master work, *The Nature of Order* (2002–2005). He reviews his 15 geometric qualities of wholeness, giving particular attention to the concept of *center*—any sort of spatial concentration or organized focus or place of more intense pattern or activity. He then reviews the nature of “wholeness-extending transformations” and concludes with a photographic essay that is said to portray “the beauty of daily life” at the Eishin campus where he claims that “simple beauty and wholeness in the environment heals, supports, and engages life” (p. 453).

In evaluating *Battle*, one might argue that its most valuable section is the Eishin pattern language, which demonstrates perhaps the most

comprehensive design programming that Alexander has provided in his many published works. Also valuable is his description of the cooperative laying out of the site through intensive, firsthand “being with” the natural landscape. Most significant architecturally is a largely completed campus that does appear to evoke an environmental ambience that would contribute mightily to the kind of progressive educational experience aimed for by Eishin Principal Hosei. There are also several campus buildings, including the gymnasium and Great Hall, which look to evoke an understated elegance and subtle wholeness. These buildings provide considerable evidence that Alexander’s approach to design can lead to powerful architecture.

*Battle* has its weaknesses. A first concern is that the Eishin story is told only through Alexander’s eyes, so one has no independent verification of the actual success of the design process or finished campus. A larger problem is Alexander’s combative tone: The book’s warlike imagery projects an incongruent mean-spiritedness jarringly out of place in relation to the gentle, empathetic way of envisioning and making that are the existential and conceptual crux of Alexander’s design approach. One hopes that purging himself of the difficult Eishin experience through completing this book will shift Alexander’s writing back toward the hope, grace, and charity that necessarily infuse his remarkable design vision.

Phenomenologically, Alexander’s work remains central because it demonstrates the inescapable significance of the built environment for contributing to gracious human lifeworlds. “Our well being,” he writes, “originates in large part in the spatial order of the world” (p. 382). The pattern language for the Eishin School is a stunning example of how a group of committed clients and designers can locate and describe environmental and architectural elements that might forge a place of unique character and atmosphere. The many plans, photographs, and testimonials included in *Battle* indicate that the Eishin campus has a vibrant sense of place that students and faculty have come to cherish. This achievement demonstrates how the engaged mode of understanding and making advocated by Alexander can effect life-enhancing environments and places.

## **Outline of the Eishin Pattern Language**

(supporting explication of patterns not included)

### **1. Global Character of Campus**

- 1.1. An outer boundary surrounds the campus.
- 1.2. Contained by this outer boundary there is an outer precinct. The outer precinct surrounds an inner precinct.
- 1.3. The inner precinct is a densely built area where School and College have their major buildings and activities.
- 1.4. The Outer Precinct is an area for relaxation, sport, outdoor activities and recreation.
- 1.5. As a whole, the Campus is given its character by stone foundation walls, natural concrete walls, wooden columns, white plaster surfaces, some green surfaces, wide overhanging roofs, dark roofs, stones and grass and pebbles on the ground.

### **2. Inner Precinct**

- 2.1. The Entrance Street to the campus is a highly visible pedestrian Way. It begins at the Outer Boundary of the Campus, and ends at the Inner Precinct.
  - 2.2. The Small Gate marks the outer end of the Entrance Street.
  - 2.3. The Entrance Street is flanked with walls and trees. It is extremely quiet.
  - 2.4. Where the Entrance Street meets the Inner Precinct, there is a second, much larger, Main Gate. It is three stories high.
  - 2.5. Beyond the Main Gate, there is a Public Yard. Opening onto this Public Yard, there is an immense building, the Great Hall. The Great Hall shapes and forms the Public Yard.
  - 2.6. Beyond the Public Yard is the Tanoji Center, the core of the Inner Precinct. This Center is the meeting place of College and High School.
- Etc. (2.7–2.14)

### **3. Buildings of Inner Precinct (3.1–3.12)**

### **4. Streets of Inner Precinct (4.1–4.15)**

### **5. Outer Precinct (5.1–5.25)**

### **6. Features of Inner Precinct (6.1–6.22)**

### **7. Special Outdoor Details (7.1–7.8)**

### **8. Interior Building Character (8.1–8.9)**

*Seamon is Editor of Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology.*