

LIFE IN DESIGN: CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER AND THE NATURE OF ORDER

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Abstract

How we build reflects how we understand the world around us. The architectural style of a period thus corresponds to the cosmological and epistemological beliefs then dominant, and objections to one are likely to line up with objections to the other. Christopher Alexander provides a strong example of that tendency. His opposition to architectural modernism and postmodernism reflects opposition to tendencies within modernity that present themselves as rational and liberating but are in his view very different in character, and his project involves restoring balance to modern understandings in a way that makes room for what he calls "the phenomenon of life." He thus reaches results similar in basic ways to those reached in traditional and vernacular architecture but in a very different manner. It is not clear however that his approach can be generally followed.

Keywords: Christopher Alexander; modernity; science; traditionalism.

We need to understand our surroundings, so we demand that our built environment make sense to us. That is why we build it in the image of what we believe about the world. If it is too much at odds with how we understand things generally, it seems stupid, fraudulent, confusing, or aside the point. For that reason disagreements regarding the nature of the world reappear as disagreements regarding architecture and urban design. If Richard Dawkins and Joseph de Maistre were on a city planning commission together, they would not see eye to eye on the appearance or location of the town hall, library, and cathedral.

The dominant tendency of public thought in recent decades has favored replacement of the traditional familial, civic, cultural, and religious aspects of social life by technically rational processes embodied in world markets and neutral transnational bureaucracies. Le Corbusier pointed out the design implications: "the core of our old cities, with their domes and cathedrals, must be broken up and skyscrapers put in their place" (Wilhelm Röpke, 1998). Such views made him a natural ally of the masters of the modern world, who want to turn social life into a rational machine that is easy to understand and control. When he died in 1965, *Pravda* said that "modern architecture has lost its greatest master," while President Johnson commented that "his influence was universal and his works are invested with a permanent quality possessed by those of very few artists in our history." Lyndon Johnson and the Kremlin may not have known much about art, but they knew what they had reason to like.

Times change, but not that much. In the world of architectural style modernist rationalism has supposedly been replaced by postmodern playfulness or irrationalism, which has its own cosmological implications. Architects like Peter Eisenman view the world as essentially disorderly, inhuman, threatening and anxiety-producing, and contend that is what architecture should be (Alexander and Eisenman, 2004). Otherwise, it is kitsch, comfort food, inauthentic, and perhaps incipiently Nazi, because it is likely to try to force some image of a fantasized past order on recalcitrant reality.

The political effect is the same as modernism. The Legalist thinkers of ancient China, brutal rationalists who invented the totalitarian state, found they could apply Taoist celebrations of the incomprehensible to their own ends. Lord Shang, who was one of them, went so far as to

punish people for praising the laws: they had no business forming any view at all on matters of state (Rubin, 1976). Contemporary postmodernism has similar implications. Business and government put billions of dollars into building projects that disorient people, disorder thought, debunk normal human responses and relationships, and convince people their understanding of reality cannot be relied on. The inevitable effect is to make us more easily manipulated. That result aligns with the social, moral, and metaphysical outlook behind technocracy: the world is composed of atoms and the void, together with human sensations and will. In such a world nothing has an essential nature, and desire and will are the only possible principles of valuation, so the will of the strongest becomes the final standard and treats the people as a formless mass of raw material.

That outlook has its apologists, but it denies that anything could be specially worth willing, so the world it evokes is as inhospitable to human life as the architecture to which it gives rise. Surely something has gone wrong. Man and beauty are part of the world, so it seems unlikely that the world in its essence could be so much at odds with them. And to the extent the world is a mixture, it seems right to support the beautiful and harmonious against the disruptive and inhuman elements that are also present. If someone wants to be a nihilist, he has no grounds for objecting to comfort food more than anything else.

But what to do? Traditionalists and others may complain, but few of them are in a position to put forward a clear response that deals with modern difficulties in a way that connects with current ways of thinking. Christopher Alexander is extremely helpful for that reason. He is not a traditionalist or a conventional thinker of any kind, but an architect, trained as a mathematician and scientist, who loves beauty, hates inhumanity, recognizes the superiority of traditional built form, and has spent his professional life looking for ways architects can do better.

As someone trained in the natural sciences, he tries very hard to make his views as definite and explicit as possible. His first major work, the underground classic *A Pattern Language* (written with several collaborators), (Alexander, Ishikawa, and Silverstein, 1977) therefore emphasized the specific. It set forth a system of some 250 patterns (e.g., balconies should be at least six feet deep, rooms should be lit from two directions) that crystallized practical wisdom today's architects and planners ignore or have forgotten. They were similar to principles followed by traditional builders throughout the world, and were intended to make buildings, neighborhoods, cities, and regions more beautiful and livable.

In spite of his scientific disposition, Alexander tends toward a sort of populism. He hoped that people could use the patterns to build beautiful humane buildings for themselves. It did not work: people followed the recipes but came up with bad designs. Patterns are needed, it seems, but vision and higher principles are necessary to guide their use. *The Nature of Order*, (Alexander, 2002a) a four-volume work almost thirty years in the making, tries to supply what is missing by calling for vision and exploring the most basic principles that govern whether a built environment becomes a place in which one would want to live.

The book is an extraordinarily ambitious attempt to bridge the gap between modern thought and goods destroyed by modernity that have normally been attainable only through tradition. It goes to the root of the issue: better building requires an understanding of good design that is integrated with what is good in human life generally. It follows that to deal with architectural problems Alexander had to deal with the impossibility of rationally discussing value in today's public discourse.

His discussion therefore has to go to very basic issues, and become metaphysical and even religious. He attributes our current inability to discuss good design intelligently to Cartesian epistemology and its resulting ontology, which radically distinguish fact from value and reduce reality to elementary particles acting locally. On such an understanding, "value" is simply personal opinion, and architecture can only be a matter of technology, ideology, or arbitrary will. The inevitable result, as the traditionalist thinker Russell Kirk observed, (Kirk, 1982) is an architecture of servitude and boredom: servitude, because order is based purely on the will of the stronger, and boredom, because arbitrary order presents nothing of human interest.

So what to do? Alexander wants to extricate architects and planners, as well as their clients and victims, from an intellectual and practical dead end. He values the solidity and usefulness of scientific reasoning, along with modern life generally, so his strategy is to extend scientific reasoning so it can deal with questions of good design while remaining objective and verifiable.

To do so he needed to identify a feature of good design that is basic to any setting we would want to inhabit, that designers from healthy traditions have in fact favored, that observers from very different backgrounds recognize consistently, and that scientists treat as real. The feature he identified is life. Life is good as well as scientifically respectable. Traditional designs and good art generally seem alive, contemporary buildings and cityscapes generally do not. Further, it turns out that if you show people images and ask which seem more alive they give similar answers, and their tendency to do so increases with practice. So it seems that life is a basic, objective, and determinable good that has been lost in present-day design, and Alexander has spent years analyzing the structural features that increase it.

The first volume of *The Nature of Order* is therefore called—and deals with—*The Phenomenon of Life* (Alexander, 2002b). It proposes that life is a matter of wholeness defined by “centers” that contribute to each other in complex ways as part of an interlocking hierarchy. A tree, for example, is a whole made up of roots, trunk, branches, and leaves and so on, each made in turn of smaller components. All the components contribute to each other, and they are separately identifiable, but it can be a bit artificial to say exactly where one ends and the next begins. Further, a tree is itself a center within larger wholes such as a grove or forest.

He identifies fifteen features that promote the wholeness and living quality of a system. Modern constructions routinely lack those features, and that lack is what makes them deadening. The fifteen features include:

- *Levels of scale.* A structure engages us more if it includes smaller structures a third or quarter its size, which in turn include structures that are similarly scaled-down, and so on down to the level of fine detail and up to the level of the whole world.
- *Strong centers.* An object is more compelling if its components point toward some central region or structure that integrates it as a whole.
- *Boundaries.* Something is more noticeable if it is framed, and the whole of which it is part is more integrated if something connects one component to another. Well-articulated boundary regions serve both purposes and help make built objects comprehensible.
- *Positive space.* We will not like the shape of something, at least in the long run, unless we like the shape of the surrounding space it creates through its presence.

And so on.

Alexander’s specific examples, which range from Turkish carpets to wild meadows and Italian hill towns, show how his fifteen features order both the natural world and a good built environment, and even contribute to the functionality of hand tools and other objects of daily use. His analysis thus connects the aesthetically valuable to the natural, functional, and demonstrable, and so makes it harder to shrug it off as a matter of personal preference, social convention, or ideology.

His approach also connects good design to inner experience. “Which design is more alive” generally calls forth the same answer as “which better reflects what you are,” and the answers of ordinary people to the latter question most often correspond to the judgment of experts as to aesthetic value. Further, because center contributes to center in an overall living system, a built environment that is full of life makes those who inhabit it feel more alive. The theory thus explains how life is deeply enhanced, if not quite redeemed, by beauty.

His final point, which he believes he needs to establish the full validity of his theory, is that reality forms a single integrated system. If certain arrangements of space are objectively more alive than others then life must somehow be implicit in space itself. His views on architecture, he says, are based on:

a conception of the world in which the air we breathe, the stones and concrete our city streets are made of—all have life in them ... This is not merely a poetic way of talking. It is a new physical conception of how the world is made (Alexander, 2002b).

His aesthetics thus imply ontology.

The book is brilliantly illuminating, and persuasively connects objective goods to properties that are natural, functional, and concretely identifiable. As such, it is a major contribution to aesthetic and architectural theory. It gives those who generally accept modern ways of looking at things but are willing to expand them to accommodate realities they tend to slight a solid way to view aesthetic goods as more than personal preference, social convention, and ideology.

The theory does not, of course, solve all problems. His approach as he presents is not at all practical. His own buildings look like places one would like to be, but the process of trial and error through which he develops them, however well it demonstrates his theory, is too time-consuming and crisis-ridden, and perhaps too dependent on his special talents, for general use.

Further, his fifteen properties are powerful but not sufficient any more than his 250 patterns were. He says as much:

These things, the patterns, the properties, may play a role in my being able to create life in things. They actually do play a role. But they are far from certain ... the life is really the primary thing, and the properties are really secondary (Alexander, 2002b).

The continuing need for something transcending every system of rules and concepts leads Alexander ultimately to religious categories. He nonetheless tries to limit recourse to them, referring occasionally to God but in general favoring more impersonal East Asian concepts, which require less extension of the scientific concepts he favors.

Alexander's work occupies a halfway position that may be unstable, a situation that is likely inevitable in the case of a work that breaks so much new ground. He wants the benefits of tradition: the emergence of functional and satisfying forms from intuition, experiment, and winnowing guided by a conception of ultimate reality as somehow spiritual. He wants to get them, though, by extending the modes of thought characteristic of a radically anti-traditional and anti-spiritual age. He proposes to do so by presenting an analysis of the qualities of natural and traditional form that makes it living and therefore good, suggesting recursive trial and error procedures for developing living forms, and proposing a generic spiritual understanding of ultimate reality to guide the process.

It seems doubtful, however, that the benefits of traditional ways can be restored by understanding what they are and determining the minimal changes to existing understandings that will be sufficient to bring them back. Explaining how the benefits of one way of being come about does not tell us how to get them again when that way of being has disappeared. Hegel describes the problem in his preface to *The Philosophy of Right*:

Philosophy ... always comes on the scene too late ... When philosophy paints its gray in gray, then has a shape of life grown old ... it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.

It is therefore not surprising that (apart from his own buildings) Alexander's examples of good design are almost all from the vernacular, often from times and places like the European middle ages when artists were anonymous because high art itself was vernacular. It seems that retrieval of what tradition gives us requires a rebirth of tradition itself, which requires acceptance of the goodness and authority of the implicit patterns of reality, and willingness to attend to those

patterns and wait for them to manifest themselves without forcing our own views on the matter. That means, in effect, the end of modernity. What is called postmodernity is at once the summation and self-demolition of modernity. We need what lies beyond it.

As Alexander realizes, the understandings on which design rests go all the way down. We get the good by giving it our all, and if so a basic transformation of life and thought will be needed to get us out of the hole into which we have fallen. Alexander pushes his analysis far enough to recognize the need for an ultimate standard that transcends rules and concepts while remaining concretely real. His approach makes that standard—in effect, God—an add-on to modern scientific thought. It seems doubtful that will be enough.

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