

WENDY KOHN INTERVIEWS CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER ON *THE NATURE OF ORDER*

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PART I

WK: For whom have you been working these 35 years—for yourself, for architects, your kids, the public...?

CA: I always try to write for anyone who can read...I'm very concerned about what's happening to the earth in the twentieth century and I suppose you can say I write for anyone who will read it. The more people who read it, the more pleased I'll be. We're in a drastic situation and so I don't have modest ambitions about how many people will read it.

WK: Do you feel as though you've been trying to write this particular work your whole life?

CA: Since about 1971, which is when I started it. But you're asking a slightly different question, which is whether the ideas that are presented in this book were with me when I started working in the late 1950s. No, they were not.

I date that to when I went to Harvard to my fellowship. Because I'd been through architecture school at Cambridge, learnt nothing, thought it was absurd...said "ok, no one is telling me what this is really all about. I know people knew how to do this at one time; so I'm going to find out what it really means to do it." And I began at the beginning: absolute zero, as I considered it.

So in those years, I was just getting some kind of a grip on what architecture is, how one can approach it, and after a long time, the pattern language came out—it was written in the 70s, came out in 77 or something. I had by then realized that there were things similar to the approaches that were common in all human societies, which had been abandoned, and tried to do something about that. When I wrote the pattern language, I thought everything was going to be fine from now on, that this was going to solve the problem. It sounds so funny but actually it is what I thought.

WK: Well, there were all 253 patterns...

CA: Well, of course I realized what nonsense that was...and as you can tell from the dates, I actually began this book before that one came out...but of course it was finished as far as I was concerned. Having got that under my belt, I was really concerned with geometry, what is the issue about geometry? Architecture is entirely about geometry. In fact, I think one of the earliest versions of this book was entitled "Geometry." It went through a lot of titles before this one came clear.

WK: How is this different from the pattern language...you said that you wrote chapter 8 ages ago. It was being incubated during the same period?

CA: I began to realize, while I was working on this, early on, that I was enmeshed in a stupendous mental trap. It felt as though it needed superhuman effort to break the bonds of this trap. Of course I was educated as a scientist and as a mathematician and I wasn't so much concerned with having to say goodbye to whatever passed for architectural teachers. I didn't mind about that, but gradually, the further I got into it, I realized I had to say goodbye to my scientific teachers, and that was very very hard.

WK: Because you realized you were straying outside the Cartesian, objective world of your scientific training?

CA: Yeah. But at the beginning it didn't seem like a very big deal. I didn't embark on some quest...it wasn't like that. I mean those properties described in Chapter 5 are very, kind of straightforward observations. So that doesn't break any particularly new ground. In other words, I think they're very interesting. They're somewhat like the Patterns except they're deeper and more general. But I didn't need to make any cosmological adventures to see them. Actually, that was kind of like straightforward science: the way I was making observations all the time—saying "ok, this thing is there when it's working, and it's not there when it's not working." But the question "is this working?"—well, what does that mean? So that although it was science, there was a fundamental issue in there which wasn't really susceptible to normal late 20th c. scientific treatment.

And I was little uncomfortable. I kind of let it slide for a while. I just said "well, I think I know what I'm talking about with this." Because, you know, I'm still back in the late 70s at this point, and that was coming pretty nicely. It was pretty exciting to write those down. They had a long gestation, I thought about them for many years. I was pretty sure of them. That wasn't confusing.

But then I began to run into the most peculiar problems. As you can see from what you've been reading, in a sense there are no objects. It's not things that are being related...

WK: It's everything.

CA: Well, something particularly bothered me as a mathematician. A simple question, like, we think we know what a pond is. So you say, ok, fine, well where does a pond start, and it doesn't seem to stop anywhere particularly. How weird.

I remember, I was back in England, and I happened to run into one of my old classmates who's a professor of mathematics in England and teaching. And I asked him what he was doing, and he started telling me about theorems and seven dimensional geometries. And I said, why are you doing that stuff? He gave me some explanation, and I said, "but it's so weird, you're doing that sort of thing, and actually, we don't even understand a glass of water, from the point of view of what kind of a thing this is." Of course, he didn't really understand what I meant.

WK: Well, I think that's always been the quality of what you look at, in APL too, a reason so many people from so many different fields pick it up and it's becomes useful to them and it touches them and they can talk about it. You're not talking about theorems that it would take a lifetime to actually encounter in any real way.

CA: I'm a very ordinary person: a very sort of plain down to earth person. And if something isn't plain and down to earth, I don't get it.

WK: And you're arguing here that we be connected to our own reactions. Clearly that has to come from somebody who is connected with his reactions.

CA: Well that's another thing, I mean, is feeling real or is it just some bullshit thing you talk about in therapy session? And I remember having a walk with someone one day and saying, you know, a person's feeling about this is as real and as definite as the fact of the sun coming over the horizon tomorrow morning, so why do we think of it as something vague and evanescent, when actually it is so real? Where did this come from, this separation?

I gradually found myself encountering, one after another of these kind of problems, and I was writing this thing again and again and again. I mean, some books get written many times over I know a book called Under the Volcano, by Malcolm Lowry about Mexico, and he wrote that book eight or ten times. He spent his whole life doing it, never wrote anything else. And I, in a way, went through something like that. Because I would write this stuff down and suddenly it wouldn't make sense, and I would say to myself, "well, wait a minute, how am I going to cope with that?" And I had to sort of perform surgery on myself, mentally, again and again and again. I was lucky I had my students, because I was teaching all this time at Berkeley, but cutting myself loose from these sort of barriers of steel that I was encased in and making a believable picture of how things might actually be was very, very hard work.

WK: It was also notable that you were doing it at a time when the Academy, and all the people talking about the "nature of things," was moving in exactly the other direction: all the multi-cultural and post-structural thought was about how you and I can't actually talk to one another because my feelings are different from your feelings, and they're both equally valid, and they're all relative, and therefore, our feelings, above all, certainly can't form a basis for a shared understanding of the way things are.

So was it a process or a lightening bolt?

CA: It was a very very slow process. But of course I was building all the time. Throughout the 25 years it was taking to write this thing, I was building continuously, often painfully, but I used what I was doing as a builder and what my students and colleagues were doing as a test bed. If I had something to say, did it check out at this level? Could I check back and forth? Actually, Vol. I has the least of that in it. In other words, it has relatively little reference to my work as an architect, or to my experiences or what I went through, or when things were going well or badly.

Vols III and to a larger extent IV are really grounded in hundreds of examples of, "here's what this means," "here's what you get when you do this," and "can you check it out?" So it's intensely empirical. And actually empirical in very simple-minded terms. Because these are the kinds of experiments anyone can do, except they were justly absolutely terrified into saying to themselves, "we're not allowed to do those kinds of experiments"!

WK: We were talking about how you were able to use your practice empirically, as an architect, as a laboratory for testing and retesting your assumptions.

CA: Yes, and I was saying that actually the kinds of experiments we were doing were a no-no, it literally wasn't permitted.

WK: Because you weren't allowed to say, "this is how I feel...?"

CA: You could say "this is how I feel" as an expression of some personal idiosyncrasy, but not about anything that was real or true. I mean, at one point I had a seven-year long First Amendment case with the University of California because they tried to prevent me from teaching this material. I brought it, because they were preventing me from teaching this material. It's a whole saga.

WK: How did it affect you and what did you learn from it?

CA: In Volume IV, I've actually thanked the people who were giving me this hell, as a sort of tribute to how serious this issue was. But it was dreadful. I was up in the middle of the night for months, years. It was really hard. I was brutalized, really brutalized, and my students were. And at that time, students who had Pattern Language on their desks were given bad grades. It wasn't that material, but people could sense that what I was dealing with was a lot more serious. Somehow, people could feel that, and it really angered them. The level of anger was astonishing, very fascinating.

WK: It speaks to the fact that this was threatening.

CA: That this was threatening and that there really were these steel bands around all of us. Even on the most absurd level, for example, the fact that I was a general contractor, or even just that my students made furniture: now this is just totally ordinary, but in the late 70s and early 80s, this was not ordinary. And again, that these things could be a focus of possibility—so many of these things became a focus of possibility, all kinds of little details.

To talk about architecture for a second: I essentially just got curious because within the framework of this kind of thinking, what you draw inevitably will not be real. So I would take students out to sites, and we'd lay out buildings on those sites...

What is important is that it really didn't occur to me, because I'm rather down to earth and sort of common-sense, that any of this merited that sort of hostility, or that it was that bizarre, or anything like that.

I was so concentrated, so busy really, just trying to figure out how things actually work, that it wasn't until Steve wrote his book about me. When he wrote that (he had a grant or something), and for many months we used to meet once week and have a taped session for two or three hours, and talk about it. And he was interested in the fact that this really was totally different. He was very sensitive to perceive this, and in a sense, he perceived it before I did. It was very enlightening to speak with him about this.

WK: Did you feel like a revolutionary or like an outcast?

CA: I never felt like an outcast. It's maybe something to do with my heritage. I probably had a problem as a child.

WK: You trusted your perceptions. And also you were onto something, and you weren't going to be deterred. Because it's clear from the way you present this that there has been a devotion on your part to tie together everything, and to be very very thorough, and to not exclude, and to re-test your assumptions. There has been a devotion on your part, which is clear right from the

beginning. You're very aware of what kind of reaction this could elicit. And, I think probably the times, in history, have come around a bit, so that there will be a bit less resistance and more consideration.

CA: I think at this point—remember, I'm talking specifically about the architecture problem when I talk about this—I do think that architects were in a very very strange psychotic state for a large part of the twentieth century. I mean, I don't find general animosity at all. And even in architecture it's now changed. But back in the 80s, it was quite bad. It was very bad for my students too.

I think there's an enormous widening of perception that we really have formed. Book IV is not really an academic book. It's really about cosmology and why on the one hand there's physical science, about 50% objects, and on the other hand, there's our own mentality of feeling our consciousness. Science wanted to say, well, consciousness is what happens when some neurons get together and start firing in certain ways. So the whole idea was that all of these things are actually supposed to be made of this mechanical picture. But then I said, well, its funny because actually the perception of self and perception of awareness and all of these kind of things are more immediate than any of that stuff. How could they possibly be built out of that stuff? Sooner or later somebody's going to have to look at this.

In the last ten years or so, consciousness of self has actually been identified as an entity. I mean, nobody knows what to do with it. But the top physicists are not saying anymore, well, we're not interested in that; it has nothing to do with us. But we better be interested. This has become a serious issue.

I'll tell you a funny story about architecture. Around 1990, I was on the board of accreditation of Rice. And there I was, talking to students, talking with faculty. To everyone I met, student or faculty, the dean, whatever, I said, "Do you know the difference between a good building and a bad building, and can you explain it?" And everybody said "no." I mean, there were very few people who said "no, and I regret it," or "no, isn't that weird?" Some students did, especially the younger ones.

So when we had to write our report, and everyone said, "so what do you think, does this school pass?" I said "No. Absolutely not. It's a joke." And it became a really serious problem. They didn't know what to do with me. Finally, they got the president, because this was really embarrassing. I wasn't a big enough person to be really worrisome, but...

WK: The interesting thing is that the general public would probably say, either, "yeah, I can tell you what I like and what I don't like. I can't tell you what a good building is." Or they would say, "well, I'm not an architect, but this is

what I think." And they would say, "I'm not an architect; you should ask an architect."

CA: Yes. That's right. Absolutely.

WK: So given that, have you come to any further conclusions about how architecture should be taught now? Or, in light of this, how would you set up an architecture school, an architectural education?

CA: Well, I'm not sure I can answer that question in the context of what we're doing here. I certainly can answer the question. I think I need to try and digress for a minute, because it's difficult to answer cold like this.

This book talks about the structure of things that have life. The second discusses the process conditions under which that living structure can come into being. And it's very firm. It's really explicit. It was the last of the four books to be finished.

And when you say, "well, ok, those are the processes that can produce living structure," then we need to find our way toward a revised architectural educational existence under the guise of making buildings in general on the planet which meet these conditions. Because this is not one of those things about which you can say, "hey, this would be a good idea." This is: "look, there are billions of processes that will do it, but there are trillions that will not." So you don't want to be in the barrel with the trillions. But we are at present.

So if you look at it from that perspective, then for the issue of the relationship between, for example, building construction and design, it's quite clear that it cannot possibly be the way it is at the moment.

Because the only way you can produce a living structure, in effect, allows the morphology to unfold a bit, and then it allows it to be constructed a bit, and then it allows it to unfold a bit more, and then be constructed a bit more. So already the process is totally different from a thing where, I'm going to make the drawings and then I'm going to give a legal set of drawings to a contractor. It's just impossible that that could produce a living structure. And, of course, the examples are legion. This is one example that's obvious.

Towards the end of Book II, I describe some of the kinds of consequences for society, certainly for the education of architects and so forth.

Of course, there's roughly speaking about 20,000 architects in the world for six billion people. Architects have a very peculiar position: are they responsible for all the buildings in the world, or are they only responsible for only a few

important buildings in the world? And it's actually not a question that's ever been answered. I suppose there are different views about it, but it's not a point of discussion.

If you actually set out to discuss it: obviously, just as doctors are responsible for the health of all people, architects are responsible for the health of all physical environments, in principle—except stuff like forests. So then, assume we knew what to do: what would be the means we'd use to try and implement good processes in buildings, roads, neighborhoods and so forth? But it obviously has to be very indirect. Because the amount of work one person can do in a lifetime, if you multiplied it by 500,000, is not even remotely large enough to deal with the habitat of human beings on the planet.

So it suddenly means on the one hand, you have to be thinking more in sort of plastic terms. Like, "ok, here's the top of a wall. How shall I make the top of this wall so it's beautiful?" Which is really only something you can do with your fingers. So that's one kind of change, which is opposite from the changes that have been occurring. But there's another one going completely the other way, that says, "look, we've got to find ways of influencing, at a distance, structures on a scale hundreds of thousands of times as large as what we currently view to be our professional responsibility."

And that's sort of like genetics. So what I'm getting at here, when you say to me, do I have thoughts how architectural education—I can answer that question, but to really to seriously answer it we have to go to questions that are bigger.

WK: About the world.

CA: Yeah. I think there are tremendous numbers of architects who are feeling these things. And the resistance, or whatever you want to call it, although it's very much still there—there's still a post-modern strain which is desperately trying to do better, but within a world view that really cannot substantially be better.

But nevertheless that is still hanging on. First of all, I think, actually, buildings are getting better anyway. Buildings and neighborhoods and cities, there's real progress, especially in the last twenty years or so. But more than that, more and more architects are feeling a profound moral disorder.

WK: There are a lot of symptoms of problems in the profession. Almost any architect, if you ask how things are going, will tell you, "Oh, it's a disaster." And they'll give all sorts of reasons: "I'm flying all over the world; my clients don't understand me; the scale of development is so large I don't know how to effect it; I make master plans, but you can't use a master plan anymore, it's not

a useful tool, so what are we supposed to do? I don't get paid; my clients don't appreciate me, and I don't know how to communicate with them"...

CA: They're manifestations of a deeper trouble. And a lot of architects are starting to actually recognize the trouble in themselves, and say something's wrong really wrong in what I'm doing and I wish I could find my way toward something that actually made sense to me. So this is widespread.

WK: On the part of the people we deal with, it's as if everyone knows there's something wrong: the contractors know it; the clients know it; the public knows it: they can't understand Herbert Muschamp; they have no idea what he's talking about.

What, in your best case scenario, will be the effect of people reading this book, the four volumes?

CA: Each one of them is a stand-alone book. And I hope they're all fairly decent books. But it isn't that any one of them cannot do anything, but the four together, actually, do quite a lot.

WK: What do you think they do? What do you want them to do?

CA: Well, I know what they do. But it's kind of immodest to say what they do. So I don't want to say it.

WK: They change everything?

CA: They change everything. That's what they do.

WK: So I'm imagining based on my reaction to reading the first book, and assuming the next three follow from there: it changes the way I'm moving through space and the way I'm looking at things. And ultimately one hopes that that goes deeper and makes it impossible to do things the old way. Because it questions all the basic assumptions.

Once you've read this and for example, gone through the habit of perceiving "wholeness," you can't go back. Or, if you go back...?

CA: No. You can't go back. I'll tell you a funny story.

Occasionally, I'd come across a student I thought was brilliant, or whom I thought was very good, but that person wouldn't take classes from me. And occasionally, I'd have the privilege of hearing why not. Because sometimes these people were very honest. There were many versions, but they always

gave something approximately like this: "we know what you're doing is really important. It's probably more than really important. We've heard that once you become familiar with it, there is no going back. Not because of you, but because of what it says. And we don't want to have that experience." And fair enough.

WK: Why didn't they want that experience?

CA: Well, you know, I really started from the beginning. And by the time I'd worked my way through PhD, I was petrified. Because I'd made myself completely unemployable. I realized, not only was I not in a position to work in an office, a big time office, but also I wasn't even employable as a teacher. I wasn't employable, period. And I was very fortunate that Harvard made me a fellow. It gave me a period of encouragement. That sense of being unemployable is very scary.

WK: You were in the Society of Fellows?

CA: Yeah. So I think these students were experiencing that. I don't think they minded the mental trip. I think it's actually very simple: "what if I can't get a job? What if I learn all this wonderful stuff, and I start to see the world in a new way, and then people look at me and say..."what am I going to do?" I think it was as simple as that.

WK: Why does it make you unemployable?

CA: Well, I think you've already alluded to it.

If you learn what a living thing is, and you begin to understand it, you then go to work for a big office. And there you are. And you're working on this big project, and you begin to realize the extent to which (this is 5 or ten years ago, at most recent; now this is better, but at the time...) there's and almost unbearable tension between what you know and what you're asked to do. So can you live with yourself? Of course, the conventional answer is, well, you're in a real situation: contribute your 25% to make it better, and grow up like everyone else and deal with the world. And that's going to be your lot in life.

But somehow, in the particular form of contrast between how things are in today's development-inspired world and how they are in a potential world which is actually livable, they really are incredibly different. And there's heartbreak around every corner. I think this is completely understandable, and the forces are gigantic, absolutely massive.

And that's getting worse, although the intellectual climate is getting better. The corporate and banking climate is getting worse, and more powerful and more...factory-like.

WK: That doesn't make you really depressed? Or really discouraged?

CA: It's a hell of a confrontation. There are so many people in the world who know about this and perceive this confrontation in one form or another that I believe...it's very difficult to destroy ideas. I don't think anybody's going to burn these books. And I think that gradually all the people who are suffering, feeling the kind of emptiness and desire for the sort of richness that's portrayed, will find this very useful as a support for what they are feeling or wanting to do anyway.

And the one thing that has happened significantly, is that there are more and more niches, actually increasing in scale. It used to be that if you wanted to be an artist, you had to do pottery or carving or something, because anything bigger than that they'd screw up. Actually that's not quite true anymore. The large forces are horrendously large, but you can actually succeed at a larger scale than was possible before, say fifteen years ago. So all these things are moving forward.

WK: There are bankers and developers who are, for example, subscribing to New Urbanism, as small a movement as it is. It's the only game in town, and they're frustrated. And so there seems to be the opportunity for a leader to emerge. Someone who is speaking about positive change, as opposed to nothingness.

CA: All of that is absolutely true. There's a lovely expression at the end of Book II about things like banking. I mean, after all, banking exists today, and it existed twenty years ago. Even there, there are encouraging changes. Still, investment capital is a great force for people and its very powerful. The weirdest thing is that America, the birthplace of modern democracy, is also the birthplace of modern capitalism, and people think that they're connected!

So anyway, one approach is to grapple with these forces and then get discouraged when you cannot, because they're so huge. But I don't get discouraged. First of all because I've talked to so many people, like you, who've said, "my gosh, there's something terribly real here; we must find our way towards this reality."

The fact that so many people know this about themselves is enormously rewarding and powerful. And in fact, when you were asking me earlier there was a thought in my mind that, in some ways, the results of reading these books are that you know yourself as a person in a completely different way.

That's almost a more powerful effect. The fact that it has huge consequences for architecture is something in itself, but the fact that actually our perception of what it means to be a person is very closely wound up with all this is perhaps more directly every single person's concern.

I've been asking myself how to empower people to the point where it's clear they have powers they didn't know they have. I've tried this with the website. It's still very seedling, but I believe it will become a force at some point. But there's a more interesting thing, which is the idea that people can't recognize their potency in this area because there's absolutely no form in which they can experience it. So people don't know what it means to make a beautiful building, or to live in beautiful buildings, except as a tourist, when you say, and you say, "oh my god..."

CA: Well, everyone will be flocking to the Hotel Palumba after reading Volume I.

(off the record)

Q: I'm toying with the idea of trying to encourage the creation of games that actually allow people, in effect, to simulate these things, to say "look, if you're trying to make a beautiful room, here are the issues. Why don't you try it and see?" It's fairly arduous to do that with real bricks and mortar, in a real project. It costs hundreds of thousands, and it takes a long time and it's dangerous for the person whose money it is. So what about letting people just find out what this is like with very little cost, just in a sort of dreamlike setting? So if we can get that out there for a few years...then people will say, "actually it's very easy. I had no idea what was actually involved. Now I'm going to do it. Here there and everywhere."

(on the record)

WK: When you say "people," do you mean architects, or do you mean anyone? Do you think there's a role for trained architects?

CA: Oh I think there must be a profession of architects. I mean, after all, by definition, they are the people who love buildings the most. They want to spend their lives with buildings, whereas other people don't want to spend their lives endlessly making buildings. They want to live in them. So it's perfectly natural that some people are musicians, some people like cooking, some people like building. I have no problem with that. I think it's not only inevitable; it's essential, actually.

WK: You acknowledge in your book that this isn't easy.

CA: No, it's not easy, and it needs passion, it needs intelligence, and it needs tremendous devotion. Even though, I mean, I am a populist. I do believe that anybody can do some version of this, and must do, and will benefit from it, and so on. But I think that architects will benefit from it the most. Because they love building the most. But the question is, how to get to (unintelligible) because the fact that is that it's all screwed up at the moment, which is a very large problem.

PART II

CA: I'm a pretty mild person, but a lot of this...I mean, doing this for twenty five years, day and night, without stopping, anybody might say, how did you sustain that? I have known many very beautiful places on earth and I feel intense anger at the way so much of the inhabited surface of the world...I feel tremendous sadness at the destruction of the earth. So that, very simply put, my aim is to put a vehicle, on command, in people's hands that will reverse that process. It's as simple as that.

WK: Well, thank you. You know, we didn't used to be able to talk about "beauty."

CA: That's right, it was absolutely forbidden.

WK: Why do you think that is?

CA: It wasn't because the word was forbidden. It was because the thing was forbidden.

WK: What was so big and bad about beauty? Why, particularly for architects?

CA: Because architects were living in a constructed mental world for most of the twentieth century. It really began after WWII, but it kind of began before that. And it went on and on. It was a fabricated psychosis, and many things had the capacity to pop the balloon.

I watched for decades at the University of California architecture faculty meetings, with people saying, "we must get together to talk about architecture." And then shying away from it like a horse at a jump. And of course it was never acknowledged why, but I'm telling you why, I believe: because they knew that almost any discussion about those kind of matters would ultimately expose the falseness of what was going on. And in some cases it was a conscious falseness. I don't think that anybody set out to be false. But there were notions perpetrated...students were coerced by cynical laughter, by mental [unintelligible], into playing these games that professors dug for

themselves...into deeper and deeper holes in terms of how silly these games were.

At one point, the entering class at Berkeley—one year, twenty two students—brought sexual harassment charges against a professor. They were male, female, married, unmarried. It wasn't that he wanted to get into bed with them. It was power, in extreme forms. One woman just had a baby, and she was told she had no business having a baby, being an architect. Why would anybody harass the students? It happened that these students ("the class from hell") were very very bright. They were lawyers, doctors, all kinds of smart and highly educated people from different walks of life. They were asking embarrassing questions. They'd say, "but why do we have to make this wall transparent. What is the reason?" "Don't ask stupid questions," they'd be told, and they'd get some incredible flaky explanation or some putting down. And since none of that worked, these people saw through it. Then it sort of started: several of these kids came to see me. They were terrified.

Why is this kind of thing going on? Well the content is indefensible, so when it has to be defended, strange and violent means start showing up. I think this psychosis is actually the least documented phenomenon of this century. It's very unusual for an entire profession to go bonkers.

WK: Clearly you see the issue of the way we experience the built environment, or the issue of what the built environment is like, as a life or death issue. Is it just architects who feel this is a life or death issue?

CA: That's very interesting. That's fascinating. I think I've not heard it put that way before. I think it is a life or death issue. And it is true that it's very very difficult for people to grasp that. That is, they feel something terribly wrong, but I don't think they represent it to themselves in that form, as you've just described it. I don't think they put it to themselves in that way. I think they feel terribly disturbed, but I don't think they put it to themselves that way. And it's kind of invisible.

I remember some cocktail party I was at in New York, and the hostess came up to me and asked what I did, and I said I was an architect. Oh gosh, how wonderful. And there was a magazine laying there, I don't remember what it was. And she said, isn't that marvelous? And there was a picture of a very sort of exaggerated slick glass and chrome living room. And I said, "well no. I don't think so, no." Why do you say that? [she said] And she looked at me, and she said, "you know, I don't think it is either?" All it took was that one question. All it took was that one, marginal question! And she said, "You're right!" And I said, "Well, why did you say it?" And she said, "I don't know...because isn't that what you're supposed to do? I mean, look at this magazine."

So in other words, it was a very very vivid expression of the fact that this is all hype. It was right there, on the surface of her awareness, and yet she was still participating in it.

WK: Well, have you met anyone who isn't fascinated by architecture, or architects?

CA: Or who wants to be an architect? Yes, that's true. That's very true. Of course, because it's the most visible form of our lives. It's very clear.

WK: I also think it mediates our place in the world...this echo of our clothing, at a larger scale. And we have personal reactions and relationships to it. But it's larger than ourselves and we can't make it ourselves.

CA: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, all of that.

WK: It's a superstructure and we can't affect it, and yet we want to affect it, and we do. There's this dual reality about it. I wanted to ask you how all of this is related to religion for you.

CA: Oh, very strongly.

WK: Is this your religion, or is this so completely seamless with all sorts of religions of the world that it's not an issue?

CA: Are you asking if it's related to my personal religion? No. Not really. I had a Jewish mother and a Catholic father. I'm not a particularly good practicing Catholic in the defined sense. I'm an intensely religious person, but not in the sense of those disciplines.

Book IV is a religious work, I suppose you could say. It does describe the meeting ground of god and person. It's again written in a rather homespun way.

WK: Thank goodness. Because if it weren't, given your subject...

CA: But it is an unavoidable subject. It's not that I chose to want to have that kind of thing. The point is that when you ask the most difficult questions about these phenomena that are being described in Books I, II, and III, you come to questions that can only be addressed by asking questions like the nature of matter. In other words, you have to say, "well, what, really and truly, all this stuff, what is it, actually? What are we, to be part of it, and how does it fit together?" And really, without answers of those things, you can't actually say that this makes sense. So it's very very specific.

WK: And not only that it makes sense, but that it's true.

CA: Yes, that it makes sense, and it's true. Yes. Absolutely. But it's important that it make sense, because part of the reason things have got so funny at the moment. Again, ok, some improvement is taking place, but certainly, things have been pretty damn funny for about the last 50 years—I'm talking about architecture. It really hasn't been ok to express belief in anything. In fact, there's been no vehicle to express belief. The kind of buildings that have been built, for the largest part, studiously avoid that issue.

WK: Because they're so self-referential, about some kind of semantic proposal?

CA: Oh, no, I think it's actually the other way around. That is, because there was a nihilistic view of living organisms, earth and stars. There was really a nihilistic view of all of that, of course, during the twentieth century, of all of that. So then, architects living in the second half of the twentieth century, by and large, in effect, being educated to believe all that, could not use the word "beauty." Because you cannot use the word beauty without getting actually somewhere close to the idea of God. I mean, you can use it, but not really, because you sort of shake inside when you do it and realize you're at the edge of something dangerous.

I think that people felt they had to maintain their nihilism. I don't think anyone thought of it in those terms. Nobody said, "Oh, I'm a nihilist." Well some did, but not many. But more, it was embarrassing to be religious. It was cool, really, to be scientific and nihilistic, to look down your nose at things that mattered, or even at the idea that anything mattered. Now, if you are in that frame of mind, and you're trying to do architecture, you've got to carve out a form of architecture which is nihilistic. And so it doesn't matter how grand the thing might be. You know, it could be a very very grand building and still nihilistic. Then one would feel that.

WK: Nihilistic, as in, not sincere?

CA: No, I think they were sincere in some peculiar sense, these not very good buildings. No, I think a lot of them were quite sincere, actually. But only in the sense of, "I really want to be a good architect and I really want to do a good job." Sincere in that sense.

But if, look, let's take a very simple thing: We know, as a matter of fact, that our own bodies are made of atoms whirling around. Fine. As far as we were taught, these things whirl around, empty of meaning. So they're little whirling things and we have millions of them in our legs, arms and eyes. Now, if you actually believe that you are an assembly of little whirling things, it's quite

difficult to construct a notion of your own meaning. You can, of course, become a Talmudic scholar; you can become a religious fanatic of any number of persuasions. But actually the trick that people mainly did in the twentieth century was to say, "I'm going to believe that stuff, but meanwhile, I know that I'm made of these atoms. And I'm not going to worry about the idea that those things don't connect." Well, that person's living with a very strange problem at the pit of their stomach. Because they know they're made of atoms, in that way, and by definition, are therefore a sort of senseless purposeless pointless thing that is going to evaporate. So how in hell are you supposed to believe in anything? And therefore, when you start making a building or even the tiniest little thing, belief in what is supposed to fuel your efforts? I mean, you can try to do a good job, a lot of architects are very sincere about that. It became fairly easy in the twentieth century to also try to do a good job in the marketplace, and some people got sucked into that a bit more than they should. But mainly, it just couldn't be rooted in anything real. So I think it was that way round.

WK: Because none of us could say "I believe..."

CA: Exactly. Because it was embarrassing. And "what kind of a jerk are you? Didn't you know that all ended in the 18th century or the 19th century or whatever," and "get cool" and "with it." And so I feel that architects underwent a tremendous misfortune. Because trying to make beautiful buildings when you actually feel like that inside is simply not possible. It can't be done.

So the reason that Book IV is a cosmological work is that actually you can't deal with these problems, no matter how sophisticated you might be about living structure, living processes, you still have to be able to say, "well, what does it all mean, actually. What am I? that gives meaning and what is a family and what is a neighborhood and what is a street even in these terms?" And the questions are pretty hair-raising and so are the answers. The answers are quite hair-raising, if answered directly. And I think that my clashes at the U of California were because people were aware that that's where it went.

Beauty

CA: I remember once having a very funny experience. I entered a competition for some art at the U of Oregon Science Center...[abridged]

I gradually realized that the fact that it was beautiful was the problem.

WK: That it wasn't conceptual.

CA: Yes, exactly. But it wasn't just that. Yes, conceptual was sort of a prevailing style at that moment. But I think I might have been able to win a prize with almost anything, except something that was beautiful! And I

thought, "How absolutely weird. And how delightful!" Of course, as you said, you weren't even allowed to use the word in those days, this was about 25 years ago.

WK: The interesting thing is that, it's not that it meant nothing, it's that it was valued as nothing—as something completely unworthy.

CA: Yes, yes exactly. That's just right. You get it.

WK: I was going to come back to religion: what is the relationship between this work and religion?

CA: First of all, it is not fueled by religion. I have personal religious feeling, but this work was not an attempt to provide an adoration of God...it was not an attempt to provide something that was consistent with religion. It wasn't any attempt in any of those directions.

I've tried to tell the truth about living things. When you come a certain distance down the road, you have to confront some questions. They are mainly questions about the "I," and what is that? So I've had to answer those questions.

Now one person, a philosopher from the U of Kentucky, told me, a couple of years ago when he read Book IV in draft (very nice fellow). Sat in my office for about a week reading these four books. And so I said, well, what do you think? He said some nice things. He said, "you know what I think you're going to be remembered for?" And I said, "no, tell me." This is a philosopher speaking, a professional philosopher. He said, "I think you're going to be remembered for giving us the first credible proof of the existence of God." That's not me speaking. But I can't say I was anything but delighted to hear it.

WK: Well, he's a philosopher, not a religious figure...he's speaking about a metaphysical concept.

CA: Yeah, he's actually an expert in Spinoza. I mean, I don't think that answers your question. I did not approach this as, I am a Catholic...therefore you know, it's going to be the father, son and holy ghost and I am going to do this. I never even had the remotest atom of thought like that.

On the other hand, I think it's probably true to say that, even though I'm a terrible Catholic (I mean I rarely go to church), I can't really think about things without an interior sensation that has to do with the experience of God. And so, let's say, if I'm trying to make a modest building, what do I do? I do consciously try to make the building move from its not very good current state towards a state in which you're more likely to experience God in that building.

And that tells me very often what to do. It's not just some sort of great wish, it actually tells me, "look, make this column bigger," or something. You know what I mean?

So that's a matter of practice. But I was a bit squeamish about this originally. Now remember again, 25 years have passed, but at the beginning, I hardly even allowed the word to appear in the manuscript. And I'm not ashamed of that now, and I gradually realized it wasn't possible to write it without the word appearing, and so it appears wherever it needs to.

I think that there's another way of putting what that man from Kentucky said, which I think in some ways is more accessible, and less sort of, up there in the air. I think there is an archetypal reality that has to do with what we are and what we need to be in. And that archetypal reality, I have sort of placed on a plate, so that it can be swallowed.

But I think that actually people have been robbed of it. This is a serious problem. It's something which existed in all societies everywhere, almost without exception, until some threshold, somewhere vaguely between 1600 and 1950, depending on which part of the world you're talking about. People actually lost that, and not only couldn't produce it, but couldn't see it. And not being able to see it is the worst.

WK: The way that you write about these ideas makes it really clear that you have been driving to understand them and connect them and explain them...and then to be able to express them in a way that all of us can as well. So that has to be the product of a lot of desire.

CA: Yeah. For some reason, I felt that was my job.

WK: Do you think of yourself as an architect first?

CA: I think of myself as a person first. And then I think of myself as an artist. I don't use the word architect very often.

PART III

WK: What happens next?

CA: I think it's interesting. As an architect, I've spent a lot of time building buildings. I've never really mastered the idea, the practical side of the idea, of generating something positive, in a part of a city or a part of a neighborhood or whatever. Not by doing it in plan, but by the kinds of things that we've been talking about. I don't know whether it's actually in my grasp.

WK: In other words, making something big.

CA: No.

WK: Effecting something big?

CA: Effecting something that involves many people. I mean, I built a campus that was pretty big. That's the largest thing I've actually built. It's about 9 blocks or something. But I'm not talking about that.

I'll tell you a story. I was in India in 1961. I was living in a village most of the time. I studied that village, tried to understand what village life was all about. And I got back to Harvard, a few months later, and I got a letter from the government of [town in India], saying "we've got to re-locate our village because of the dam construction. Would you like to build it?" I think about 2000 people were being moved. And I thought about it. And then I was very sad. And I wrote back, and I said, "you know, I don't know enough about how to do it. Because I don't want to come in and simply build a village, because I don't think that will make life. I know that the life has got to come from the people, as well as what's going on physically, geometrically. My experience of living in the village, is that I do not know enough about how to actually make that happen. And therefore I very very regretfully decline your kind offer." And I was actually chagrined beyond measure, that I had to give that reply. But it was honest, and in fact, it was because of that letter that I wrote *A Pattern Language*. Because, I thought and thought, and I said, "you know, this is crazy. What would I have to do, to put in people's hands the thing with which they could do this, so that it would be like a real village and not like an architect's fantasy?"

WK: So they could build it?

CA: Design it, lay it out, build it. By all means, with my help in abundance, but still, so that it really came from 2000 people. So anyway, I wrote *A Pattern Language*, had some modest success with this sort of thing, but not enough success. In other words, it's a very illuminating book I think, but it doesn't really put generative power in people's hands, not to the extent that I wanted to. These books, especially the middle two, describe that kind of thing in some great detail. And there are projects that I've done, but I'd now like to do take up what I had to refuse in 1961.

WK: Would you do it by putting these tools in their hands and being at their disposal as you just suggested, or would you play a different role?

CA: Oh, well, again, people who love building deserve to be able to spend their time doing that. And I would imagine, if I was responsible for some place, that

I would physically design, make, and build some important things there, some key points there.

WK: Most of it? Or would you decide on specific joints, or places that...

CA: Some key places, but above all, I would want to put in people's hands the language that was clearly sufficient for them to carry out that work in full.

WK: And you think you can do it now?

CA: I believe so, yes. You know I heard, I don't if it's true, that what we know as traditional Japanese architecture was actually invented by a group of Zen priests about the 5th century AD? I have no idea if this is true. It seems to me it's a very strange claim. And unfortunately, I don't know where I even heard it, so I don't know where I can check on it. But it's very strange, if it's true, because it's so articulate, it almost isn't like something that just kind of grew. So you know, some things are possible, I suppose.

But anyway, I do think I know enough to do that now. Yes.

WK: Do you think your major source of inspiration as an architect is in nature?

CA: No. Traditional building. I adore nature. And I find it a sort of constant source of inspiration and learning. Of course, you can become sort of very enthusiastic about mollusks, and birds, and trees, and think about them when you build. But compared with thinking about the great works of traditional architecture...I mean, they're just constantly before me. I sort of constantly ask myself, "Can I do anything as great as that? I mean, can I do anything even 5% as good as that?" Ravenna, or the [unintelligible], or whatever. Those are what I think about. And I'm certainly not trying to imitate them. But I'm trying to do as good as that, though I know that I never will.

WK: But they inspire you.

CA: Yeah.

WK: Does this new work, and the implications of it, change your practice of architecture?

CA: Yes, completely. My office is entirely based on this kind of thinking. All the people who work in my office, on one level or another, know this material, have been nurtured by it. I suppose we're conscious this is what we're trying to do, conscious that we fail a lot. I love failure. I find failure so inspiring.

I remember once I was giving a lecture at Berkeley, and I said, "you know, when you're making a building, I find that every step that I take, I usually make at least nine bad mistakes before I get a good one. On every step, you know? And the only thing that makes me a good architect is that I know when they're screwed up. So I go very quickly go through the nine—well, not necessarily very quickly, but with absolute certainty: I know how bad they are. And finally then, when I've found a good one, I know that's good." And finally someone piped up from the back and said, "Well, how can you be a professor at Cal if you make so many mistakes?" I thought it was really funny. I actually was flabbergasted because she really meant it. It wasn't any kind of joke.

WK: These days huge tracts of land are developed at once, and clearly there's a demand for housing at that scale, since it's being bought as soon as it's built, generally. Given your ideal of a close relationship between builder, architect, and inhabitant, how do you see that pattern changing? And do you see the sustainability movement as related to that change?

CA: I think it's very marginal. But I think it's positive. They're about 3% of us, at best. They're paying for it, and also most of the people who are interested in those things have good hearts, and that's important too.

WK: They're allies?

CA: Yes, and better than that, more than just allies. I think that serious things come out of it. Some of them are a little bit flaky. Some of them could be co-opted. But I think that the issue of large-scale development is a massive challenge of our era. I've started talking to Duany recently. We've known each other a long time. We've never done anything together, and we're talking about doing something together. I don't agree with quite a lot of what he does, but he's been incredibly bold in actually laying out a scheme for trying to put some kind of order into large tracts of land. I think his methods are wrong, and some of his goals are wrong, but I still think he's an incredibly intelligent and effective person.

WK: In what way are his methods wrong?

CA: Oh, he buys into developers completely, I mean totally, and actually he doesn't understand that's a mistake. In other words, to him, it's credo: because that's where the action is; therefore, that's where he goes.

WK: Well, that has also been the principal means of his success: that he's perceived that shaking the hand of the developer and saying, "let's work side by side"—that's not the end of the world. But to me, the main problem with the New Urbanist product is the nostalgia of it: It's not real.

CA: No, it's very uncomfortable. It's not real.

WK: You allude in this volume, and I don't know whether you do more in the later volumes, to a difference in orientation between male and female architecture students. And I wonder how, because since so much of this has to do with a union between mind and body anyway, differences between men and women relate to all of this?

CA: I love working with women; I've worked with a lot of women. And I think they are less ego-bound to feel and carry out what is true and appropriate in a particular situation, having just the kind of modesty to do right; and to make beautiful things right. I think men are able to do that, but I think their lives are complicated by egomania, which makes them say, "I think my first idea was brilliant, and I don't have to go any further."

I think that at the same time, of course, women struggle because they don't have certain things that you need to get buildings built. And so it's kind of a complicated thing.

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