

## BOOK REVIEW

*Christopher Alexander: The Search for a New Paradigm in Architecture.*  
By Stephen Grabow. Stocksfield, U.K.: Oriol Press, 1984, 306 pp. ills., notes, bibliog., no index, £15, 9 1/4 × 6 1/4 inches.

This is a unique book. It is the biography of a seeker and the history of a search. And because that search has been enormously innovative and fruitful, discovering the background is particularly engaging. The book traces Christopher Alexander's quest to find a way to bring humaneness and function and beauty to architecture. He is not content that these properties appear only in the final product; he wishes to guarantee their role in the design process itself. Both Alexander's dedication to these themes and his way of approaching them seem to Grabow to constitute a paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense; he feels that Alexander is calling for nothing less than a new vision, a new way of seeing the world.

This tale of quest and vision begins more or less historically with two sections largely concerned with Alexander's early life and intellectual development. There is then a section on the development and use of the concepts expressed in *Pattern Language* and *The Timeless Way of Building*, followed by a section on the potentially bothersome constraints of money, power, and construction. The final section expresses the struggle to nail down an aesthetic. This struggle is the outcome of the frustration of discovering that an aesthetic outcome is not an automatic result of using the pattern language process.

These themes suggest the unusual scope and versatility of this unique individual. Christopher Alexander is a sensitive designer, a perceptive student of how people relate to space, and a thoughtful observer of what makes visual configurations aesthetic. Each of these three domains is a considerable area of strength. As a theorist, he is committed to seeing them as one. This inclination toward imperialism, which many of us theorists share, is a source of difficulty as well as strength. If the synthesis fails one may be left with an apparent chaos when each of the domains might have otherwise retained its coherence and usefulness. There is also a tendency to focus on the attempt at synthesis rather than on the value of the parts.

From the perspective of both the environmental designer and the environment-behavior researcher, these three domains have very different significance. The aesthetic theory, although thought-provoking and having considerable potential, probably is of the least immediate inter-

est. It suffers from a serious vagueness and makes no contact with the substantial body of research and theory on aesthetics that already exists in the environmental design area.

The second domain, that of "Patterns," is (or should be) of enormous interest to researchers and designers alike. Here is an incredibly rich collection of hypotheses about the functional relationship between people and the built environment. It should be noted, however, that the functions considered are by no means restricted to such traditional concerns as circulation and access. Rather, the emphasis is on a rich and varied assortment of high-level functions such as privacy, anticipation, transition, and mental repose. Particular attention is devoted to the spatial patterns that would tend to support these high-level functions. (Architects are all too often less concerned with these than are the people they design for.) The patterns blend empirical findings with a design intuition that is for the most part exceedingly perceptive and stimulating. In addition, *Pattern Language* is exceptionally user friendly. As we learn from Grabow's volume, its very format was established empirically. Its succinctness, concreteness, and ingeniously devised way of presenting information make its already excellent content even more valuable.

The third domain, the way Alexander personally carries his architectural work, is in principle an interesting but somewhat peripheral issue, a sidelight relative to the central intellectual contribution that Alexander and his colleagues have made. I say "in principle" because Alexander makes it a more central issue than it perhaps deserves to be. Just as he is determined to see the aesthetic and the functional as one, he also seems to identify the way he practices his craft as necessary to reap the aesthetic/functional benefits he seeks. Although there is both empirical support and moral force behind much of the content of *Pattern Language*, the same cannot be said for high strength concrete and the various other special features of Alexander's architecting/contracting practice. This is not to say that these procedures are not interesting and valuable in themselves, just that there is not the direct linkage that Alexander seems to call for.

One might of course wonder whether this volume fairly and accurately represents Alexander's position. Would he in fact approve of this effort? On this issue there is little room for doubt. Alexander spent many hours in discussion with the author, and excerpts of his recorded comments are quoted extensively. Alexander has, in fact, written an approving preface, indicating that his own view of his work has been influenced by the process that led to the book.

What is it reasonable to ask of such a volume? One would certainly expect some insights into the origins of and the connections among the creative body of work that Alexander has produced. But beyond that, what are the special issues raised by Alexander's role as the generator of

a new paradigm? Undoubtedly each reader will harbor somewhat different expectations. What I had hoped to find were:

- (1) An analysis of what underlies the genius of the patterns. They are a unique and profound achievement. Yet it is not obvious on the face of it why this is so. It seems reasonable to expect some discussion of what accounts for their special quality.
- (2) *Pattern Language*, an awesome integration of data, insight, and design, seems to have had relatively little influence on architectural practice. In recent years architecture has showed signs of groping for a new paradigm; an analysis of why this one has not been a leading contender seems called for.
- (3) Perhaps it is asking a bit much, but a book favorably disposed to this precedent-shattering perspective might be expected to attempt to interpret the concept of patterns in such a way that designers might find them more comfortable enabling rather than threatening. Grabow quite correctly recognizes the appearance of a new paradigm; does it not seem appropriate to attempt to build some bridges to show how contact can be made across this unfortunate gap?

The reader seeking to be enlightened on these three themes will, alas, seek in vain. Although Grabow's focus seems to be largely on synthesis, what is called for is some thoughtful analysis. Too often there is assertion rather than clarification. Too often we are subjected to value judgments (x is "really beautiful" while y is not) rather than explanation. Intuition, for all its power, can at times be a source of great frustration. Asserting the intuition as truth when no argument is available is here demonstrated to be poor policy. It lends a mystical air, a cult-like quality to ideas of varying merit, all of which are presented as inseparable facets of the same take-it-or-leave-it whole.

This volume is written on behalf of an important and potentially decisive intellectual contribution. Perhaps what is most needed in appreciating the significance and the appropriate role of Alexander's contribution is distance. Distance is needed to see more clearly what the central issues are and to separate these issues from the intense personal involvement of their creator. Distance, alas, is what this volume most seriously lacks.

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### REFERENCES

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