

## COMPREHENDING ALEXANDER'S LEGACY

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**Abstract.** A year after Christopher Alexander's death, we are making an attempt to embrace his legacy looking to sum up some results. We reveal the significance of his revolutionary ideas and analyze the reasons for the lack of a full-fledged scientific discussion around them. To the greatest extent, we appeal to Alexander's basic work "The Nature of Order", which is essential for understanding other, more specific provisions of Alexander-in particular those contained in the "Pattern Language". In his critique of modern architecture, Alexander builds a multilevel system of causality, covering almost all levels of being. The reference point for Alexander is nature as a complex organized, ordered whole, and the criterion is its beauty. We consider this unique approach to be one of the factors that complicate the "dialogue" with Alexander. On the one hand, comprehending his coherent concept requires unbiased interest and considerable effort. On the other hand, having delved into it, it is already difficult to deny its strict logic, and yet, it completely overturns the ideas about architecture that have been established over the past hundred years. As a result, Alexander's positions remain practically "under the bushel" and are still waiting for their true discovery.

**Keywords:** *Christopher Alexander, scientific discussion, criteria, objectivity, natural order, beauty, modern architecture, clash of paradigms.*

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### 1. Introduction

A year ago, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2022 Christopher Alexander passed away. This event was almost taken for granted by our architectural community. It was webpage "Archi.ru" which provided us with the obituary. The rest of the initiatives related to the memory of Alexander are tightly connected with the magazine "Kapitel" and the author of this article. Particularly, in June 2022 a round-table conference devoted to the problems of architectural education was organized by the St. Petersburg architectural society in memory of Alexander. Supposing we could have missed something — in general, it is obligatory to state that Alexander can still be called a far-flung island, terra incognita in Russia. Surely, it would be incorrect to say that his name is completely unknown: having "A Pattern Language" (Alexander's ground-breaking work was written in 1977 but the Russian translation was published only in 2014) in a workshop is considered good form among architectures. Generally, this book cannot be called a best-seller, and when the interest in the opinion of various specialists of "A Pattern Language" occurs, the answers seem to be rather uncertain.

This does not correspond to the importance of Alexander's ideas in any way.

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There are several reasons why, and it is of great interest to analyze them. First of all, the massive volume cannot help but frighten those who are prepared for simple, desirably visual perception. Instead, the ground-breaking theory of architecture is offered to be perceived anew. But is it worth the hassle?...

In my opinion, an extra difficulty is created by the translation of initial term “pattern”, which has multiple meanings and does not have the exact equivalent in Russian. “Шаблон” sounds too mechanistic, and “паттерн” — eerily scientific.

Thus, initially there is a certain barrier, but it is only beginning. Furthermore, the path is grounded for more complex reasons.

Architects understand that their freedom is paved with a variety of restrictions, and there is a bunch of them — budget, requirements, the tastes of a client... The space left for forthcoming artworks is crucially narrowed for architects.

What do theorists say? There are lacunae diluted by some publications by T.U. Bystrova — PhD, professor, translator of Salingeros’s books and fragments of Alexander’s works. In particular, Bystrova wrote the article which provides us with general transparent perception of ‘The Nature of Order’ and also quite a detailed description of the main goal of “A Pattern Language” (the way of creating a “living” structure, which has an uncanny resemblance with an evolving organism, based on the unity of practical, empiric, and social approaches) (Bystrova, 2020).

A short article about Alexander dated back to 2013 comes from A.G. Rappaport. (Rappaport, 2013). In this article the author admits that he discovered Alexander anew after the books of the latter had become available — “Timeless way of building”, “A Pattern Language”, “A new theory of urban design” and “The Nature of Order”. Its brevity creates a striking contrast with the claimed importance of Alexander.

Rappaport pays attention to the fact that Alexander approaches the problem of “language” (despite having the book called “A Pattern Language”) differently from Charles Jencks in ‘The Language of post-modern architecture’ and architectural semiotics of the 70-80s. Alexander thinks and speaks absolutely groundbreakingly, and it is possible that mainly a random coincidence of terms in drastically contradictory methodological approaches led to the fact that the works of Alexander created from the 80s to 2010 were placed on the periphery of theoretical thought.

Rappaport highlights a specific bond between the topics which intrigue him and Alexander (“the problematic of worlds” ontology and correlation of living and dead in architecture) and he frankly says that Alexander had started to develop these topics first.

To Rappaport’s mind, the innovation of Alexander’s works helps to make them “totally groundbreaking from the point of the methodology of architectural-environmental research” in contemporary society. The most significant is, according to Rappaport, “the projective direction” of Alexander’s theory, and consequently the discussion of its relevance is seductive in terms of its ability to overcome the insurmountable lacunae between environmental and projective approaches.

A.G. Rappaport also accepts that this kind of approach “as ahistorical, eternal (the way Alexander says) ... can reconstruct the humanity of the world which nowadays suffers from technical idealism”.

This is the end of the article. No further discussion followed, in spite of “seducing”.

In any case I could not find any other examples of serious appeal to Alexander in open access. Undoubtedly, he is mentioned, more often along the name of Nikos Salingeros who has become available in Russian and did a lot in terms of popularization and easier “assimilation” of Alexander’s ideas.

So, serious theorists prefer to bypass Alexander in silence. Perhaps someone is repelled by the very formulation of the question of limiting creative freedom by any framework other than functional ones. The restriction is applicable, among other things, to the freedom of statements, “copyright” for verbal interpretation due to the fact that Alexander develops a strict system criterion. It is exactly what architectural theory has not known since the epoch of functionalism at least! But no one is embarrassed. On the contrary, the very formulation of the question of clear and strict criteria in architectural and artistic circles is perceived as malicious heresy.

Which are the criteria proposed by Alexander? He states that the feature of architectural quality is beauty because it can be called one of the most powerful factors of happiness, and people are created mainly for happiness. Architectural science has also not heard this for a long time — probably since the time of Stalin’s utopia. For those architects who were educated in the realms of modernism the adverb “beautifully” is a synonym of vulgar bourgeois taste. According to Alexander, beauty is *objective*. And this is another stumbling block owing to the fact that post-modern philosophy had seemingly ‘cancelled’ objectiveness without the right of appeal. However, Alexander bases his criteria by estranging them from the laws of natural order.

Nature is a complex and hierarchically organized, structured, and magnificent unity, a great book which unveils the mystery of existence. This view is akin to the ancient worldview and stretches the thread to the traditional mimesis, and it lies as the basis of Alexander’s scientific search. The point of view is deeply personal and full of awe. Studying these tendencies and correlating them to the rules of constructing conventional (pre-modernistic) buildings, Alexander finds them entirely similar. And he deduces from this the laws of the construction of “living structures”, i.e. those that theoretically “could be” alive, by analogy with natural structures. I will name just some of these laws aimed at achieving hierarchical orderliness (by analogy with nature): this is the obligatory presence of strong centers, wide boundaries, local symmetries, a wide range of scales (listed what can be perceived without further explanation) — a total of fifteen laws. (Here it is appropriate to draw a parallel between the meaning that Alexander and Hans Sedlmayr attach to the “center”) (Sedlmayr, 1948). Later Nikos Salingaros generalized them into three main laws, including the bunch of further rules (Salingaros, 2016).

It is obvious that the rules of Alexander are in a real contradiction with the principles of contemporary architecture. According to A. G. Rappaport, Alexander conducts research on the architectural language in a manner far from Jenkins and the structuralists of the 70s and 80s. In other words, not from the position of post-modernism nor from the position of deconstructivism. (Structuralists of the 80’s evolved into poststructuralists and justified deconstructivism as a creative method). These two directions still determine the current state while Alexander unveils the third way connected with the legitimization and reconsideration of “beauty” as the most vital and objective law of the world.

Firstly, Alexander encroaches on freedom as the main conquest of modernity. Secondly, he reconstructs a vertical hierarchy which has been demolished by post-modernism. The most groundbreaking statement of Alexander is that the top of this hierarchy lies in the realm of the transcendental (Alexander, 2016). The strict scientist-empiricist in him eventually came to this conclusion as a result of numerous experiments and decades of thought. In the system of Alexander all these levels are tightly connected, and one statement stems from another.

Thus, Alexander's approach not only challenges the architecture of the previous century. By and large, we are talking about a clash of paradigms, when two irreducible pictures of the world are found. This was clearly manifested already in 1982, during a resonant discussion between Christopher Alexander and Peter Eisenman (Alexander & Eisenman, 1982). That "dialogue" is a classic example of a conversation in different languages, in which Alexander appeals to common sense and harmony, and Eisenman appeals to poststructuralists who reject meaning as a manifestation of totalitarianism. It is characteristic that the debate became more of a Public Relations effort for Eisenman, who was on the cutting edge of architectural and intellectual fashion at that time, than for Alexander with his "eternal" approach. Contradicting the architectural mainstream, Alexander's works in the 80's, according to A.G. Rappaport, "were placed on the periphery of theoretical thought until 2010".

In fact, they remain on the periphery to this day. But those who can gain insight into the logically consequential arguments of Alexander without any prejudices might find the answers to numerous of crucial today's issues. This is confirmed by the discussion that does not stop around Alexander in the English-speaking Internet space. I am backing this up by the quotation from the article of an architect, the name of whom, unfortunately, I could not find out (2018).

*"I've been studying and experimenting with building energy efficient houses made of natural materials for a few years. At one point I realized that one fundamental subject was still a mystery to me: how to design, shape, give form to a house? What makes one design better than another? How to design a new house (that can take on any shape)? How to choose from seemingly infinite possibilities? I could not find good answers to these questions. Then in my 2nd or 3rd reading of Charles Eisenstein's Sacred Economics I came across a quote from Christopher Alexander and the Nature of Order.*

*I inquired and came across his more famous works A Pattern Language and A Timeless Way of Building, but did not resonate with them. They felt, oddly (given the spirit of his work), very mechanistic. After some hesitation I finally got my hands on a copy of Book 1. Shortly after I started reading it, I got the other three books — I wanted to be able to read through without interruption. I was taken in, I found answers, surprising answers, answers that resonated deeply with other discoveries that excited me, answers that resonated deep with my own feelings and experiences, answers that apply to so much more than creating a house, answers that potentially turn the world upside down (or maybe finally put it right side up!).*

*The key takes away for me is that creating living structures (houses, software, organizations, societies ... that support life) is less about structure and more about process: **how structure is created**. The (mathematical) odds are not in our favor — there are orders of magnitude more possibilities for creating structures lacking in life than living structures. Good processes help us make choices that increase the odds of creating living structures. Nature surrounds us with examples of good processes of unfolding wholeness: from blooming flowers to maturing embryos — nature never assembles pieces together, it always refines from the inside out ... and so should we. We need to move away from design (as in theoretical and pre-emptively forming shapes on paper removed from circumstances) towards gradual, feedback induced, sense-driven making" (Alexander, 2018).*

As a result of the deep and consequential reading of "The Nature of Order", the author of this text not only benefited with professional value for himself but could also share this value with others. He has dragged systematical "extracts" out of the enormous

book and placed them on the Internet in a strict order according to the chapters, from the first to the last, with his own comments. Due to this work all the readers who are interested in Alexander's ideas can get some access to the text of Alexander.

From the experience of the unknown author, we can get an insight into several valuable things which are desirable to know before getting acquainted with Alexander.

The first: the most important requirement for the perception of Alexander's theory is the presence of unanswered questions and "craving for the truth". Those who know and understand everything have no need for it.

The second: it is more correct to start studying Alexander's theory "from the common to the individual". The author of this comment says that "A Pattern Language" at first seemed rather mechanistic to him. Undoubtedly, when the acquaintance begins with specific laws and rules with mathematical formulas which stem from these laws, then the conception of projecting as mainly a mathematical process can occur. But it is not like this. If we compare the laws of the patterns language, for example, with the order system of Vignola, it becomes clear how "exceedingly broad the commandment" of natural order stated by Alexander is. It comprises not only the laws of constructing the orders but also a numerous variety of the canons of traditional (regional, national), so-to-say, pre-modernistic architecture. Consequently, the architect is free, but he has some landmarks to follow: natural laws and experience, which has been obtained throughout centuries by solving repeated situations.

However, in order to feel this freedom, a person needs to reach accord with that system of the world order, the part of which is human. Otherwise, his freedom can be considered as God-fighting. In order to reach the accord — it is worth understanding this freedom. Alexander 'discovers' the world anew by reconsidering that mechanistical model of the Universe which was shaped in The New Ages.

And this is the third aspect which is worth finding out beforehand when you come to studying Alexander. In "The Nature of Order" he reconsiders the very basics of the modern scientific worldview. This worldview, according to Alexander, is built on the basis of the mechanistical model which we had learned at school. Considering this model, in the world almost everything consists of atoms which are small revolving mechanisms. People also consist mainly of atoms.

Thus, *"there are few people alive who do not believe ("know") that they are mechanisms made up of millions of tiny whirling mechanisms. But if you believe ... [this] mechanized reduction is accurate, how can you take seriously the kinds of ideas which I have described about the life of buildings, and walls, and rooms, and streets? The answer is you cannot. You cannot, because if you believe the three elementary-school facts, then mentally, you are still living in a universe in which nothing matters, and in which you do not matter. And then the life of the environment is not real either"* (Alexander, 2018).

But what really makes sense and can be called "present"? The spiritual nature of reality which has fallen out of the Newtonian worldview. The target goal of Alexander is to unite the scientific and spiritual worldviews in every sense of the word. And this is much more difficult than simply recognizing the existence of God (which is the case in various forms and degrees among many scientists). In fact, the mechanistic model of the world does not care whether there is a God or not. Modern times have switched science to the study of matter exclusively, leaving the questions of the spirit to theology. This trait marked the beginning of the fragmentation of the previously integral picture of the world, which continues to this day. We live in this paradigm; scientific institutions that study a world in which there is no meaning function in it.

**“Ideas about the personal or spiritual nature of reality, no matter how desirable they seem, cannot affect you deeply, even if you think they do, until they can be embodied in some new picture which leaves the facts of physics intact, and also paves the way to a more spiritual understanding of the world...”**, — Alexander says (Alexander, 2018). *“In order to have an architecture in which our own lives and the quality of our surroundings, the buildings, too, have meaning, we must find a new form of physics, a modified physics in which self and matter can be reconciled. We have not been sufficiently aware to what extent our own 20th-century cosmology — because of its focus on the inert — has undermined our capacity to produce buildings that have life”* (Alexander, 2004, p. 18).

The inert’ means substance “on its own” in the context of which the discourse about beauty — a mysterious feature applicable to perfection has no sense either. Being a consequential logician, Alexander, in continuation of the discourse about the spiritual nature of the reality, poses the question of human-being and the core of his term “I”. It is rather important for him to understand, *who* and for *whom* one builds? Which human “organ” makes a person perceive, admire, and adore beauty? Heidegger called the person of tradition “the praising person” (the opposite of “the moral person”, “trading person” and “post-human-technician” of the later periods) (Dugin, 2009), and this determination perfectly fits the approach of Alexander. *“... All the efforts I have made have at their heart, just this one intention: to bring back our awe”*, — he claims in the conclusion to the 4<sup>th</sup> volume of “The Nature of Order” (Alexander, 2018).

In fact, the “new picture” that Alexander is talking about is a return at the modern scientific level to the old, traditional paradigm in which spirit and matter are considered as a single whole, with a priority on the former. And the crucial thing is that this entity is not only considered, but also “praised”. This tradition is pierced with adoration of the beauty of the Universe and the idea of being a humble researcher of nature. The name of Plato, who destined the whole of the European philosophical tradition to be “footnotes on the pages of Plato’s works” (according to a witty remark by A.N. Whitehead) shows us how incredibly effective this approach is. However, this point of view is equal for many people to the reverse of historic wheel...

## 2. Conclusion

Unwinding the chain of causal connections, Alexander could carry out the complex of groundbreaking research which probably does not have an analogy in science. In order to prove his architectural views, he was forced to touch all the layers of existence, use some information from physics, mathematics, psychology, philosophy, sociology, cosmology, anthropology and other realms of knowledge. This desire to reach “the new syncretism” required truly enormous efforts — and not only of scientific character. According to N. Salingaros, his friend was sad at the end of his fruitful life (Salingaros, 2022).

Taking into account everything that was said, we might be surprised not only with the fact that the works of Alexander remain “on the periphery of architectural thought”, but also the way they could pave their ground and continue to capture new minds. Almost everything in these works is opposite to “the rules of success”, starting with their huge format and ending up with profound statements of framework. Alexander was not afraid of seeming to be a reactionary, standing in the way of business-interests, turning out ungreeted in the scientific society and eventually becoming a “personal” enemy, who is

destroying the basis of the tranquility of renowned architects. All of this proves the power of his ideas which can contradict the spirit of Time. It is imagined that the importance of Alexander will increase as time goes by. Due to his works, we have the only systematical alternative to the approach which was established in architectural theory and practice in the last one hundred years.

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