A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction

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At the core of *A Pattern Language* is the philosophy that in designing their environments people always rely on certain 'languages,' which, like the languages we speak, allow them to articulate and communicate an infinite variety of designs within a formal system which gives them coherence.

This book provides a language of this kind. It will enable making a design for almost any kind of building, or any part of the built environment. 'Patterns,' the units of this language, are answers to design problems: how high should a window sill be?; how many stories should a building have?; how much space in a neighborhood should be devoted to grass and trees?

More than 250 of the patterns in this language are outlined, each consisting of a problem statement, a discussion of the problem with an illustration, and a solution. As the authors say in their introduction, many of the patterns are archetypal, so deeply rooted in the nature of things that it seems likely that they will be a part of human nature and human action as much in five hundred years as they are today.

A Pattern Language is related to Alexander's other works in the Center for Environmental Structure series: *The Timeless Way of Building* (introductory volume) and *The Oregon Experiment*.

A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction Details

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From Reader Review A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction for online ebook

Deirdre Keating says

I have to give it 5 stars because there is no other way to describe it but as amazing. Forgive me the long review, but it was a library checkout and I want to refer back to it.

I was initially annoyed that there wasn't an idex where I could look up "office space" and quickly read their recommendations for the best layout. Yet now I love the way each pattern refers to all the other patterns it is connected to, and you find yourself flipping from garden benches to farmhouse kitchens. It probably also helps that each chapter/pattern is only a few pages so I could delude myself (and my family) that I was only going to read for a few more minutes.

I can see why some wouldn't enjoy this---I can't imagine trying to read it for a class, or as laid out from start to finish rather than jumping around. One (positive) reviewer wrote: "It's wildly ambitious and preachy and reassuringly confident." All true, and also quite dated at times, but still lovely and inspiring.

It made me want to contact the designer of our house, because, while we unfortunately don't have the several feet-thick walls recommended, so much of our house has patterns as if the designer had the book in hand, eg: the flow through rooms, cascade of roofs, dormer window, ceiling height variety, low window sills (something I previously found baffling), as well as things we added: window seats, half-hidden garden, child-caves (under-the-stairs room).

I especially loved the last pattern: Things From Your Life. "Do not be tricked into believe that modern decor must be "slick"...or "natural" or whatever else that current taste-makers claim. It is most beautiful when it comes straight from your life--the things you care for, the things that tell your story." I so appreciated this after being told, by a much more "design-wise" friend that I was "brave" to have so many family photos out. I know design "rules" call for them to be in less public rooms, but I love photography and these people, and love having them throughout our home.

I love the open shelves pattern & hope to implement it in our kitchen. The city-planning patterns depressed me, as they are the opposite of how most public spaces are laid out, but I still found them instructive. Loved the "child in the city" pattern and more.

The copy I borrowed from our library had a personal inscription that included this quote:
There is nothing stronger or nobler
than when a man and a woman
are of one heart in a home--
a grief to their enemies
And to their friends great joy,
But their own hearts know it best.--Homer

EDIT: The above review is from November 2010.
Reread again in 2014. Loved it even more, and started a blog series, 31 Days of A Pattern Language

Taco Ekkel says

Very inspiring. Empowered me to think practically about architecture at all scales. No appraisal or brainstorm on anything architecture, houses or buildings goes by without these patterns popping up in my mind.

I now understand why the author himself hated that his 'pattern' approach was appropriated by folks turning it into something abstract (programming patterns) whereas he meant them as an easy, democratic tool for everyday people to make their own neighbourhoods and houses. This book is a political statement in the sense that it actively tries to pry the monopoly on shaping our built world out of the hands of the chosen few in architecture firms.

The book is a product of its time though, and while many ideas are rooted in universal properties of the human psyche and physique, there are also ideas that are less timeless — and obviously it lacks insights we've learned since the 70s.

Andrew says

I'll start by saying that Christopher Alexander has attempted to develop a more humane system of urban and domestic planning, and has provided a number of thought-provoking ways to implement his vision.

I'll also say that, intellectually, it holds next to no water. By trying to ground the dreamy poetics of Bachelard as "science," you lose the metaphorical value that Bachelard has to offer, while gaining no actual science. It's not like there's any justification for the numbers he tosses in or anything. And by trying to apply the axiom-driven reasoning of mid-century social science to geography and concrete space, he demonstrates its fraudulence as an intellectual movement. I'll leave Carl Jung back in the Eisenhower administration where he belongs, thank you much.

What we're left with then, is a string of speculative sketches, which range from some rather intriguing architectural ideas at best to some embarrassingly determinist urban planning ideas at worst. I didn't need 1200 pages of this. I'm not entirely sure how or why I finished.

Dawn says

1171 pages covering 253 'patterns'. And this is the second half of the book (1st half is "The Timeless Way of Building".

1171 pages!!! love their little sketches and diagrams, but for the average urbanist, this book isn't worth your time. Lots of the ideas are timeless, if misunderstood or neglected during certain periods, but many others are dated, unpopular, or so idealistic as to be ludicrous. Some principles counter-acted others, some are counter-intuitive but quite sensible, others are classic gems.

This book in it's exhaustive coverage of all scales of living, might be a guide for God, as if he were moving on to towns and buildings on the 8th day. The scale of the proposed design is completely utopian, but the tone is unabashedly sincere and specific.

What i like is that instead of just identifying problems with the built environment as so many do, they are all about solutions, however unrealistic.

A few quotes.

"It is not possible to avoid the need for high speed roads in modern society; but it is essential to place them and build them in such a way that they do not destroy communities or countryside."

"There is abundant evidence to show that high buildings make people crazy."
(From Chapter 21: "Four-Story Limit", complete with cited studies and a comparison of SF's Transamerica Pyramid to a Big Brother Ministry from Orwell's 1984)

"As part of the network of bike paths, develop one system of paths that is extra safe - entirely separate from automobiles, with lights and bridges at the crossings, with homes and ships along it, so that there are always many eyes on the path. Let this path go through every neighborhood, so that children can get onto it without crossing a main road. And run the path all through the city, down pedestrian streets, through workshops, assembly plants, warehouses, interchanges, print houses, bakeries, all the interesting 'invisible' live of a town - so that the children can roam freely on their bikes and trikes."

See what i mean? ah, to have lived in the 70s, when such a path was still dreamable...

Faith Reidenbach says

Anyone with the luxury of designing their own home should jump at the chance to get this book. It's a bit dated, but at 1100+ pages it surely describes most of the details you'll need to think about.

I took it home from the library because it's a fascinating book about architectural design in general, everything from the optimal size of a public square (70 feet wide) to the best place for a garden seat. I learned that my house has a good "intimacy gradient" (spaces meant to be public are readily accessible; private rooms are tucked away) but is poorly designed with regard to windows (rooms should have windows on 2 sides).

However, with no easily discernible scheme of organization--not to mention seeing all the ways my house could never be improved--this book was ultimately frustrating to me.

Matt says

I really don't know what I was expecting when I reserved this from the library, but it wasn't this. In my defense, it sounded interesting. I thought it might be a discussion of sociology and history meant to inspire or empower people to build what they wanted. In fact, what I got is....

Let me back up. Just recently, Irrational Games released the latest in their series of dystopian first person shooters - 'Bioshock Infinite'. In this series visionary philosophers seek to found utopian communities based

on the idea that humanity needs to be organized around a different guiding principle, and in this isolation temporarily achieve great things only to be ultimately undermined by the fundamental flaws inherent in their philosophy. In the first game, you get to live out the fantasy of killing a bunch of Ayn Randian objectivist libertarians that have mutated into monsters. In this latest game, you are pitted against fanatical American patriots who worship the founding fathers.

One of the things that greatly interests me is that the utopian communities of Bioshock look absolutely nothing like the sort of utopian communities that are actually created or desired by the sort of people whose philosophies Bioshock draws inspiration from. American religious mystics don't create high tech cities. They create something more like a Shaker village. The people inspired by American Exceptionalism didn't create isolationist flying communes, but Detroit and Chicago. The followers of Ann Rand didn't and wouldn't be interested in planned communities. They'd correctly diagnosis any sort of planned community as a de facto government and isolation as a tool of empowerment by that government. You can say many things about the Objectivists, but they aren't really into building Utopias or at least not for communities as a whole. Actual religious utopians building intentional planned communities don't tend to imagine high tech cities as a way to get spiritual. If you actually look at the history of intentional communities in the United States and the world, you find a lot of luddite religious groups, a few con artists, a great many free spirited anarchist squatters, and an endless succession of socialist communes, compounds, show cities, and planned communities. In fact, the only modern religious philosophy that has shown any consistent interest in building communities set apart from the rest of society is socialism. It's got a rich 200 year history, but if you are waiting for the Bioshock game that has a communist planned community at its heart, well, I suspect you'll be waiting a long while. Actually attacking a vibrant religion, especially one many of your friends belong too, has way too many social repercussions.

If you want a real model for the sort of communities found in Bioshock, then you couldn't really do better than this book. Instead of a discussion of the theories of social organization and how they relate to architecture, what you get in this book is a blueprint based on a theory of desirable organization. There is within the pages of this book a detailed outline of exactly how the lives of people are to be controlled in every practical aspect. Alexander has a plan for everything - where you own land, where you work, what you do, where you shop, and where you sleep. Everything is planned out in meticulous detail.

What I find particularly interesting is that what he's planning is ultimately little more than a tessellated medieval town. This is guy who has clearly gone to Europe, fallen in love with the post-medieval countryside and decided that this is the way mankind must be made to live. Grounded in pseudoscience, Alexander outlines reasoning for recreating every incidental aspect of the medieval countryside. In the real world, the complex winding tapestry of medieval fields and farms was the result of patrimony and continual subinfeudation. In Alexander's fantasy world, the thin intertwined fingers of land familiar to anyone with more than a half-dozen hours of college level course study in Medieval history are the product of science - in the same way that the huge communal government owned farms of the Soviet Union and Mao's great agricultural leap forward were the product of science.

The pattern of streets in a medieval town, the layout of semi-self-sufficient neighborhoods within larger cities, virtually every aspect of medieval culture save the central organizing cathedral at the hub is apparent in the layout. The steel I-beam doesn't exist in this world, nor does it appear the elevator, nor does electricity save in the most cursory way. This is building for the 19th century. Now, there are important topics here that could be discussed, but from his perspective in the 1970's - a time filled with socialist community planning (my cousin lived on a commune) - the writer isn't really asking the right questions or thinking about them. Instead of looking at the world's architectural diversity and really seeing it as adaptive and useful engineering, he's got his theory and by golly he's going to stick with it.

I do Alexander no injustice to claim that he is a would be tyrant of the highest degree. Alexander is well aware that his intentional planned community won't come about organically by people seeing the sense of his ideas and incorporating them into their lives from the bottom up, first building house according to his principles, then latter building complexes, and latter neighborhoods and finally cities. He well aware that his vision requires above all two things – central planning and authoritarian force. The only way to get people to do what Alexander believes is good for them is to make them do it. Every second page of the book contains an enjoinder to create laws that enforce the pattern discussed in that section, and a discussion of the necessity of doing so. Of course, every page with such an injunction also contains a 'proof' that the pattern to be enforced is really the natural one humanity prefers, which means there has to be a Satan in the garden somewhere but I didn't read the book closely enough to find evidence beyond a few attacks on 'bankers' and 'investors'. I suspect however that I'd be learning nothing additional about the book to find the answer on that subject. I've encountered too much of this sort of crap before.

Anyway, what I wanted was science. What I got was religion. There are many ironies in this text, but probably the greatest one for me is that of all the areas of American life that this book impacts (other than a few municipal codes in California), the area you can see Alexander's theories play out to their fullest is in the design of Shopping Malls.

Carol Jones says

This is the book that sparked my interest in architecture and home design, many years ago. Skip the town and urban planning if you are more interested in how to design a comfortable home. Christopher Alexander is passionate and persuasive about what he believes we need in our homes: natural light from two sides of a room, window seats one can actually read in, quiet separate dressing areas for every person in a house (because bedrooms should be rooms to relax and be intimate in, not a messy clothes managing area), child caves (because children love to be in tiny, cave-like places), and many things you may have not thought of. You'll never look at your home the same way again.

Hal O'Brien says

I was reading John Brunner's "The Shockwave Rider" in college, and it makes some architectural references. Trying to dig up what they were, I stumbled on this, mostly because Alexander was early in the card catalog, and at 1200 pages I felt sure it'd have what I was looking for.

I was wrong, of course, but only in the limited-to-the-task-at-hand way.

Alexander's main idea is that architecture is like a language. With a finite set of elements he calls patterns (not unlike words), you can put them together in a near infinite set of possible buildings (not unlike sentences). Having told you this in the first 10 pages or so, and referring you to his book "The Timeless Way of Building" if you want more on the theory, he then spends the thick remainder giving you 250+ patterns to play with.

It's because of Alexander that I yearn to teach kids pi through showing them the trees in the park. It's because of Alexander that when I'm in a room, I look to see if it has light on two sides.

Mike says

This is probably my favorite non-fiction book. Christopher Alexander and his students have collected everything there is to know about design and put it in one book. Yet cultures go on making the same mistakes over and over. And few architects I talk to have ever read the book.

The book is easy to read and understand. It consists of hundreds of patterns, described in a page or two. They range from the width of door molding to how cities should be laid out. For example, there is a pattern, "Old People Everywhere", and Alexander explains why that's the best pattern for humans to follow. Each pattern has a number of stars. Four stars means the author is pretty sure there are no other patterns for this subject of equal value. One star means it's a good pattern, but there may be other patterns that serve people well.

A little bit of history, at least as I know it. First, Alexander wrote a thin volume titled, "The Timeless Way of Building", that postulated that there were patterns of design that just worked. All we had to do was identify them and emulate them. This book was greeted with a huge yawn by readers. So, Alexander went off, with his students, to actually identify the patterns, thus producing "A Pattern Language".

Howard Mansfield says

Patterns are key to understanding what is ailing our landscape. There is an order, a language, for the way a good street is created. For example, there are recognizable parts that make up a good village townscape. Each part — a fence, a lilac, a walkway, a wall, a front door, a roof — each part works with the other parts to create a place that could only be that place in the whole world.
This is the brilliant insight of Christopher Alexander's amazing book, A Pattern Language. You may have seen it around — it's an unusual, yellow brick of a book that presents 253 patterns. There are large patterns for country towns, neighborhood boundaries, and ring roads. And smaller patterns for street cafés, pedestrian streets, porches, fruit trees, compost, alcoves, fireplaces, children's secret play-spaces, dancing in the street. This book can be read in any order—just as a walk across a city or town can take you many places. And it can be read as a long poem in praise of the delights of ordinary places. It's a stirring book, and like a first encounter with Bach, it opens a view to a better self, a better place. Alexander makes you feel like you can go out and build something beautiful.
A Pattern Language shows us that the relationships between things matter—and that there are no things, really, but relationships. There isn't a chair, but the relationship of the parts that make up a chair. There isn't a house, but a series of patterns—a pattern language that creates a house. And that house is a part of other patterns creating a yard, a street, a village.
Read A Pattern Language with its companion book, The Timeless Way of Building

Ruth says

The authors of this book, architects and designers, believed that they had identified design issues that were timeless. They did the research and writing for the book between about 1968 and 1977. I think many of their solutions, and even some of the problems they identified, were dated by the time the book was published. I

read the essays in the book out of order, which was interesting--sort of like choosing your own adventure. That, and the unwieldy nature of their arguments, made it difficult to figure out how to summarize what the book means to me. It's a beautiful and idealistic book that envisions a society where people build to give everyone what they need.

These authors were among many people who believed that the only way to ensure that communities reflect the people who live in them is home ownership. They did not address questions of affordability of housing. Furthermore, as they began their project in 1968, they believed that the problem of racism in housing was over. After all, they'd seen the passage of the Fair Housing Act. They even dismissed racism as an issue in one essay, while discussing the formation of neighborhoods by affinity. These massive oversights or innocence or whatever it was, make reading this book almost unbearable. Another thing which made the book feel dated, to me, were all the ways that the authors tried to deal with the generation gap and the family. I cannot imagine how people who had traveled to many cultures and cities could think of their emphasis on the normalcy and centrality of the nuclear family and in particular the needs of couples were universal.

The other piece of reading this book that saddened me were all the insights about low rise buildings, the importance of public space, and the need for people to have space to play. Every positive thing in this book has either been ignored in urban planning--to the extent we actually allow urban planners to plan spaces--or made available to affluent people only. I think the saddest thing was seeing recently that people are building mini-houses in parking lots. This decades after this book came out and was read by everyone--this book that asserts that only a minimal amount of space in a city should go to parking, and how important it is for every house to have a garden.

Anyway--fun to read, if bittersweet.

Alper Çu?un says

An essential book for anybody interested in the field. I read it cover to cover, very slowly with breaks and now I feel I have some grasp of what it takes to build a house.

It is of course dated and highly geared towards North American houses but it's still a seminal work. The parts on urbanism are in fact how we in CNW Europe do manage things, so that is heartening.

Extensions to the book for instance how to build houses in very space constrained environments like the Netherlands could be interesting.

What is annoying is how much of today's buildings are not aligned with the patterns in this book. I recommend policy makers and architects to be thumped with this tome on a regular basis.

Malcolm says

If *A New Theory of Urban Design* is the summation of the theoretical developments in Christopher Alexander's work, this is the practical how-to guidebook vision of building integrated and human centred spaces, of building spaces that blend internal and external physical environments. I was introduced to this by an architect friend and neighbour when I was doing some writing about topography and (our) community: it

is an inspirational and exciting book, although at 1200 pages of architectural and urban design discussion hardly likely to be a holiday blockbuster. Superb!

Jordan Stephens says

This book was my anam cara. I've long since felt perplexed by the way American cities are designed and the way we are forced to live as a result of their structure and underlying philosophy. I am likewise confused by the holding in high esteem of homes that lack the ability to satisfy daily needs. Though this book is designed for the city planner, architect, or builder (none of which am I), I found in it validation that these needs are not so unusual and hope that there are those in the American planning and architectural communities who are doing work to further these ideals.

This book is divided into three sections: Towns, Buildings, and Construction. This book advocates using a highly utilitarian philosophy in constructing towns and buildings. I use "utilitarian" not in a Marxist sense, but in the sense that utility and function incorporate the need for beauty, sunlight, and connection to the outdoors and religion - all of which are also fundamental needs to life in addition to other standard forms of utility such as having a shelter, a place to put your coats when you enter a home, etc. This philosophy asks the question of what humankind's needs are and, based on that, creates a language to pattern towns and buildings.

Here are a few examples for creating a successful house from the Buildings section:

•The modern standard for a door height is taken for granted. Be sensitive to the moment of passage and transition by altering door heights.
•Likewise, vary ceiling height for formality and intimacy.
•Build closets and storage space into walls that separate rooms - this will provide increased sound-proofing and won't waste access to natural light.
•Children love special, small places. Use empty nooks and crannies to fulfill this love.
•Build low window sills to greater connect occupants to the outdoors. Likewise, use opening windows as opposed to sliding windows.
•Raised flower beds provide humans with greater physical access and connection to the outdoors.
•Use items that tell your story and have meaning as decorations in your home.

Here are a few examples for creating successful neighborhoods and cities in the Towns section:

•No one stage of the human life cycle is self-sufficient. As such, places in which the elderly reside or frequent must be very near places where the young resident or frequent.
•Structure towns in such a way that tap the fundamental desire of humans to be near water, without destroying the water.
•Create small industry cores near small residential cores. The modern separation of industry from residential creates an unfortunate environment in which people live two lives that do not intersect.
•Create neighborhoods that support the common desire to be around like-minded individuals without supporting complete segregation.
•Use green streets for little-used streets and lanes as an alternative to asphalt. This is more pleasing for the eye, better for the environment, and cheaper.
•Create playgrounds based on the local neighborhoods. A playground that boasts "No skateboarding, no bikes, and no pets" will be no playground at all in some neighborhoods.

•Connect religion to common life. In Rome, cathedrals were never free standing but were always connected to other buildings.

I skimmed through the most technical-oriented section - the Construction section, which comes in at a measley 231 pages in a book of 1167 pages.

My only quibble is that this book could benefit from an index.

Kristina Stykos says

If I was on a desert island and could only have one book, this would be it.