



# Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology Newsletter

Vol. 6, No. 1

Winter 1995

With this issue of *EAP*, we begin our sixth year. We thank readers who have renewed their subscription. Those who have not yet responded will find another renewal form tucked inside. As of late fall, we have had 71 renewals from a 1994 subscriber list of 141. Many of you have forgotten! Please renew.

Last year, our financial situation ended satisfactorily, particularly because of several generous donations. For safety's sake, however, we could use more subscribers. One way in which readers could help *EAP* is to ask their university or college libraries to order an *EAP* subscription. Currently, only five universities subscribe. Library copies increase our readership and bring in new members.

We draw your attention to the comments of architect **Andrew Cohill** in this issue's membership news. He asks what the relationship between *EAP* and computer communications might be. He volunteers to establish an electronic mailing net for *EAP* members. Are readers interested in such a venture and, if so, how should things proceed? One possibility is to place an older issue of *EAP* "on line" so that potential new members might learn of our interests and become involved.

Unintentionally, this issue has largely come together as a focus on architect **Christopher Alexander's** *Pattern Language*. We include a review of his recent book on early Turkish carpets, *Toward a Twenty-First Century Art*, as well as

shorter reviews of commentaries about his work or articles written by former students and associates. We also include an essay by architect **Alfred Bay**, a recent Berkeley master's student who worked with **Hajo Neis**, a co-author of **Alexander's** *A New Theory of Urban Design* (NY: Oxford, 1987).

We also include poems by landscape architect **Gwendolyn Scott** and geographer **Miles Richardson**.

## EAP SESSIONS AT EDRA

As announced in the last *EAP*, the 1995 Environmental Design Research Association's annual meeting will be held in Boston, March 1-5. *EAP* members **Ingrid Leman Stefanovic** and **Duncan Case** have both organized *EAP*-sponsored sessions for the events. Stefanovic's full-day intensive session will focus on

"Recovering Sense of Place: Research in Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology." Case's workshop will emphasize "Qualitative Research and Pattern Language: Toward the Design of More Humane Living Environments." Tentative participants in the two events include **Margaret Boschetti**, **Herb Childress**, **Catherine Howett**, **Sara Ishikawa**, **Clare Cooper Marcus**, **C. Thomas Mitchell**, **Douglas D. Pateron**, **David Seamon**, and **Fran Violich**.

A more complete description of these EDRA sessions appears on p. 15 of this issue.



From Alexander's *Foreshadowing of 21st Century Art: The Byzantine-Timurid prototype, a Turkish-rug pattern*. See p. 5.

## ITEMS OF INTEREST

**Way of the Mountain Newsletter** reviews books, articles, and other works dealing with environmental ethics, especially relating to deep ecology. A recent issue covers such topics as "bioregional living," "landscape and mindscape," and "enculturation and place." Address: *Way of the Mountain*, PO Box 2434, Durango, CO 81302 (800-578-5904).

The first conference of the **Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE)** will be held June 9-11, 1995, at Colorado State University, Fort Collins. Possible paper topics include: nature writing, ecofeminism, bioregionalism, and place studies. Write: Scott Slovic, English Department, Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, TX 76666 (303-491-6222).

The **True Heart Artist Network** links artists with other artists around the world and connects projects with resources. The aim is to use art "to make the world a better place, to protect the environment, and to promote intercultural understanding and peace." Address: PO Box 11728, Milwaukee, WI 53211.

**Communication and Our Environment** is an interdisciplinary conference to be held in Chattanooga, Tennessee, March 30-April 2, 1995. Sponsored by the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, the meeting will "address questions about how speech, writing, visuals, and different media affect our understanding of the natural environment, environmental policy, education, or action." Write: Prof. M. J. Killingsworth, English Department, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843 (409-845-9936).

*Below: A minor border of a 17th c. Konya carpet. See p. 5.*



## EAP SUNY SERIES: TWO NEW BOOKS

Two new volumes have just been published in the State University of New York's "Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology" series--Robert Mugerauer's *Interpretations on Behalf of Place: Environmental Displacements and Alternative Responses* and Louise Chawla's *In the First Country of Places: Nature, Poetry, and Childhood Memory*.

Mugerauer emphasizes the interplay between European continental philosophy and North American environments and architecture. Drawing on a keen understanding of conceptual trends in both scholarship and the design professions, he clarifies various competing philosophical visions and their considerably different perspectives on environment, place, and architecture.

Chawla explores how people's personal philosophies of nature shape their childhood memories and self-identities. Drawing upon written work and original interviews, the book describes use of memory through the perspective of five American poets who represent different contemporary beliefs: William Bronk, David Ignatow, Marie Ponsot, Henry Weinfield, and the late Audre Lorde.

Initiated in 1993, the SUNY series in "Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology" is edited by EAP editor David Seamon. The first volume in the series is *Dwelling, Seeing, and Designing: Toward a Phenomenological Ecology*, edited by Seamon. To order any of the volumes, call 607-277-2211 or 800-666-2211. Or write: SUNY, c/o CUP Services, PO Box 6525, Ithaca, NY 14851.

## MEMBERSHIP NEWS

**Andrew Cohill** recently completed his PhD in Architecture at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. His phenomenological thesis studied architects at work with an emphasis on how "they used and stored information."

Currently, he is the Director of the Blacksburg Electronic Village, a community networking project in Blacksburg, Virginia. The aim of the project "is to provide members of the town (about 34,000 people) convenient and low-cost access to the Internet and a rich variety of online information services."

He writes: "Recently, I have become interested in the notion of 'presence' on the Internet, or the 'net,' as it is more commonly called. We are all familiar

with physical presence (for ourselves and both the built and natural environment), but creating a presence for ourselves on the net is a new and different problem. I am planning to teach a class on this topic in the spring of 1995."

He explains that he would be "willing to provide an electronic mailing list for *EAP* folks or for anyone interested in discussing phenomenological issues." Address: 1700 Pratt Drive, Blacksburg, VA 24060 (703-231-7855; Andrew.Cohill@bev.net).

**Graeme Leitch** is a part-time graduate student in architecture at Auckland University in New Zealand.

He has an undergraduate degree in anthropology and is interested in cultural landscape, poetics of place, cosmology and reading traditional concepts of dwelling in the light of theories of dislocation, displacement, and exile. He writes, "My time is largely spent building a house myself, so these concerns are grounded in daily practice." Address: 4 Rangeview Rd, Sunnvale, Glendene, Auckland 8, New Zealand.

**Michael J. Scully** is a retired biodynamic farmer and the Director of Downtown Springfield, Inc., a non-profit corporation that works to revitalize downtown Springfield, Illinois.

## SPECIAL SECTION: RECENT WORK RELATING TO PATTERN LANGUAGE

Ingrid King, 1993. *Christopher Alexander and Contemporary Architecture* [special issue, *a+u*, August]. ISBN 4-900211-42-7.

In the 1960s, Norwegian architect Ingrid King studied architecture under Christopher Alexander at Berkeley. Later, she worked on several of his design projects and became a contributing author to two of his books, *A Pattern Language* (1977) and *A New Theory of Urban Design* (1987). In this special issue of the Japanese design journal, *Architecture and Urbanism*, King seeks to overview Alexander's theories and designs and to show connections with other traditions in contemporary architecture.

The book is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 examines Alexander's theory of architecture and includes discussion of pattern language, the nature of order, and the architect's system of design and building. Chapter 2 considers his style of architectural practice in more detail, especially its emphasis on adaptability and user participation.

Chapter 3 attempts to link Alexander's work with other contemporary architects. King gives most attention to indirect links with the buildings of Alvar Aalto, arguing that, if one were to choose an equivalent of "a 'pattern language' building in the 'modern' vernacular," it would be Aalto's Villa Mairea" (p. 114). In her short last chapter, King reviews some central tenets of Alexander's efforts and holds them to brief critical evaluation.

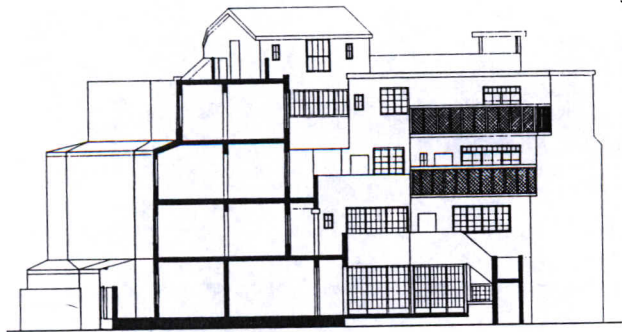
King suggests that, as it stands, Alexander's work

often seems esoteric and not readily accessible to outsiders. She hopes to link his efforts with other traditions in contemporary design and, therefore, join him in a larger architectural circle.

Unfortunately, the book fails badly in this regard. One problem is that graphic images are few and small—most of them little larger than postage stamps. A much more serious difficulty is a stilted text that, at times, is unintelligible. One senses that perhaps the original text was in Norwegian, which was then translated to Japanese and then again to English.

Whatever the source of the problem, King's presentation has little of the clarity, precision, and *feeling* of Alexander's own writings and designs. Newcomers to his work will be confused and disappointed, while admirers will find little that is new but much that is badly said. Curiously, the short introduction by Alexander has the same sort of disembodied spirit, and one can only hope that the book's Japanese translation is more understandable and felt.

Overall, the book is a considerable disappointment, and Alexander's extraordinary work is poorly served. One wonders what went wrong. Thankfully, King includes some intriguing personal anecdotes and commentaries, which partly redeem the book and say as much about King as Alexander—for example:



Above: Section, Emoto apartment building, Tokyo, Japan, Christopher Alexander and colleagues, Center for Environmental Structure

Alexander and I have taught studio design essentially based on the same premises, and Alexander used to wonder why the

projects in my studio tended to be better than in his. The answer to that is very simple, namely that to achieve the kind of objectives he has in mind, the student has to be fully mobilized as a designer. The concepts first have to become the personal property of the individual student. But not only that, the various structured views these concepts represent lend themselves as vehicles to develop the individual student's design potential, and it is this process of integration that makes their projects good.

In some ways any one of Alexander's books represents an approximation, and the underlying matters are much harder to achieve than what he will credit. They certainly need the application of all the possible design talent in the world, essentially acting in their own capacity, if one is at all to get anywhere. To just stay in the realm of user design: Who is going to invent the various specific pattern languages? It cannot all take place within the orbit of the Center for Environmental Structure [Alexander's design group in Berkeley] (p. 96).

Murray Silverstein, 1993. Mind and the World: The Interplay of Theory and Practice (A Theory). *Architecture California*, 15, 2 (November), pp. 20-28.

As a co-author of *Pattern Language*, architect Murray Silverstein's writings and designs have been influenced by Christopher Alexander's work but demonstrate innovative new directions and possibilities. In this article, Silverstein examines what he sees as three shifting periods in his architectural career and asks what they say about the interplay between theory and practice.

In the first period, Silverstein had just finished his graduate studies at Berkeley and was helping Alexander found his Center for Environmental Structure (CES). During this period, CES colleagues developed the pattern language theory, including the master volume, *Pattern Language*. Very little building was done during this period and "theory ruled" (p. 20).

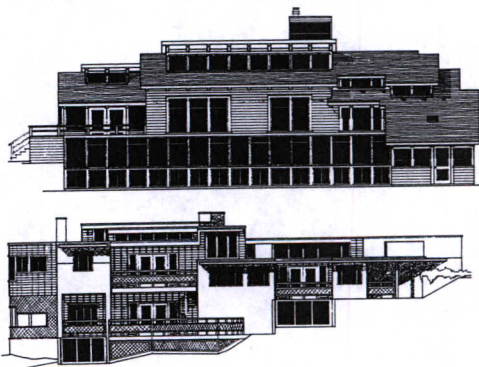
In the mid-1970s, Silverstein started his own practice with partner Max Jacobson, a CES colleague. The two architects continued to write about theory but also collaborated on a series of built projects, mostly residential. "During this period," writes Silverstein, "practice seemed a kind of lab within which theory could be tested and refined. In this sense, theory still ruled, but practice was its necessary proving ground" (p. 20).

Silverstein explains that, in the last ten years, he and Jacobson, along with their third partner, Barbara Winslow, have entered a new period in which theory

has taken on a different role whereby it is much more indebted to and arises from practice:

Practice, with its *ad hoc* nature, now dominates the equation. It is no longer our goal as practitioners to prove or disprove theory; indeed, practice seems to generate theory instead of the other way around. The buildings and projects that interest me now are more like open, probing questions than proofs. They use theory; they lead to theory; but existing in and of the world, they are in some fundamental way beyond theory's ken (p. 20).

Below: South facades, Johnson House (above) and Cooper House (below), San Ramon, California, Jacobson, Silverstein, Winslow, Architects



The body of Silverstein's essay explores these three periods in detail, with each section concluding with a set of implications as to what the period meant in terms of the theory-practice interplay. Ultimately, Silverstein suggests that a certain balance of theory and practice is crucial, though he also points out how readily one can err toward one side or the other:

When theory is continuously expanded to cope with the conflicts of the real world, it runs the risk of becoming ever more utopian and isolated, its projects hot-house creations whose success is contingent upon a whole fabric of never-to-be conditions in the world. On the other hand, where practice is continuously beaten down and forced to compromise by the exigencies of program and circumstance, it loses its theoretical moorings, and becomes so enmeshed with the 'world as it is', that it loses vision and intellectual content, becoming a mindless response to existing conditions. These are the dangers we've

been trying to steer a course between while struggling with the contingent happenings of a developing practice. Over time, our work seems less theoretical--less, that is, the *product* of theory--but still needful of the clarity and vision that theory has to offer (p. 26).

Silverstein then describes this "clarity and vision" in greater detail:

[This theory informed by practice] not only describes the ideas which drive past work; it also moves practice toward greater content, greater clarity, as it challenges the practitioner to *reabsorb*--more thoroughly, more elegantly--the lessons of past work...[P]ractice-derived theory can become like a flashlight that helps the practitioner see deeper into his own work--its range, its motivations and potentials--and to appreciate more in the work of others. *One needs fresh theory, in short, to make on-going sense of practice* (p. 27).

## SPECIAL SECTION ON PATTERN LANGUAGE: BOOK REVIEW

Christopher Alexander, 1993. *A Foreshadowing of 21st Century Art: The Color and Geometry of Very Early Turkish Carpets*. NY: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-520866-8 (cloth).

To read Christopher Alexander is, regularly, to feel a sense of vision and hope. In all his books and designs, the aim is the search for understanding, beauty, and wholeness. He has spent his life, he says, "trying to find forms for buildings in which people may feel themselves at home" (p. 7).

This search has involved the design and building of several significant buildings as well as the creation of a remarkable theory of seeing, designing, and building that has been most often identified as the "Pattern Language." Alexander has set forth this theory in a series of books "intended to provide a complete working alternative to our present ideas about architecture, building, and planning" (p. 2).<sup>1</sup>

The seventh book in this series focuses on a topic that, at first glance, may seem considerably removed from the built environment--Turkish village carpets of the 14th-17th centuries. Many years ago, Alexander became a collector of these carpets and now owns one of the finest collections in the world. He surmises that the weavers of most of these carpets were probably *Sufis*--Islamic holy men and women who sought to encounter God through mystical rapture. The carpets were woven as one means to "reach

union with God" (p. 21). Each carpet tries to express "the ultimate oneness of everything" and "a pattern which is the infinite domain" (p. 21).

Alexander admires the carpets because of their great sense of beauty and spirit, which, when he began his collection, he could only understand dimly. He began studying the carpets, sensing they could teach him much about one of his major research and design interests--wholeness and genuine order:

I began to realize that carpets had an immense lesson to teach me: that as organized examples of wholeness or oneness in space, they reach levels which are only very rarely reached in buildings. I realized, in short, that the makers of carpets knew something which, if I could master it, would teach me an enormous amount about my own art (p. 15).

## CENTERS AND WHOLENESS

This book presents the lessons he has learned from 74 of these carpets, all illustrated in color photographs at approximately one-tenth scale. The book is divided into four parts. The longest sections, parts II and III, present Alexander's dating method and then discuss each of the 74 carpets. Part IV uses the contrast of 12th- and 19th-century carpets to demon-

strate how their quality has degenerated over time, probably because the weavers gradually lost touch with the spirituality of their work.

EAP readers will be most interested in part I of the book, which presents Alexander's understanding of why the earlier carpets are so powerful. At the start, he emphasizes that this power and wholeness is not a matter of personal preference or taste but, rather, "a definite, tangible, and objective quality which really does exist to a greater or lesser degree in any given carpet" (p. 26).

The heart of this quality, he believes, lies in the color and, especially, the *geometry* of the carpets. "It is the geometry," he writes, "the interlock of the shapes, the very striking boldness of the geometric shapes, and the way that figure and ground reverse, and the many, many levels of scale, which bring the softly shining color to fruition" (ibid.).

Alexander develops a language and a way of looking at the carpets that he hopes will offer common agreement as to which carpets are more and less powerful. "To study wholeness," he says, "we must have an empirical way of distinguishing it from preference" (p. 27). In this sense (though he would not phrase it this way himself), he develops an implicit phenomenology of carpet geometry, drawing on personal discoveries made after studying the carpets for "1000s of hours" (p. 17).

He immediately points out that an accurate judgement of a carpet's relative beauty and wholeness is not easy but requires experience and many years of disciplined looking and seeing. He believes, however, that newcomers can begin to sense the relative power of carpets if they can find a way to bypass personal preferences and look at the carpets in a broader way.

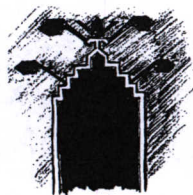
This relative strength of a carpet is partly related to its "staying power": "if you had to look at the thing over and over... which one stays the longer?" (p. 30). One tool he uses to train a wider awareness is to show people two carpets and then to ask:

If you had to choose one of these two carpets, as a picture of your own self, then which one... would you choose? Which seems better able to represent your whole being, the essence of yourself, good and bad, all that is human in you? (p. 28)

## THE NOTION OF CENTERS

Ultimately, however, a clearer understanding of carpet geometry requires practice, and the first part of Alexander's book is a guide to looking and seeing. The crux of Alexander's argument is what he calls *centers*—smaller or larger gatherings of pattern that are seen as units or wholes. Centers are "local configurations that appear whole in the design" (p. 32) or, again, "a psychological entity which is perceived as a whole, and which creates the feeling of a center in the visual field" (ibid).

Typically, but not always, centers are bounded units that the eye reads as a larger or smaller visual whole. The drawing, below left, illustrates the most obvious kind of center: a mandalalike pattern that looks like a round blossom. To the right of this example is another center—an archlike pattern with projecting arms and "lily" at the top.



As can be seen in both of these examples, a crucial characteristic of a center is that it is *composed of other centers* and, in turn, *may be an element of some larger center or centers*. In the blossom fragment, for example, the flower form, as a whole, is a center, but so are the five small white hexagons, the four small squares, the central eight-pointed star, the eight surrounding dark octagons, and so forth. In turn, this blossom is but a small part of a much larger carpet.

This nesting possibility leads to a first central criterion for the relative force of a center: It does not get its power from its shape or elements alone but, also, from the gathering of other centers that this center contains or is part. There is, in other words, a potential synergy among centers that in the best carpets supports a density of pattern and connection:

...every carpet contains hundreds, in many cases even thousands of centers, strewn, packed, and interlocked, throughout its structure.... The degree of wholeness which a carpet achieves is directly correlated to the number of centers which it contains. The more centers it has in it, the more powerful and deep its degree of wholeness (p. 36).

## ASPECTS OF CENTERS

The notion of centers is the crux of Alexander's theory and, at first glance, may seem rather obvious and without extensive interpretive power. In the rest of part I, however, Alexander probes the notion from several different angles and, overall, provides powerful evidence for the way centers can help the reader look at carpet geometry in a deeper, more informed way. He identifies four key qualities that contribute to the relative strength of a carpet and its centers: (1) symmetry; (2) positive and negative space; (3) levels of scale; and (4) distinctiveness.

He first examines the strong connection between centers and symmetry. By far, he says, most centers are symmetrical, with at least one bilateral symmetry (for example, the two centers above). There are some centers, however, that are not symmetrical, though, crucially, these centers, first, are almost always composed of smaller symmetrical centers; and, second, almost always contribute toward forming a larger symmetrical center.

Another crucial aspect of powerful centers is a strong use of positive and negative space so that every part of the carpet, from small to large, contributes to geometric pattern and interconnection. Particularly important is whether the ground space supporting a figure has its own sense of form and thus generates its own sense of center around the center that the figure itself makes. Alexander writes:

In a really good carpet, there is no distinction between figure and ground; every single piece of space, or almost every single piece, is a center; and the resulting density of centers is enormous, since there are centers everywhere, intertwining, interlocking, overlapping, and side by side (p. 53)

It is an almost infallible rule that the presence of beautifully organized centers in the 'negative' space is the clue to the beauty of a carpet. When the negative space is powerful, well-organized, we almost always have a design of power and beauty. When the negative space is poorly organized, shapeless, and lacks centers, we almost never have a carpet of any artistic value (p. 55).

## RANGE OF SCALE AND DIFFERENTIATION

Alexander points out that much local symmetry and good figure-ground relationships do not necessarily guarantee a powerful carpet. For example, an infinite chessboard of black and white squares has many symmetries and a strong sense of figure-ground yet poorly bears repeated viewings and quickly becomes uninteresting. This fact leads to a third central quality of strong centers—that they contain a range of scale—in other words, "a cascade of levels or steps in size" (p. 61). He explains:

...the real depth of any center comes from the fact that it exists, and works, at many levels simultaneously. In such a center symmetries and positive space do not occur only at a single level, but at many different levels, each one nested in the one above it, each being detailed, or 'having children' in the ones below it (p. 62).

One reason why later carpets are not as forceful as earlier carpets is because the weavers, no longer feeling a deeper sense of order, simplified this multileveled structure so that the careful weaving of many steps of scale gave way "to designs which have many fewer levels in them" (p. 62).

Alexander is definite about the amount of change these steps best involve to be most effective: each center must be roughly *one-third to one-half* the size of the next largest center. In this way, the range of levels provides a set of parts that are, at each scale, readily legible yet also part of a larger network that has its own cohesion and pattern. The result is an "ambiguous web where large and small are united to form a complete and seamless unity" (p. 62).

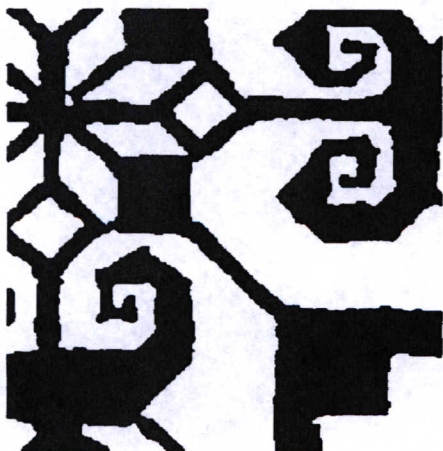
The fourth aspect of a powerful carpet relates to its centers being distinct: that each center is distinguishable and, therefore, set apart from the other centers around it. A design does not work, Alexander argues, unless it is made "of a number of distinct, identifiable entities, each with its own identity" (p. 63). Ways whereby the weavers created a strong distinctiveness include boldness of shape, contrast with adjacent centers, and strong color differences.

## AN EXAMPLE

Having sketched out Alexander's argument, I want to illustrate it with a specific example drawn from a pattern that he calls the Byzantine-Timurid prototype.

At one level, Alexander's general argument may seem obvious and even simplistic. Or, because of its circular quality (i.e., for a center to exist it must be part of other centers), one may find it difficult to grasp the argument in a way whereby it can be used to evaluate particular carpets.

I was discouraged by the book until chapter eight, which discusses the relationship of positive and negative space. I could not understand how some centers could be more dense and full than others. The discussion of the Byzantine-Timurid prototype opened something for me, especially the significance of positive and negative spaces that can readily reverse their roles and, therefore, make continuous interest for the eye. Suddenly--and I must say the moment was revelatory--I understood what the density of a center could be. Something in me realized that, yes, this book has much of the force and vision that so much of Alexander's other work has.



We begin with a small portion of the Byzantine-Timurid prototype shown above. Readers should use this pattern as a kind of phenomenological exercise--that is, what does one see and does that seeing change? What are the parts and patterns that contribute to this seeing?

Immediately, one notices that what is seen can

shift: first, the black patterns seem to be the "substance" of the pattern, but then one notices that the white patterns offer "substance" also. Negative and positive spaces are reversible. No space is wasted in the sense that every piece is contributing to the pattern seen.

As was explained above, Alexander argues that, crucial to wholeness, is the presence of many different centers of various scales, packed together to create a sense of density. What centers are present in this fragment? The smallest are the white diamonds that, together, make up the eight-pointed star in the upper left. On the right side of the star are black squares above and below. These squares are also centers, as are the black lines separating the diamonds that make up the star.

In turn, the black forms join together to make another large center that runs horizontally from the center of the white star to create an arrowlike structure with black spirals turned inward at its base. Further, these black spirals become "negative" space for an even larger white arrow that points diagonally toward the white star. Yet again, the black "negative" space between the white spirals of the white arrow becomes yet another center (a kind of flower upside down with a black diamond at the base of its stem).

In this small bit of pattern, then, we find several differently-sized centers that might be said to work at three levels of scale: the smallest, diamonds, squares, and spirals; next, the white star, black arrows, and black flower; and, largest, the white arrowheads pointing toward the star.

This density and hierarchy of centers, all interlocked so that positive and negative spaces readily reverse, is what Alexander calls *density*--a thickness of pattern and relationship. What is so striking is that this small portion--already quite full with centers--is part of a larger design (see front page) that is much more laden with centers. The reader might take time to study this larger pattern and work out at least a few of its centers, at different levels of scale.<sup>2</sup>

#### WHY A 21ST CENTURY ART?

One might wonder why the Sufi weavers could create such dense patterns of centers in their carpets and why we, as moderns, have such difficulty in seeing the carpets as systems of centers. The answer

to the first question relates to the weavers' seeking to use craft as a way to find "union with God" (p. 89). In this sense, the most important value of the carpets is not in their beauty but, rather, involves their ability to penetrate more deeply "into the human soul than other carpets do... their special worth is spiritual and religious—no only aesthetic" (p. 90).

At the same time, Alexander suggests that we 20th-century people are typically oblivious to the power of centers because of a Renaissance-inspired, anthropocentric view of the world that reduces all its contents and situations to what we can know and control as human beings. In regard to seeing the carpets, this perspective leads us to look for things and parts in the carpets rather than interlinkages and wholes:

Since "man" became elevated as the center of things [at the time of the European Renaissance], a sharp focus of attention on figure without ground became more and more common, while the unifying spiritual vision of the Middle Ages and of the Islamic world, in which every point of space was a spirit-carrying center, became forgotten (p. 274).

Thus, the title of Alexander's book: that the carpets of the past might become a harbinger of the art of the next century. He hopes that his understanding of the carpets will encourage artists, designers, and others to make things of equal completion and beauty.

## LINKS WITH DESIGN

Alexander believes that the heart of such 21st-century art will be *density*, since this is what the best and most beautiful carpets (or for that matter, any well-designed thing) possess. In all of his work, the aim is to understand the nature of density and to use that understanding for design and building. He explains that such understanding in architecture is not easy:

There, too, in making a building, one is searching for just such a center or pattern of centers—which contains within itself the full range of the relationships which I have been talking about—dense and self-sufficient. It may sometimes take weeks, months to find the necessary structure of a particular center. It is hard work—not at all the kind of thing where shapes merely drop off the pencil—instead it is hard wrought structure, found with pain and difficulty (p. 70).

Other than this comment, Alexander says little in *Foreshadowing* about how practically an understanding of carpet geometry might contribute to better architectural design. Rather, his main aim is to explore the carpets he loves and to allow them to open yet another path toward his interest in wholeness and beauty. He does mention several times in passing that his much longer work, *The Nature of Order*, will shortly be published and explore the nature of centers in much greater detail and demonstrate more direct significance for design and building.

It should also be mentioned that, in his earlier *A New Theory of Urban Design* (1987), Alexander has already applied the themes of density and centers directly to the making of urban neighborhoods. There, his description of the most beautiful towns and cities closely parallels the qualities of his finest carpets:

Each [town and city]... grew as a whole, under its own laws of wholeness... and we can feel this wholeness, not only on the large scale, but in every detail: in the restaurants, in the sidewalks, in the houses, shops, markets, roads, parks, gardens and walls. Even in the balconies and ornaments (1987, p. 2).

In *A New Theory*, Alexander draws heavily on the notion of centers to facilitate such environmental wholeness in our own time. He writes that any new element in the urban-design process, be it a building, open space, or outdoor furnishing unit, "must be a 'center' in itself, and must also produce a system of centers around it" (1987, p. 92). In *New Theory*, he presents a conceptual approach that might facilitate such centers, thus grounding the notion as it can have practical meaning for the making of places and buildings.

## COMMENTARY

How effective is *Foreshadowing* in getting the reader to accept Alexander's interpretation of the carpets? Overall, quite powerful, though, as I said above, the full sense of the argument does not become clear until midway through part I when the reader can really begin to see that some carpets are much more rich in centers than others and that this richness has a strong impact on what one sees in the carpet and how long its geometry holds his or her

attention.

At the same time, the book has its problems. When Alexander first introduces the notion of center, he does it rather sketchily, and readers are not sure what the very smallest unit to comprise a center might be (p. 37)—in fact, as far as I can determine, Alexander never really provides a clear answer to this question. Another problem is that, especially in his early discussion, he does not provide enough interpretation to help readers see how the centers he claims to be present are really there (e.g., p. 37, pp. 80-81, p. 156).

What I'm suggesting is that, because Alexander's way of seeing is innovative, the book would be better if the pace were a bit more slow and all carpet interpretations were better spelled out, at least the first several. Perhaps what is needed is an accompanying workbook with graded exercises that would begin with the most elementary sorts of centers and then proceed to more complicated examples. Also useful would be a set of exercises that examine weak carpets vs. carpets with dense systems (a task that is begun in the last part of the book).

In fact, a few times Alexander mentions exercises that he does with his design students—for example, having them draw a complex border pattern, which is almost impossible to do because they do not know how to pay attention to centers (p. 177).<sup>3</sup> How helpful it would be to have such exercises laid out directly so that the reader could have direct experience in looking and seeing!

When reading Alexander, the reader remembers the art works, objects, and places that have given happiness, wonder, and joy—some deep quality of presence and grace that makes life worth living. For Alexander, this quality in the carpets is "a feeling of an archaic soul produced in the shape alone" (p. 80). For the built environment, this feeling is much the same—a sense of relationship and rightness that makes one feel more full and whole. The obligation, says Alexander, is that the thing built must work "to create a continuous structure of wholes around itself" (1987, p. 22).

*Foreshadowing* is an integral contribution toward understanding wholeness and translating that understanding into practice. In this sense, it is central to Alexander's aims and is as stunning, at the level of

looking and explication, as the other volumes are in their efforts at praxis. What is perhaps most hopeful about the book, as with all of Alexander's work, is that it offers such well-argued evidence for the possibility of learning what genuine order is and someday transforming that learning into a concrete world, through a spiritualized design and policy.

—David Seamon

## NOTES

1. The other books in the series are: *A Pattern Language* (1977), with Sarah Ishikawa and Murray Silverstein; *The Timeless Way of Building* (1979); *The Oregon Experiment* (1975); *The Linz Café* (1981); *The Production of Houses* (1985) with Howard Davis, Julio Martinez, and Don Corner; *A New Theory of Urban Design* (1987), with Hajo Neis, Artemis Anninou, and Ingrid King. They are all published by Oxford University Press.

2. To describe all the centers in this larger design would require lengthy discussion, and, here, I highlight only a few. Note at the largest scale, the white Greek cross with spadelike arms; this cross is part of a larger center marked by the diamond in which it fits. At the next level of scale, one notes the many centers within the Greek cross. Besides the centers already highlighted above, there are the four black squares surrounding the white star, which, in turn make their own larger center of a black square behind the star.

There is also the black buglike pattern repeated in the four arms of the star: the bug's head is either diamond-shaped (horizontal) or hexagonal (vertical) with four legs (two spiralled, two right-angled). Note, crucially, that the white "negative" space around each bug also has its positive qualities: two white wafers in the middle of which each bug rests. Also within the large diamond containing the Greek cross are four white birdlike forms. The black space containing these birds is a triangle, yet another center.

In regard to overall scale, there is at least a threefold hierarchy: the largest centers of diamond and Greek cross; the next largest centers of white "wafers" and "bugs," black triangles and white birds, and central white star and black square; finally, the smallest centers: the diamonds of the star, the small black squares comprising the larger black square; the various parts making the "bug." In turn, the center of the large diamond interlocks with surrounding centers: for example, the black triangles with the white birds become arrow tips of a black spadelike center projecting diagonally inward toward the center of the Greek cross.

In short, there is a richness of centers, and all spaces of the whole work to create a great density of pattern.

3. "Even when they are trying to see centers, they often fail to see them all, and are not able to grasp how many centers there are in the design, how densely packed with centers it is" (p. 177).

## BUILDINGS, HOUSEHOLDERS, AND RECONFIGURING LIFE

Alfred Bay

**Alfred Bay** is an architect and builder. He recently completed his master's thesis in Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley. This essay includes excerpts from that work, which presented case studies looking at "issues of phenomenology and the building/design process." Address: 731 Colusa, El Cerrito, CA 94530.

In my fifteen years as a builder, I have undertaken numerous residential remodelling projects. Though often frustrating, these projects are fascinating in that they provide a direct view into people's lives--a special entry into the private domain of lived space. Gathered in by walls, floors, and roofs are personal modes of inhabiting, of making and taking possession of place.

In some way, always, the builder is not only reconfiguring the house but, pantographically, helping to reconfigure the lifeworld of the householder. There is a relationship between house and inhabitant (the simplest constituency making up a home) akin to that of psyche and soma: a change in one precipitates a change in the other.

As mind and body inextricably encounter the world together and so constitute a *being*, so does that taken-for-granted plexus of social and physical engagement--the lifeworld of the inhabitant together with the surrounding, inhabited, spatial environment--constitute *being-in-the-world*.

I suggest in this essay that, before every act of building, there is a disturbance or dissatisfaction in the lifeworld and that, beyond the act of building, is an image of a reconfigured world in which the physical and psychic modes of being sustain each other--a lifeworld made whole. And I suggest that the building process can be grounded in this realization and, looking beyond functional program, can aspire to such wholeness.

To illustrate this relationship between changing lifeworld and building program, I discuss three residential remodelling projects in which I was involved. In all three projects, I knew the clients socially before engaging them professionally and so have some authority for discussing the more private aspects of their lives.

### FAMILY W

Just this past summer, I was approached by a newly married couple whom I will call family W. They were buying a two-bedroom house and wanted to know how hard it would be to build an addition over the garage. This was the first marriage for Mr. W and the third for Mrs. W. She had a teenage daughter from her first.

"We'd like to give Anna more privacy, so she and her friends can come and go without disturbing us or without us disturbing them," Mrs. W explained as she sketched out a plan for a 400-square-foot master suite with a very large bathroom. Mrs. W had been in a car accident and wanted a large tub for hydrotherapy.

Opening onto both the bathroom and the bedroom was another small room.

"What's this?" I asked. "It looks like a nursery. Are you pregnant?"

She blushed and said, "Yes, but we've only told family."

### MRS. Q

Mrs. Q owned several houses in the neighborhood where I grew up. She sold them one by one and settled into what had been her mother's house, a two-bedroom, one-bath "bungalow" on an ample lot.

When her friend Larry fell ill with AIDS, she decided to add a wing to her house that would contain a small hospice where he could live. It would be an autonomous unit with bath, kitchen, living room and bedrooms, and would have a discrete entrance but be accessible to the heart of the main house so that Larry could have privacy or supervision as his desires and needs changed.

Larry died before we began construction, but Mrs. Q had a vision and adapted her plan. The hospice

became a rental unit for students from nearby Stanford University. This changed the program slightly. The importance of the separate entrance was increased, and Mrs. Q demanded visual separation between her yard and the new living kitchen and living room. But still, she wanted the possibility of easy communication between the apartment and the main house.

"The rent will pay for my winter vacations," she explained, "and someone will be around to keep an eye on the house. When I get old and decrepit, I'll take over Larry's place. And some young family can move into the main house and take care of me."

Her own children or grandchildren perhaps?

#### MRS. B

About the same time I began work for Mrs. Q, I was asked by the mother of a friend to renovate the kitchen of their 1960s open-plan home.

Being friends with one of the daughters, I knew this particular house. I had visited the family off and on during my high school years. I also was familiar with the generic problems of these aging tract houses, having repaired and remodeled a number of them.

Like most, this house had deteriorated: the roof leaked, the bathroom walls were mildewed to the point of rot; the veneer panelling was scarred and broken. The kitchen was in a similar state, though no better or worse than the rest of the house. But Mrs. B, as I shall call her, was adamant that what money she had should be spent in making the kitchen bright.

Mrs. B's husband had just died in the house after suffering a year of degenerative cancer. He had spent his last bedridden months in the living room adjacent to the kitchen. There, he had a view of the garden and could be part of daily family life. The I.V. poles

and other life-support paraphernalia were still scattered about when I began work.

#### TRANSFORMATIONS

Here, we have three cases of straightforward functional programs generated, apparently, by life-world change. The architectural solutions proposed in the cases of Mrs. Q and family W were intended to support the spatial demands of change.

More occultly, however, these solutions can be seen as physical modellings for the emergence of an extended lifeworld structure, literal *trans-form*-ations, gathering the old into the new while offering an armature around which the still-yet-to-come can in its turn gather.

Family W needed more room because another member would soon join the household; but more than that, they needed a house that would accommodate a more sophisticated juxtaposition of domains.

In selling the house that was the scene of her second marriage and buying a new (smaller) house only a few miles away, which would be the scene of her third, Ms. W was already making a statement that her life had a new structure.

In visualizing the house with a new arrangement emphasizing vertical separation (new husband, baby, and self upstairs; teenage daughter connected, but with some autonomy, downstairs) joined to a horizontal realm of communal areas, she was proposing a concrete way her two separate families might unite.

#### A LITERAL ATTACHMENT

Likewise, Mrs. Q, while embracing an architectural solution to immediate lifeworld needs, was also proposing a vision of how she would like her life to unfold. Income from the "rental" unit would provide



Sketch, house for family W

more amenity for her retirement years. I also happened to know, however, that her means were already sufficient.

In my assessment, what was more important than income was the literal attachment of people to her household. She had raised her children in another house a few blocks away—a great, wooden, three-story structure in a gorgeous yard across the street from the local grade school. Now she was alone—husband and children had left—and she wanted to ensure that she would remain at the center of a shifting constellation of young(er) people.

In making the first gesture towards Larry, quite consciously, I think, she was expressing the hope that, when *her* turn came, someone would do the same for her.

### A LOCUS OF RENEWAL

In the case of Mrs. P, the *gathering* was more impulsive—a single emphatic statement that, in the very presence of death, life goes on.

In the prototypical arrangements of many cultures, kitchen and hearth are the same. In houses today, they are almost always separated. Still, the hearth lingers on as a metaphorical heart(h) giving the animated heat of life to the home, while the kitchen continues as the hub of communal activity.

In the open plan of Mrs. P's house, the kitchen was the visual and geometric center of the communal areas. In designating it as the locus of renewal, she literally attacked the heart of the matter. In a single

In a single gesture both pragmatic (the kitchen *did* need repair) and symbolic, she was asserting the continuation of the household and the life it held. (And also, perhaps, her hold on the house.) It is interesting to note that the deathbed was positioned between the kitchen and the fireplace.

### GETTING BUILDINGS BUILT

But what does all this have to do with making buildings? That, after all, is the ultimate purpose of my work: getting buildings built so that they, in turn, may support a world to fulfill the clients' expectations and move them on towards their dreams.

In the case of Family W, *the what* remains to be seen, though I would guess that the new construction will read as a separate volume rising out of the mass of the old and that emphasis will be put on the connection between upstairs and down.

Looking back to Mrs. P's project, it is hard to say if my design for the kitchen upgrade (which was simple and straight forward) would have changed had I not known the circumstances in which the project was embedded. In other situations, I more likely would have encouraged the client to spend less money to bring one corner of the house to life and more money to repair other parts, such as the bathroom. My sense of Mrs. P, however, was that she really wanted one room in the house to sparkle.

In the case of Mrs. Q's addition, her shifting program did directly suggest a tri-partite plan. The end spaces evolved around the bath-kitchen nexus, and either end could be bedroom or sitting-room/-study, depending on the degree of connection or separation, privacy or supervision, desired.

Less consciously, my reading of Mrs. P's program appeared in the attention (both time and money) I devoted to the approach and entrance way. I generated this detailing in response to what I felt was one of Mrs. Q's driving, but not overtly stated, interests: to make the "little house" (she's come to call it that even though it's attached) a place of its own that would be honored and loved.

### CHANGING WORLDS

Whether our acts of building are as simple as arranging posters on a bedroom wall or setting a chair in a favorite sunny corner, or as involved as converting the mess hall of a children's camp into a house, we are remaking the world in our own image and, in the process, remaking ourselves in the image of that world.

In the examples above, I have tried to illustrate some possibility of relationship between lifeworld shifts and design. Building is a way in which we can literally change the structure of our world and thereby change the structure of our lives.

## HARD WATER WALKING

The first step is crucial:  
the ice along the shore is the weakest.  
Testing every step,  
we walk over to where  
a man is hard water fishing,  
as they say in Minnesota.  
But we are walking on a frozen lake  
on the northwest edge  
of the Flint Hills in Kansas.  
Surrounding hills cut the wind  
down to a stinging breeze.  
The silence is not absolute:  
ice creaks and booms, birds call, we speak.  
Yet the cold absorbs sounds  
as though it demands silence.  
Our words, common place really,  
take on a weightier meaning.  
Perhaps because what we do  
is dangerous or we think it is.  
We can see the ice  
is thick enough for safety.  
On spots bare of snow  
we marvel at the visible  
delicate structure which holds us,  
at how we can gage the depth  
from trapped air bubbles.

It is a matter of trust  
to walk on such glaring beauty.  
Yet during the Ice Ages  
people walked across the Bering Straits  
on a wide ice bridge.  
People still hunt mollusks  
under the Arctic ice when the tide is out.  
This knowledge does not  
lessen our sense of daring,  
our sense of hearing or motion.  
Still we shuffle, testing  
the middle of the lake,  
the center of ourselves.

—Gwendolyn Scott

*Scott is a landscape architect and poet.*

## AN AGING ACADEMIC AT A CONFERENCE

### I.

No writing yesterday,  
but presented a paper on the true ideal,  
a man I first met back in 1957.  
A colleague, a fellow not given to praise,  
except to himself, said it was great. So?

Reading Kerouac, since I'm in San Francisco,  
forty years into the past.  
The Beat Generation,  
between Korea and "Burn, Baby, Burn."  
The other side of Elvis?

The down-and-outs fill the sidewalk,  
as the Vietnamese open restaurants.  
Who will win this stretch of street?  
And why do porno shops open  
among those who have lost out, given up,  
Or, having found the edge, jump over?

From this hotel window and the view in Monterey?  
Both peer over roof tops of machinery to mountain horizons  
But in Mexico, the poor go to the mountain,  
and in Frisco, the rich monopolize it.

### II.

This spring morning, I turned the corner  
at my San Francisco Convention Hotel,  
heading toward the bay and saw  
St. Patrick in gothic  
announcement of Friday's Passion  
and, further on, a man in a suit,  
with coffee, doughnut, and portfolio,  
nod to the guard who sat in the glass foyer  
with clock and gun.

Last night, in the evening cool, I went forward  
into 24 Hour Video of Bondage, Butts, and Breastworks  
and, further on, passed a family of three,  
a holy trinity of homelessness,  
he with a beard and a credulous question,  
she with a plastic bag of possessions,  
and the daughter, a cotton mattress clutched  
between her ten-year-old arms.

—Miles Richardson

*Richardson teaches in the Department of Geography and  
Anthropology at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.*

## EAP SESSIONS AT EDRA

As explained on the front page of this issue, the 1995 Environmental Design Research Association's annual meeting will be held in Boston, March 1-5 at the historic Omni Parker House Hotel. EAP members Ingrid Leman Stefanovic and Duncan Case have organized the following EAP-sponsored events.

### Recovering Sense of Place: Research In Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology

This session presents work in environmental and architectural phenomenology, specifically in terms of its contribution to the recovery of sense of place in design. Dedicated to illuminating implicit, synergistic meanings arising within the complex interrelation between human beings and their lived spaces, phenomenology provides a rigorous, comprehensive supplement to traditional positivist planning perspectives.

Moreover, the phenomenon of "place" is clearly seen to be more than simply another category or element of design: as philosopher Edward Casey notes in his recent *Getting Back into Place* (1993), "to be is to be in place... The point is that place, by virtue of its unencompassability by anything other than itself, is at once the limit and the condition of all that exists."

In the absence of an understanding of the foundational phenomenon of place, environmental design may run the risk of remaining at the level of mere busywork.

The intensive will be organized in two, half-day sessions to address the following themes:

**The Ontology of Implacement:** What is the phenomenological method? How does it shed light on sense of place?

**Recovering Sense of Place: Design Initiatives:** What, specifically, does phenomenology have to offer to design practitioners?

This intensive is organized by Ingrid Leman Stefanovic and includes the following panelists:

- Margaret Boschetti, Possessions and Place-Making: An Interpretive Study of the Older Person's Experience
- Duncan Case, Phenomenology & Traditional Environment-Behavior Research
- Herb Childress, Path as Place
- Catherine Howett, Place Experience as a Catalyst for Community
- Douglas D. Paterson, Planning and the Creation of Good Place
- David Seamon, Goethe's Prism Experiments as Phenomenological Seeing
- Francis Violich, Ten Essential Properties of Identity with Place

### Qualitative Research & Pattern Language: Designing More Humane Living Environments

This workshop argues that both the means for collecting information and the means for applying it are important and that there is a necessary relationship between the two which needs to be given greater attention if environment-behavior research wishes to achieve its goal of more humane environments.

The position is taken that qualitative research and Christopher Alexander's Pattern Language provide an effective match of method and means which meets this goal.

Consideration is given to the possibility that qualitative research is better able to capture the "quality without a name" that drives Pattern Language and that Pattern Language may be better able to create humane living environments because it includes the "quality without a name."

Participants will reflect on experiences using Pattern Language and the relevance of using qualitative research in their development. Participants' topics are as follows:

- Duncan Case, workshop organizer, will use examples from his own work to provide a context for workshop discussion.
- Clare Cooper Marcus will reflect on her long-term commitment to generating user-oriented design guidelines and the benefit of using qualitative research in their development.
- Sarah Ishakawa, one of the co-authors of *Pattern Language*, will share her experiences and reflections on the application and development of Pattern Language since its inception.
- Tom Mitchell will provide reflections on the place of Pattern Language in the emerging practice of "soft design," a subject addressed in his recent *Redefining Designing* (1993).
- David Seamon will examine the sympathetic relationship between phenomenology and Pattern Language.

### Further information:

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For more information on EDRA or the conference, contact: PO Box 24083, Oklahoma City, OK 73124 (405-843-4863).

**Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology**, published three times a year, is a forum and clearing house for research and design that incorporate a qualitative approach to environmental and architectural experience. One key concern of **EAP** is design, education, and policy supporting and enhancing natural and built environments that are beautiful, alive, and humane. Realizing that a clear conceptual stance is integral to informed research and design, the editors of **EAP** emphasize phenomenological approaches to the environment but also cover other styles of qualitative, descriptive research.

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