

Commentary

The Structure That Structures Us

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Abstract

Christopher Alexander explored the world of built structures. He longed for buildings and spaces that touched and triggered our own psychological and spiritual structure. From his examples of spaces we experience as alive he distilled his Fifteen Properties: aspects and qualities in buildings that quicken us. As architects, we want to learn how we can create structures that embody the Fifteen Properties. Can we do so through consciously attempting to design them? In my experience of designing, we need more than a conscious attempt. We need an awareness of the goal of our designing. And Alexander himself gives us a glimpse of that goal in *The Linz Café*: Our goal is nothing short of designing as an offering to God. What might an offering to God mean? What might it mean as an attitude free from ideology or embalmed belief? The discoveries C. G. Jung made can help us get in touch with such a goal. Our goal is our own divine centre. Our challenge as architects is to open ourselves to the images and structures that appear on our paper or screens as we design. What is their source? Can we see ourselves in them? Can we meet our divine centre in them?

Keywords

divine centre; living structures; original experience

Issue

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Christopher Alexander has left us with wisdom in the form of quite a few buildings and quite a lot of words. How do we plough through the words to get to the essence of Alexander’s experience and message? How do we make Alexander’s experience our own experience? And how do we apply that experience in our own designing? We can begin by focusing on Alexander’s Fifteen Properties (Alexander, 2002, pp. 144–242). Their vignette drawings sum up the visual DNA of living structure (Alexander, 2002, pp. 239–242). Once we’ve acknowledged that the Fifteen Properties are truly accurate reflections of structures we experience as living, how do we give form to them?

We want to have centres in what we’re designing. That’s probably our first conclusion after meeting the Fifteen Properties. So we do our best to make centres in the designs emerging on our screens, on our paper, or in the exploratory models we make. But is that enough? My experience tells me it isn’t. Why?

Immediately I recall being in love and, for the first time, discovering how to express that love bodily. Does

it help to read about other people’s bodily positions? No, that would be like putting the cart before the horse. The horse is of course our own love, however young and inexperienced it may be. It’s the love that motivates us, that steers our energy toward our lover. It’s not a question of technique, of rules to follow, of a checklist to prove we’ve succeeded.

If our experience of love applies as well to our experience of designing and building, then we’ve already learned something essential. The source of making the centres in what we design and build is not a conscious choice or will. The source is far deeper, just as the source of our love is far deeper. We don’t choose to fall in love. Our love is given to us.

Alexander uses a vast number of words and thoughts in his attempts to persuade us he’s discovered something that’s objectively true. If we’re thinkers, the words may influence us, may even liberate us from a worldview we weren’t even aware of having. But if we long for something as direct and convincing as our experience of being in love, then we need something more than words,

something more than rational explanations, something more than the necessary critique of our current culture.

What is that something? That something is Alexander's intuition in *The Linz Café* (Alexander, 1981, p. 69):

If I look at the simplest snow hut made to cover hay in the Alps, or if I look at a great work, a wonder, like the Baptistery of Florence. . .there is, in them something which they have in common. . .they are both pictures of the human soul.

It is so easy to say this. . .and so hard to make it clear. But definitely, in a specific sense, the works of art which touch us, which evoke great feeling. . .are works which have consciously, and deliberately been created as offerings to God, as pictures of the universe, or of something that lies behind the universe. . .as pictures of the human soul.

In *The Linz Café*, Alexander does not develop his intuition further. In fact, he apologises for introducing God into his experience, since, as he explains, we live in an age of not faith (Alexander, 1981, pp. 69–72).

In the preface to the first book of *The Nature of Order* (Alexander, 2002, pp. 6–24), Alexander provides a convincing critique of our age of not faith. But he doesn't delve deeply into the source of that not faith.

In my experience and reflection, our age of not faith has a source, just as the Fifteen Properties have a source. That source is in fact a new faith. The new faith teaches

us that our rather primitive scientific method is the only credible source of our knowledge, and indeed of our faith, of what we truly can accept as meaningful.

The new faith teaches us not to talk about God because God, it professes, can only be ideological. And of course it is indelibly true that our species has committed dreadful sins in the name of our various gods.

This scientific method has led many of us to accept a life limited to cognition and the physical attributes of our brains. But the scientific method has also led us to study the depths of our soul, our unconscious, our experience beneath and beyond our thinking and reasoning. What has it helped us to discover?

Let's begin not with the theory, not with the reflection, but with the evidence. The evidence is the structure of the mandala (Figure 1).

If we look at this sand mandala without thinking about it, we easily meet the structure of Alexander's Fifteen Properties. Boundaries contain centres. Other boundaries contain previously contained centres. The order and the colours touch us, enliven us, quicken us. They make us feel alive.

We can study the Hindu origins of the sand mandala. We can also study the work of Carl Jung, who found in the mandala an image of the human psyche or soul. After years of encountering the inner lives of clients, after years of searching for meaningful images in human history, Jung settled on the mandala as an image of the structure of the human psyche or soul (Stevens, 1990, pp. 27–53). Jung described the centre of the mandala as our original experience of life, just as the centre of a



Figure 1. Chenrezig sand mandala. Source: Wikimedia Commons (2008).

living cell. In our original experience of life, we're not conscious. But our life is divine, not of our choosing, not of our making (Jung, 1977, p. 104). It's simply life: in us and beyond us.

In our development, we move away from our divine centre. We become aware of distinctions: night and day, mother and breast, brother and beast, mine and thine. Our ego is born. We need our ego in order to live in the world. But there's more to our world than our ego. And our own experience of developing reminds us what that is. It's our lifegiving origin. It's our divine origin. We could easily describe it as the God whom we design and build for.

The God whom we design and build for: This god lives in the centre of the mandala of our soul or psyche. This god is not an ideological god, not an article of faith. This god is an essential part of who we are. This god is our own centre. God as our own centre! Something new? Something astonishing? Something vaguely familiar? Something to be thankful for. Something that gives us energy. Something we want to build on, and for.

Why can't we, in whatever age we live in, devote our designs and buildings to God? What would stand in the way of our wish to thank our own divine source of life? Ideology. Peer pressure. A devotion to the smaller gods of design programmes and functionality and sustainability. All these influences are undeniably articles of faith. But the only article of faith we can ground in our own lives is the divine centre that gave us life, that structured and structures us, that can structure the structures we design and build.

Why shouldn't we be who we already are? Why shouldn't we open ourselves to the structure that struc-

tures us? If we're in contact with that inner structure—with our own inner structure—then that structure will automatically structure the designs we draw and build. If we design and build as an offer of thanks to our divine source, we'll find both the psychic energy and the wisdom to make living structures.

We need more than a checklist of an ideal design. We need to remember and to reconnect with the source of the structure that structures the Fifteen Properties. We need to reconnect with the structure that structures us. And then we can build a world that embodies that living structure.

Let's design and build as an offer of thanks to the structure that structures us!

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author



Jaap Dawson: Why was I as a boy fascinated by spaces and buildings? Why did I want to design them? What did they do for us? In my first study of architecture, at Cornell, I found no answers. I only learned there was apparently only one way to design, and that was according to the rules and vision of Modernism. Years later, when I took a course in depth psychology at Union Theological Seminary (as part of my doctoral study in education at Columbia) I encountered C. G. Jung. Jung helped me return to what I had known as a boy: we play and live not from the physical spaces we dwell in but from the inner spaces we carry within us. After my dissertation I moved to the Netherlands, the country my maternal ancestors had come from. I studied architecture again, this time in Dutch. And this time I was passionately interested in making buildings and spaces that reflected the inner spaces we dwell in. Along the way Alexander helped me, together with Léon Krier, Louis Kahn, and Dom Hans van der Laan. I taught architectural composition in Delft till my mandatory retirement in 2013.