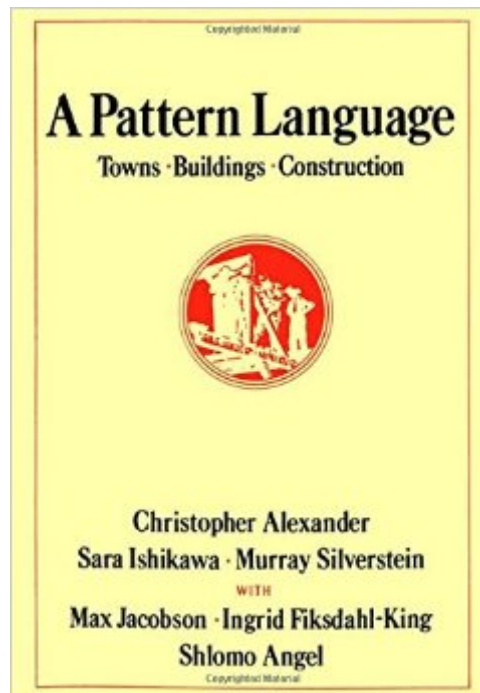# A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction (Center For Environmental Structure)

Synopsis

You can use this book to design a house for yourself with your family; you can use it to work with your neighbors to improve your town and neighborhood; you can use it to design an office, or a workshop, or a public building. And you can use it to guide you in the actual process of construction. After a ten-year silence, Christopher Alexander and his colleagues at the Center for Environmental Structure are now publishing a major statement in the form of three books which will, in their words, "lay the basis for an entirely new approach to architecture, building and planning, which will we hope replace existing ideas and practices entirely." The three books are The Timeless Way of Building, The Oregon Experiment, and this book, A Pattern Language. At the core of these books is the idea that people should design for themselves their own houses, streets, and communities. This idea may be radical (it implies a radical transformation of the architectural profession) but it comes simply from the observation that most of the wonderful places of the world were not made by architects but by the people. At the core of the books, too, is the point 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 forma system which gives them coherence. This book provides a language of this kind. It will enable a person to make 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 pattern language are given: each consists 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 seemly likely that they will be a part of human nature, and human action, as much in five hundred years as they are today.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

My fascination with Christopher Alexander's work began with "The Timeless Way of Building," but increased tenfold upon discovering his inexhaustible classic, "A Pattern Language." At over a thousand pages (I think,) "A Pattern Language" is an encyclopedic study of what makes buildings, streets, and communities work -- indeed, what makes environments human.Alexander and his co-authors present us with over two hundred (roughly 250) "patterns" that they believe must be present in order for an environment to be pleasing, comfortable, or in their words, "alive." The patterns start at the most general level -- the first pattern, "Independent Regions," describes the ideal political entity, while another of my favorite patterns, "Mosaic of Subcultures," described the proper distribution of different groups within a city. The patterns gradually become more specific -- you'll read arguments about how universities should relate to the community, the proper placement of parks, the role of cafes in a city's life. If you wonder about the best design for a home, the authors will describe everything from how roofs and walls should be built, down to how light should fall within the home, where your windows should be placed, and even the most pleasant variety of chairs in the home. An underlying theme of all the patterns is that architecture, at its best, can be used to foster meaningful human interaction, and the authors urge us to be aware of how the houses we build can help us balance needs for intimacy and privacy.They admit that they are uncertain about some of the patterns -- they indicate their degree of certainty using a code of asterisks placed before the pattern.

Nominally about architecture and urban planning, this book has more wisdom about psychology, anthropology, and sociology than any other that I've read. Nearly every one of this volume's 1170 pages will make you question an assumption that you probably didn't realize you were making. In a section entitled "Four-Story Limit", Alexander notes that "there is abundant evidence to show that high buildings make people crazy." Underneath is a photo of San Franisco's Transamerica tower, captioned with a quote from Orwell's 1984: "The Ministry of Truth--Minitrue, in Newspeak--was startlingly different from any other object in sight. It was an enormous pyramidal structure of glittering white concrete, soaring up terrace after terrace 300 metres in the air." Alexander backs up

this polemic with convincing arguments that high-rise living removes people too far from the casual society of the street, from children playing in the yard, and that apartment-dwellers therefore become isolated. Alexander spends a lot of time in this book trying to figure out how to restore the damage to our communities that have been done by automobiles. He argues for better public spaces and for more integration of children, old people, and workers. He argues for more access to water by more people. Many of Alexander's arguments are against the scale of modern systems. Public schools spend a fortune on building and administration precisely because they are so physically large [I've seen statistics showing that our cities spend only about one-third of their budgets on classrooms and teachers].

I've read all three books in this series, and I thought this was by far the best and most accessible. The first, "A Timeless Way of Building", introduced the author's philosophy and was, I thought, a bit bogged down with New Age jargon. I prefer to think in terms of comfort and relationships, though ultimately I agree with just about everything the author-as-designer states and obviously went on to read his other work. I thought the third book, photographs of a project completed by the author, should have been the most informative, but ultimately didn't do justice to the author's ideas. But maybe it was just the poor quality of the pictures. IMHO this is the masterpiece of the trilogy. Its concern is the practical application of the author's ideas, and one could only wish to live or work in a space designed with this philosophy. His thinking is pragmatic AND beautiful, bringing balance and harmony to space.Having made the case for his system of architectural and social design in his earlier work, the author here goes on to formalize a system of 253 patterns, ranging in scale from towns down to benches. Patterns 1 through 94 define a town or community; numbers 95 through 204 define (groups of) buildings; and numbers 205-253 define a "buildable building". The individual patterns are themselves evocative and inviting, and cover a myriad of human social and environmental relationships: number 1 is Independent Region, pattern 2 is Distribution of Towns, 10 is Magic of the City, 57 is Children in the City, number 62 is High Places, number 63 Dancing in the Street, 94 is Sleeping in Public, 203 Child Caves, 223 Deep Reveals, 235 Soft Inside Walls, 253 Things from Your Life.

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