BOOK REVIEW

THE TIMELESS WAY OF BUILDING

Christopher Alexander

Reviewed by Ar. Humaira Nazir*

One of the most interesting treatise authored by Christopher Alexander is "The Timeless way of Building" that was first published in 1979 by Oxford University Press. The author of the book Christopher Alexander is an architect. Besides an architect, he is a lover of mathematics and science. He got his childhood education in sciences and after earning Bachelor's degree in Architecture, he pursued his education and got Master's degree in Mathematics and then PhD in Architecture from Harvard University. As an architect he searched for beauty and tried to look for a "view of design", how to design, what to design and how science and mathematics can contribute to design. He felt the need for theory to support the "view of design" which can help obtain a product. His search for theory is presented in his book "Timeless way of building".

Christopher searched for architecture which is extracted from an understanding of the proportions in nature, building materials and context and which is an extension of nature. He talks about how nature is stabilized in beautiful and poetic way thoug natural processes. Alexander emphasizes on how building can be extensions of nature.

He suggests that buildings should grow like nature and growth of the buildings should depend on the "life of inhabitants" and not on the principles of construction. When this "life" is happy, free and at peace then it leads to humans becoming a part of the place as much as the place becomes a part of humans.

The book is framed in an unusual architectural text in which Alexander describes his concept in the headings that provide an overview of his whole theory, followed by detailed description of each theory. It provides a poetic viewpoint of the built environment in a precise and concrete way. His theory is based on the language patterns that are used to discuss and create architecture. This language pattern is the main core of the book and is outlined in ten chapters, supported with specific examples for better understanding.
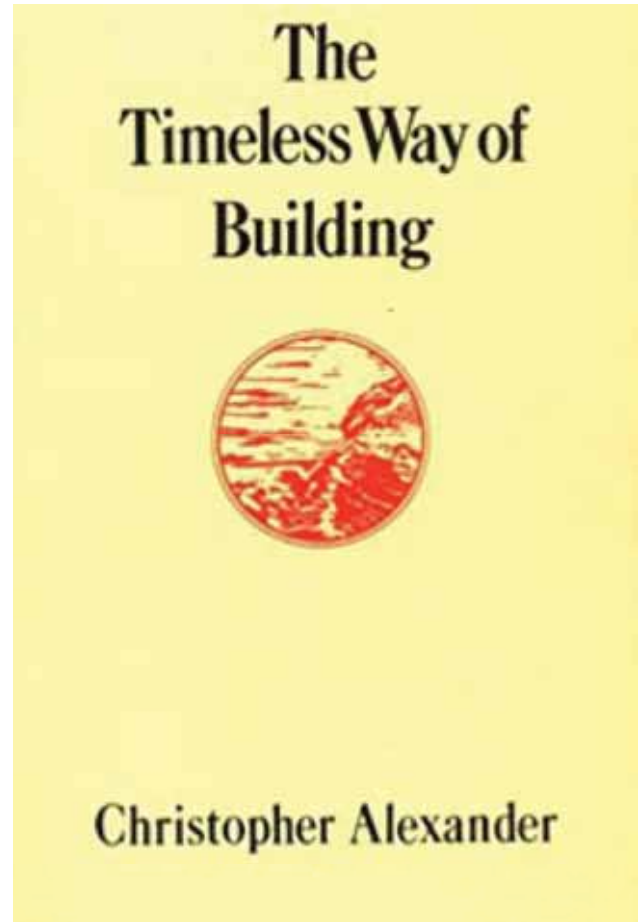
Black and white illustrations and thumbnail sketches are used throughout the book, some of which are given references while some are just visual representation to support the text.

The book is arranged in "three parts" and each part explores many theories. One part of the book consists of the "complexity theory", another part is related to the "architectural and city planning theory", and yet another part is a "spiritual treatise". In the introductory part of the book Alexander states that there is only one way of building that is "timeless" and this is essential and indispensable, as

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a timeless building never gets old with the passage of time, and the more it ages the more value is added to it.

Next three sections of the book are named as "The Quality", "The Gate" and "The Way". In the first part Alexander defines the quality that is nameless and undefinable, but exists and is recognizable. This quality is self-generated and cannot be made. The building with this nameless quality can not be separable from nature, but is a part of it. Qulaity without name does not mean that it is ambiguous or not specific but this quality gives the feeling of liveliness,

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Quality
without   ⟶   Objective + Precise
name
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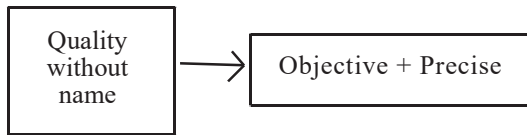
as a whole, as comfortable, as egoless, as eternal and free. The quality is dependent on inner feelings and emotions. Some places adhere to this quality and some do not. The key to recognizing this quality is the "pattern of events" which are happening at a particular place. These patterns define the character of towns, buildings or places and are influenced by the inhabitants. These events are not specifically human events but include events like wind blowing, water flowing and weather patterns. Pattern of events are also created by culture and transferred by it. Pattern of events are linked with the pattern of spaces. When these interrelate with each other, a slightly different arrangement is made at everyplace. It is defined as:

According to Alexander patterns are either dead or alive. Alive patterns help resolve the inner conflicts of people

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Pattern of Event + Pattern of Space
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Elements of People and Culture
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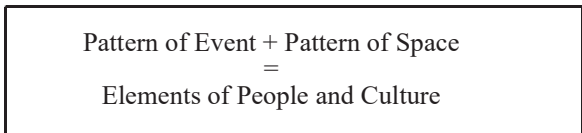
while dead patterns make the inner conflicts and feelings alive. Patterns are also repeated but repetition is dependent on the context. In every context these patterns possess unique characters. The same character is also possessed by nature.

The second part of the book entitled "The Gate" is the heart of Alexander's proposed theory. It is the most convincing part that defines the pattern language. It illustrates the use of pattern language by giving the example of barns. This pattern language is obtained through existing examples of patterns that are required to discover, and is used with some modifications feasible in different context. Alexander states, "pattern language are finite system of patterns that allow us

to make infinite system of unique patterns appropriate to different context".

According to Alexander the function of patterns is to identify the problems and provide solutions that fit in the specific

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Pattern   ⟶   A filed   ⟶   Not Fixed
          ⟶   Not generated
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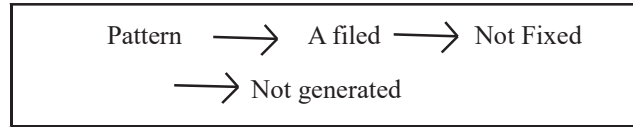
context. Pattern language provides a framework in which patterns enable to solve a specific problem by balancing two conflicting forces. It has the following generic form. Patterns create relationship between the context and the system of forces that arise into that context, and suggest configurations

• Context   • System of forces

• Configuration
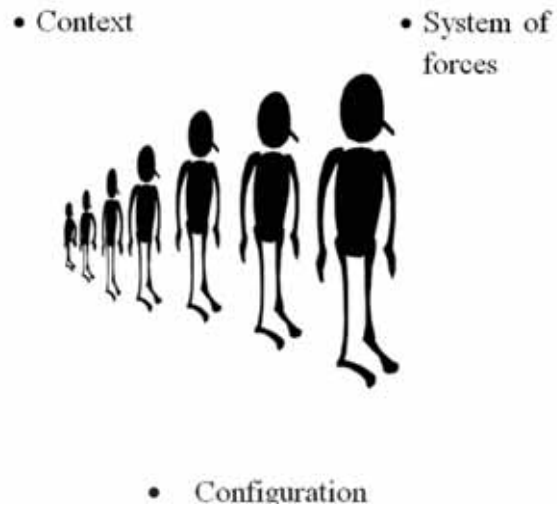
that allow these forces to resolve themselves.

In the last part Alexander describes the use of pattern language in the architectural participatory design. He explains how people can share pattern language to design towns, cities and the neighborhoods. He suggests that it is not necessary to draw buildings on paper, but they can be built by multiple language patterns from marks on ground.

Overall, this publication is about how the built environment that must be an extension of the natural environment. Alexander successfully generates a vocabulary to design spaces, focused on human architecture that does not lack scale and proportion and is inspired by nature. The people who occupy these spaces do not feel isolated.

This book itself is a timeless classic. Generally, the holistic language of this book makes it timeless. The tone used by

Alexander is easily understandable but it is also self-congratulatory at times. The writing style of the book gives a feeling of reading a religious book of architecture and reads meditative centering than as a practical exercise. This is not a practical book of architecture but is an exploration of human life. Every concept is summarized in short sentences, as well as discussed in detailed paragraphs because the author wants to give an overview of his ideas initially before going into the details. It is a good idea to give an overview of the concept first but it is at times disturbing as well because the tone changes in every heading, which distracts the flow of the reader. On the other hand, the spiritual terminologies used to frame the concept are alien to many readers, but at the same time this is also the strength of book. Furthermore, some positioning patterns are discussed in the center of the book, which it raises questions about how a transition is to be made to the ideal state and the answer of this question is not found in the book. It also feels that Alexander speaks to the reader as a "believer" rather than as a theorist. Despite these lackings it is nonetheless an essential publication that every planner, architect and designer must read because it is one of the most fascinating books on space design.