

A PATTERN LANGUAGE: TOWNS, BUILDING, CONSTRUCTION

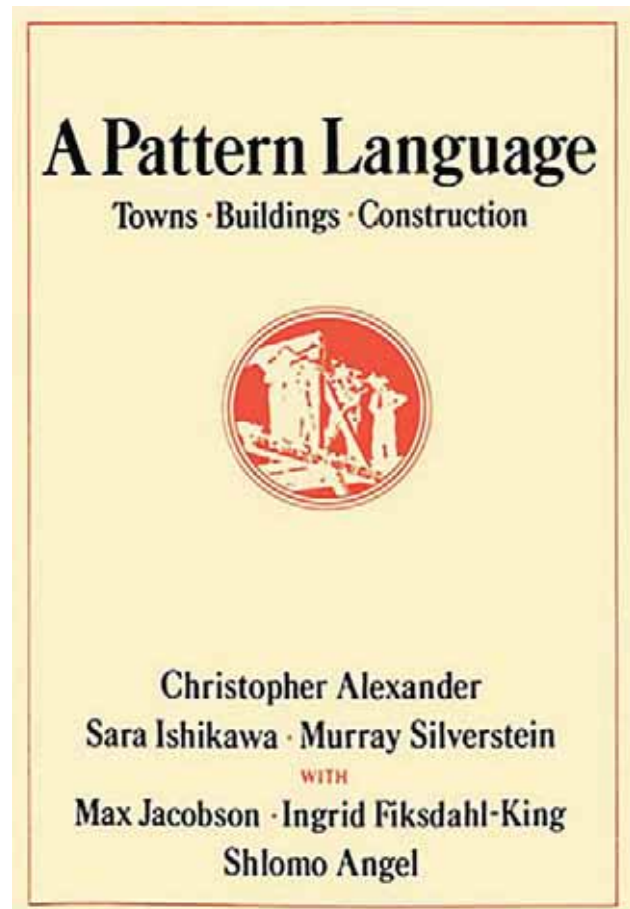
*Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein,
Max Jacobson, Ingrid Fiksdahl King and Shlomo Angel*

Reviewed by Humaira Nazeer*

Late 1900s experienced the lack of fusion of personal and professional environments, with the alienating impact of poor design and architecture. It was, therefore, important to create a link between life at work and at the house, for the health of the residents and to promote happiness. To this end, the participation of the local residents in the task of improving and designing their own cities and houses were encouraged by presenting a treatise "A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction".

A Pattern Language (1977), an instructive and a timeless classic volume on architecture, urban planning and living in a society, authored by architect, design theorist, designer, mathematician, and a former pupil of Harvard Graduate School of Design Christopher Alexander (Ph.D. '63). Alexander is also known as an Archimedes of urban planning, together with five of his colleagues at the University of California's Center for Environmental Structure, Berkeley. The book uses architecture, sociology, psychology, and anthropology to define the architectural settings that are most satisfying. In a nutshell, the philosophy of the book is that people always depend on several languages in developing their environments which, like the languages, they converse in, enable them to express and articulate an endless variety of projects, within a formal process that gives them cohesion. This purely utilitarian philosophy is explained in the context, that utility and functionality combine the requirement for aesthetics, sunshine and relation to the outdoors and religious conviction. All of these are also essential necessities for survival, apart from other basic types of utilities like shelter, place to keep your jackets and shoes when you enter a house, etc. This philosophy raises the question of what the requirements of a society are and, on that basis, provides a language for patterning cities and buildings.

The uncommon, yellowish covered textbook is divided into three parts: cities, buildings and construction. It sets out over eleven hundred useful pages, with the two hundred and fifty three patterns, that act as archetypal elements of design.



These are profoundly rooted in the nature of objects, that together form a "language" to talk of an unlimited diversity of designs, beginning with the layout of cities and continuing down to how to place lamps and shelves in the house. Big patterns for village towns, cities, community borders and roads surrounding the towns, are discussed in details and with small patterns for neighborhood cafés, pedestrianized streets and paths, medieval town's street patterns, foyers, fruit trees, manure, niches, fireplaces, private play spaces of children, dancing in the street and architecture of semi-independent neighborhoods within bigger cities.

* Humaira Nazeer, Lecturer, Sir Syed University of Engineering and Technology, Karachi.
Email correspondance: architect.humaira@gmail.com

Patterns are fundamental to know whether our towns and living spaces are ailing. The pattern comprises of statements of those environmental issues that usually happen with the discussion of the problem, with an example and a solution. Design issues, such as how high the sill of a window should be? how many floors will there be to a building? how much land will grass and trees be given in a neighborhood? and how to create a better townscape with various identifiable parts of the village are touched in the book. Suggestions about fencing, a lilac, a footpath, a wall, a front gate, and a roof amongst others, are given in the text. The premise here is that, each part has to connect with the other parts in order to build a place that can only be that place in the globe. Other the issues touched are about situating the rooms in a house for natural ventilation, light and dark, that of flow of activity and of the absence of copulation between couples when kids are there. The solution is suggested to provide realms of private "couple," a world where the man and woman's relationship, their innermost desires, can be expressed and lived through.

In short, the writers provide a timeless way to explain the "how and why" of constructing structures and community by moving from the macro to the micro features of design..

It is a special, enjoyable treatise in which the writers focus on how design should try to make people feel more relaxed, successful and happy in their life. Overall, it is an idealistic book that imagines a world where people strive to give everyone what they require. It is all about how we reside independently and together as citizens; and how the structures that we create around these lives either enhance or distract from that experiences. The authors, are quite outspoken and do not shy away from informing people confidently what the problematic is with the physical structures of the metropolitan, suburban, and rural parts of the country. The authors are enthusiastic and have logic about what they choose to believe. They have tried to build a sustainable urban and residential development process and have offered a variety of thought-provoking methods of implementing their dreams.

One of the strengths of this book is that it sticks out from many other books, as it does not say all rules are set in one size and scale. Rather, based on the particular conditions,

a design can blend patterns in various ways. This is an expression of outstanding technical prose. It offers universal, interlinked concepts that can be viewed in any order and that guide the reader directly to other patterns that might attract them. Almost every 's second page of the book includes an instruction to establish rules that follow the patterns described in that chapter and address the need to do so. Each pattern has multiple stars associated with it. Four stars mean the writer is pretty confident that there are no other patterns of similar value for this particular subject. One star indicates it is a good pattern, but there may be certain patterns that can also work well for a particular purpose. The writers have a proposal for almost everything, where example where there are houses, where one work should , what one should do, where one needs to go for shopping and where one should relax. All the patterns are carefully laid out. A few of the patterns have also been criticized, specifically, those that connect with the architecture of cities and villages, however generally, the patterns offer a valuable guideline to what creates a comfortable place.

In general, the language of the text is very easy to read and apart from being a lengthy book, the whole text is divided into three to ten subjects which are very easy to pick and study. The text is a reflection of its time. The universal characteristics of the human mind and body are expressed in many concepts and it appears to be a companion to "The Timeless Way of Building." This book touches upon all the areas of American life, besides than specific civic codes.

One of the weaknesses of this tome is that there is no proper contents' page which the reader can refer to, two hundred and fifty three patterns in the content's table are displayed only as three. In addition, a few mistakes in the format of text are noticed, a few titles are not in capital letters, and some text that ought to be bold is not. Certain concepts are outdated, contradictory, or ambitious and misleading. Often the text seems highly focused on homes of North America, even though it is a visionary creation.

It is recommended that anyone engaged in the human-built-environment study must read this book. I also suggest that policy-makers and planners should refer frequently to this book. I strongly recommend it to students too.