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Commentary

Christopher Alexander As An Architectural Thinker

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Abstract

In this commentary the author discusses why Christopher Alexander remains on the margins of contemporary architectural discourse despite his original, important, and lasting contributions to the field. Being a somewhat controversial figure in architecture and architectural theory, Alexander has occupied the status of a seminal albeit not always adequately understood and interpreted author. The rejection and misinterpretation of his ideas are due to multiple reasons, including his refusal to act and write as a standard scholar and his lack of interest in appealing to his professional community. While his attitude perhaps explains the neglect of his intellectual legacy, it does not justify it. A reconsideration of his legacy could benefit from rethinking his intellectual identity. This commentary suggests that Alexander should be approached as an original architectural thinker rather than a standard architectural academic. Thus, he could be comparable to other renowned figures of the modern era, including such influential yet often misunderstood social thinkers as Ivan Illich or Jacques Ellul.

Keywords

architectural discourse; architecture; Christopher Alexander; modernism; patterns

Issue

This commentary is part of the issue “Assessing the Complex Contributions of Christopher Alexander” edited by Michael W. Mehaffy (Sustasis Foundation) and Tigran Haas (KTH Royal Institute of Technology).

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1. Introduction

The impact and influence of Christopher Alexander on architecture and architectural theory, as well as on other fields (including computer science and software engineering), is undeniable. Most of his books have been and continue to be widely read, discussed, debated, and criticized. Though his *A Pattern Language* is often mentioned as a perennial best-seller in the field of architecture and urbanism (Dawes & Ostwald, 2017), Alexander remains a lonely, somewhat isolated, and contested yet towering figure. A lot of his critics are inclined to dismiss him or belittle his contributions to architecture and urbanism, suggesting that his writings lost their importance long ago, though most agree that he was influential in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, Peter Eisenman, his opponent in the renowned Harvard debate in 1982, remarked that Alexander “fell off the radar screen” (Alexander & Eisenman, 2004). There is no lack of similar opinions. The reviewer of a new edition of Roger

Scruton’s *Aesthetics of Architecture* took the opportunity to emphasize that authors with whom the English philosopher shared his view of architecture are no longer key figures in architectural discourse:

Alexander and Krier briefly occupied a position of influence in the 1980s and 1990s—the heydays of postmodernism—but their intellectual impact has largely withered away due to the renewed prominence of modernism and modernity, in all their complexities, as the main point of reference. (Heynen, 2017, p. 208)

Some recent studies have presented a detailed account and classification of critical responses to Alexander’s concept of patterns that provide a broader picture of his critical reception (Dawes & Ostwald, 2017). Unsurprisingly, quite a number of these responses question his approach and methods. Occasionally, even some of his former students and collaborators doubt the validity of his concepts

and dispute their applicability in architectural practice (Angel & Salingaros, 2022).

Nevertheless, the problem remains. How should Alexander's legacy be interpreted in the present context now that architectural modernism and industrial design have largely won their war on tradition and its discourse has not only become dominant in the West but also been successfully imposed on non-Western cultures as everywhere modernism was embraced by the architectural profession and the building industry? Did he lose his life-long battle or the war? Can his contested legacy be meaningfully adopted to the needs of the present and future? Was he a scholar or a thinker?

2. Patterns and Beyond

Nikos Salingaros recently discussed the reasons for Alexander's failure to convince the architectural community that his concepts provided the key to many problems of architectural and urban design practice. Salingaros insists that the discipline of architecture (including practitioners and academia) is largely to be blamed for rejecting Alexander's ideas, which remain synchronous with most recent scientific discoveries, neuroscience being one of the fields to support his untimely concepts of patterns and phenomena that he called quality without a name (Salingaros, 2021). Shlomo Angel, on the contrary, sees the roots of the problem not so much within the architectural community and/or its habits of thinking and acting but in Alexander's flawed strategy of communication. According to Angel, "Alexander was not able to influence the practice of architecture significantly because he did not 'recognize' the architects. He never acknowledged that architects have a role in creating the built environment. He wanted to talk directly to 'users'" (Angel & Salingaros, 2022, p. 388). Even Per Galle (2020, p. 347), who is sympathetic to Alexander's ideas, acknowledges that his writings "sometimes verge on the edge of eccentricity."

All this seems puzzling, bearing in mind that Alexander was not just some eccentric author putting together strange and incomprehensible ideas but a sensible, hard-headed practitioner who implemented many architectural projects on several continents and spent decades teaching in academia. Alexander, as an architectural designer and author, was concerned with practical as well as metaphysical questions (Alexander, 2001–2005) and "advocated a logical, objective approach to design" (Stenson, 2009, p. 22). Besides, his work with his clients is described as "collaborative" (Galle, 2020, p. 346).

On the other hand, his impact on architectural theory is indisputable. A recent look at Google Scholar confirms that Alexander has accumulated an impressive amount of no less than 39,735 citations (last accessed on February 3rd, 2023). In this respect, he far surpasses any other contemporary architectural theorist, including those currently in fashion.

3. Challenging the Sacred Cow

Alexander was highly critical of the developments in architectural modernism, especially the cultural, social, and aesthetic consequences of this omnipotent cultural and aesthetic ideology. As modernism (and a multitude of its avatars) largely remains a sacred cow in the community of architects, Alexander's ideas are generally rebuffed without convincing arguments being provided. In this sense, it seems like he crossed the limits of discourse acceptable to most members of the architectural profession.

Nevertheless, his critical view of modernism, his attitude towards his professional community, and the controversial reception of his writings among members of the architectural discipline evoke parallels with other important intellectual figures of the last century. The philosophers and social critics Ivan Illich and Jacques Ellul seem to match Alexander both in their critical inquiries into modernity and its technologies as well as in their controversial reception by their professional communities. Being educated as a philosopher, Illich chose to speak to other communities and society at large, while Ellul crossed the boundaries of sociology and entered the realm of philosophy to unwrap the role of technology in modern society. Consequently, Illich is described by a friend and intellectual biographer as a "contradictory" figure—a "modern man who wanted to be 'a reminder of the past'" yet who remained a thinker of high integrity (Cayley, 2021, p. 467). Both Illich and Ellul set out to dismantle the "certainties" of modernity and challenged the assumptions shared by their peers. Alexander walked in the same direction.

Here is the rub. Modern professional consensus is based on doxa rather than on episteme. Alternative views are tolerated only if they do not challenge doxa and threaten the accepted mainstream paradigm. Thus, the problem that persists in the discipline of architecture (both in practice and in academia) is the uncritical adulation of modernism that verges on fundamentalism, despite continuous attempts to unpack this stale cultural ideology (Blake, 1978, 1996; Curl, 2018; Gablik, 1984; Mehaffy & Salingaros, 2015; Millais, 2009; Samalavičius, 2017).

4. Controversies and Beyond

Alexander has often been described as a controversial figure. Yet this description has become almost a cliché that does little to explain his importance. Paradoxically, the fervor with which Alexander's views are disputed attests to his enduring importance as a social and architectural thinker. Though some of the critical reactions to his writings are well-justified and reasoned (e.g., the dubiousness of some of his recommended patterns or occasional discrepancies between structures designed according to prescribed patterns and truly beautiful buildings that do not necessarily correspond to them), many of the usual

critical responses fail to go beyond the rhetorical layers of Alexander's writings. Some of the criticism is simply shallow, such as the complaints that he used his own designs as examples of "living structures" in his books (were Le Corbusier or R. B. Fuller any different?) or that some of the images he provided lack quality. The insistence on the scarcity of non-Western material is also pharisaic, as Alexander was developing his own concepts rather than documenting any historical developments. These shortcomings, however, are often disproportionately escalated to cosmic dimensions.

His writings do contain internal contradictions, yet contradictions are inevitable for any serious attempt at revealing truth. While episteme inevitably contains some contradictions, doxa does not. These contradictions require further scrutiny.

5. Conclusions

It is obvious that Alexander has been and remains marginalized in the architectural profession. Nevertheless, this does not allow one to conclude that he has had no impact on the architectural or urban discourse since his popularity waned in the 1980s and 1990s. Like other original and non-conventional social thinkers who refrained from focusing on their professional communities, Alexander consciously distanced himself from his peers and the mainstream doxa. This enabled him to bypass the influence of architectural modernism, pursue his goals without falling prey to this architectural ideology, and develop his own (oppositional and meaningful) ways of seeing architecture and the built environment. His legacy, however, might be sustained best by further developing some of his most promising ideas and concepts as well as patiently drafting and implementing new educational programs (e.g., Building Beauty) rather than debunking criticism.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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