

Everything is Somewhere



By Angus W. Stocking, LS

Angus W. Stocking works for MSA Professional Services, Inc., in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. His coworkers have had just about enough of this 'graphical excellence' stuff.

Life, the Nature of Order, and Everything

In my December 2004 column I briefly profiled architect Christopher Alexander and alluded to his current project, the four-volume *Nature of Order*. This column reviews the first book of the set, *The Phenomenon of Life (TPoL)*, and next month the second book, *The Process of Creating Life*, will be considered.

Alexander defines 'life' very broadly, and believes that it exists in the world around us in varying degrees—a quality inherent in all things, not solely a property of plants and animals. This is not a particularly radical belief. It's a tenet of Buddhism and Taoism, and is beginning to find adherents among some scientists. The thing is, it's hard to define life in a way that includes creatures like animals and insects, but *excludes* things like crystals or complex computer programs. Viruses are a good example of the difficulty; are they intricate crystals that self replicate in certain animals, or are they living beings in their own right? Ask a biologist sometime, and see what she says.

So, right away, Alexander tackles some big questions: What is Life? What is Space? What is the Nature of Order? These are questions that occupy mystics, and there are some who see Alexander that way. I don't. He is too practical and hardworking, and he is not too concerned with *individual* spirituality; his focus is on reforming the built environment, but, yes, he addresses *spirit*. Infuriating his detractors, Alexander con-

tinually points out the 600-pound gorilla in the room that many try to ignore—that humans are spiritual beings, and that the world is a spiritual place. We make demands on our buildings that aren't satisfied by profit and efficiency. That we so successfully avoid this reality so much of the time explains much, Alexander contends, about the often unsatisfactory nature of the world we've made for ourselves.

Alexander points out that *structure* can work against human wholeness and spirituality and this seems logical enough. After all, how many people leave nature to get 'back to the city' when seeking peace and enlightenment? There are, of

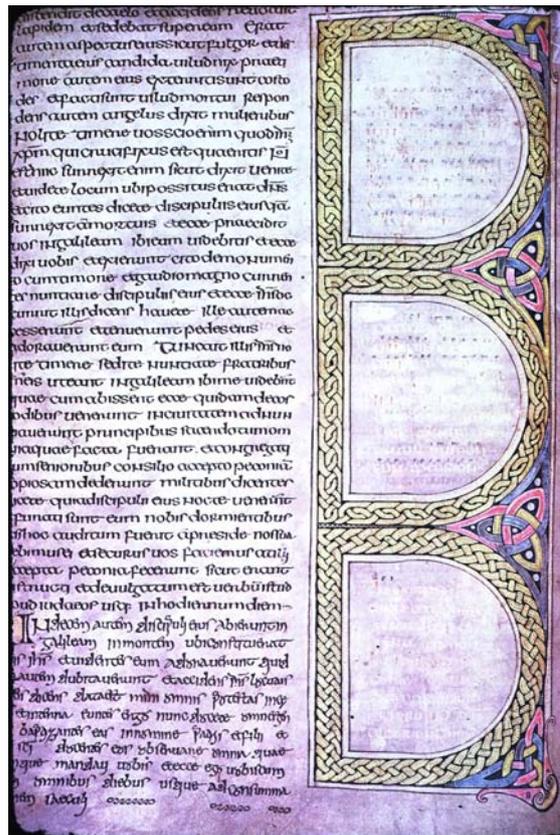
course, exceptions. Beautiful gardens or soaring cathedrals can be engines of transcendence. But these are exceptions that prove the rule; generally speaking, the built environment is perceived to repress human wholeness. Why? Why don't humans create beautiful living structure as readily as do bees, clouds, trees, or termites? *Nature of Order* is a work of great detail and great force that attempts to answer this question.

That the question of spirit comes up, implicitly but insistently, is the work's strength and weakness. The force of *Nature of Order* is derived from Alexander's fearless exploration of the structure of the world, and the place of humans in that structure. But it also makes his philosophy threatening; a lot of people just want to build a better house or subdivision, not wrestle with questions about the deep structure of the universe.

In Book 1, *The Phenomenon of Life*, Alexander gives his fullest and deepest explanation of *his* conception of life, and why it is more deeply felt in some places and things than in others. Early in the book he describes an incident from his teaching career that succinctly captures many of the themes of his work, and the reasons his ideas meet resistance. He asked his students to compare two things: a picture of a 7th century illuminated manuscript (the Durham Gospel fragment) and the wall of the auditorium in which the lecture was being held. Then he asked a simple question—which of the two had more life?

The question met enormous resistance. Not because it was hard—nearly every student agreed, albeit reluctantly,

The Durham Gospel fragment—do you think it has more "life" than a typical auditorium wall?



that the graceful, calm-yet-intricate manuscript held more life than the post-modern, brass-detailed wall. The *question itself* was what created resistance. Just admitting that one artifact can have more life than another was disturbing. If it is *possible* to enhance the life of a building, then it is *important* to do so; but the question of life is not being addressed in today's architectural curricula—except by Alexander.

Alexander finds that people of all types *do* intuitively agree with amazing uniformity on the relative amount of life found in various places and things. Although the question seems strange, it has an answer. But this is astonishing, because it tends to destroy the difference between the subjective and the objective. Science stoutly rejects data which cannot be measured. Human opinions, notoriously squishy, cannot be measured by any known instrument... but what if humans themselves, in *aggregate*, can effectively measure this vital quality?

There is another, deeper reason for resistance. Lurking beneath Alexander's simple question is a much thornier question: if humans respond to the life of a place, and if life can be detected and worked with rather simply, how is it that so much of the built world works against life? Why do apartment blocks, tract developments, and urban sprawl seem to limit human potential and creativity? Suddenly, the work of a surveyor moves beyond the question of profit, and into the uncomfortable realm of religion. This is an old question for us; we sometimes divide up natural places of great beauty, and it is not always obvious that development is the same as improvement. Alexander examines the roots of this dilemma—and talks about ways to transcend it.

Alexander makes his case for pervasive life thoroughly and with great cumulative force. He begins by discussing what he calls *centers*:

"In using the word center in this way, I am not referring at all to a point center like a center of gravity. I use the word center to identify an organized zone of space—that is to say, a distinct set of points in space, which, because of its organization, because of its internal coherence, and because of its relation to its context, exhibits centeredness, forms a local zone of relative centeredness with respect to the other parts of space. When I use the word center, I am always referring to a physical set, a distinct physical system, which occupies a certain



Christopher Alexander

volume in space, and has a special marked coherence." (TPoL, p. 84)

Redefining a word as basic as *center*—or *life*, for that matter—seems willfully inscrutable at first, but the idea is actually quite useful. Consider a pond within a clearing, and the clearing within a forest, and so forth. Calling the pond a *center* helps us to see it as a locus that influences a larger whole. And the idea is recursive; the clearing is itself one of many centers in the larger forest and influences that whole, which in turn is one center of a larger regional whole, and so forth.

Like Alexander's earlier concept of a pattern language (see previous column) the value of the concept lies in its use. Learning to analyze wholes in terms of centers makes it easier to actually see how a whole is formed, and how it can be strengthened or how it is being weakened. The application of this idea to *land surveying* is actually being tested by Alexander in a new development near Brookings, Oregon. The master plan codifies a *process* (not a plat) that identifies, preserves, and strengthens existing centers.

Living wholes are made up of strong centers, and the life of a whole is increased by strengthening and increasing its centers. As I began to get comfortable with this idea, I indeed found it to be a useful way of looking at the world around me, a way to figure out why I like some places more than others.

Alexander continues his argument by explaining why some centers have more life than others. And here, I think, he presents an idea that is extremely compelling and immediately useful. It

amounts to a general theory of aesthetics, and will likely be adopted rather quickly in the field of visual arts.

Alexander proposes that there are 15 fundamental properties—structural features—that appear consistently in things which have life: levels of scale, strong centers, boundaries, alternating repetition, positive space, good shape, local symmetries, deep interlock and ambiguity, contrast, gradients, roughness, echoes, the void, simplicity and inner calm, and not-separateness.

Approximately one-third of *TPoL* is devoted to a masterful exposition of these properties, shown and discussed in man-made artifacts such as Turkish carpets or the plan of Rome and in natural phenomena like a nautilus shell or the way cracks form in the mud of a drying desert. The illustrations and text work together and gather force like Ravel's Boléro, culminating in an essay titled *A New View of Nature*. Surveyors will appreciate that Alexander finds life in some of the world's largest engineering projects, such as the Golden Gate Bridge.

Ultimately Alexander has made it possible to talk, really talk, about why we like some things and places better than others. Rather than falling back on vapid words like *pretty* or *awesome*, we can speak with precision about the qualities that distinguish Yosemite Valley from, say, a gravel quarry, or why we are more moved by a giant sequoia than by a mall. His beliefs and accompanying language legitimize human feeling, validate our intuitive sense of value, and, without hubris or solipsism, make the world personal.

I have barely skipped a stone over the surface of this remarkable book. In 476 exhaustively illustrated and footnoted pages, Alexander rigorously makes the case for his new view of the world, and takes initial steps toward a mathematical statement of that view. It is an intellectual tour-de-force and fully supported by his real world work as a builder and architect. His ideas are powerful and practical, and may be world changing. They are worthy of your consideration. *A*

Editor's Note: If you have enjoyed Stocking's writings on survey related topics, you might be interested in his new book, Everything is Somewhere, a collection of his published and unpublished works in revised and expanded form, with new introductory material. It is being carried exclusively by Bernsten International, Inc. Sample chapters may be read at everythingissomewhere.com.