

**Christopher Alexander: The Timeless Way of Building.**  
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**THE TIMELESS WAY**

**A building or a town will only be alive to the extent that it is governed by the timeless way.**

**1 The Timeless Way (3)**

**It is a process which brings order out of nothing but ourselves; it cannot be attained, but it will happen of its own accord, if we only let it.**

Each one of us has, somewhere in his heart, *the dream to make a living world*, a universe. Behind all processes which allow us to make buildings live, there is a single common process. It is *a method or a discipline*, which teaches us precisely what we have to do to make our buildings live. *But though this method is precise, it cannot be used mechanically. What this method does is simply free us from all method.*

*We have so far beset ourselves with rules, and concepts, and ideas of what must be done to make a building or a town alive, that we have become afraid of what will happen naturally, and convinced that we must work within a “system” and with “methods”.*

*The thoughts and fears which feed these methods are illusions.* To purge ourselves of these illusion... *we must first learn a discipline which teaches us the true relationship between ourselves and our surroundings.* Then, once this discipline has done its work... we will be ready to give up the discipline, and act as nature does.

*This is the timeless way of building: learning the discipline – and shedding it.*

**THE QUALITY (17)**

**To seek the timeless way we must first know the quality without a name.**

**2 The Quality without a Name (19)**

**There is a central quality which is the root criterion of life and spirit in a man, a town, a building, or a wilderness. The quality is objective and precise, but it cannot be named.**

*We have been lead to believe that what something “is”, is an entirely separate question from what it “ought to be”; and that science and ethics can’t be mixed. – On the human level of complexity, then, there is a distinction between systems which are true to their “inner nature”, and those which aren’t.*

Indeed, *this subtle and complex freedom from inner contradictions is just the very quality which makes things live.* Yet still this quality cannot be named. *Words fail to capture it because it is much more precise than any word.* The quality itself is sharp, exact, with no looseness in it whatsoever. But each word you choose to capture it has fuzzy edges and extensions which blur the central meaning of the quality.

[Examples: alive, whole, comfortable, free, exact, egoless, eternal.]

It is not only simple beauty of form and colour, ... not only fitness to purpose, ... not only the spiritual quality... that comes from faith.

*The quality which has no name includes these simpler sweeter qualities. But it is so ordinary as well, that it somehow reminds us of the passing of our life. It is a slightly bitter quality.*

### 3 Being Alive (41)

**The search which we make for this quality, in our own lives, is the central search of any person, and the crux of any individual person's story. It is the search for those moments and situations when we are most alive.**

*We shall begin to understand [the quality without a name] concretely, in all these larger pieces of the world, only when we first understand it in ourselves.*

In our lives, this quality without a name is the most precious thing we ever have. And I am free to the extent I have this quality in me. This wild freedom, this passion, comes into our lives in the instant we let go. And it happens when our inner forces are resolved.

We cannot be aware of these most precious moments when they are actually happening. Yet each of us knows from experience the feeling which this quality creates in us.

*Places which have this quality, invite this quality to come to life in us. And when we have this quality in us, we tend to make it come to life in towns and buildings which we help to build. It is a self-supporting, self-maintaining, generating quality. It is the quality of life.*

### 4 Patterns of Events (55)

**In order to define this quality in buildings and in towns, we must begin by understanding that every place is given its character by certain patterns of events that keep on happening there.**

*The quality without a name is circular: it exists in us, when it exists in our buildings; and it only exists in our buildings, when we have it in ourselves. To understand this clearly, we must first recognize that what a town or building is, is governed, above all, by what is happening there.*

The standard patterns of events vary very much from person to person, and from culture to culture. But each town, each neighbourhood, each building, has a particular set of these patterns of events according to its prevailing culture.

Our world has a structure... certain patterns of events – both human or nonhuman – *keep repeating, and account, essentially for much the greater part of the events which happen there. And indeed, the world does have a structure, just because these patterns of events which repeat themselves are always anchored in space.*

*I cannot think of sleeping without imagining myself sleeping somewhere. The life which happens in a building or a town is not merely anchored in space but made up from the space itself.*

### 5 Patterns of Space (75)

**These patterns of events are always interlocked with certain geometric patterns in the space. Indeed, as we shall see, each building and each town is ultimately made out of these patterns in the space, and out of nothing else: they are the atoms and the molecules from which a building or a town is made.**

On the geometric level, we see certain physical elements repeating endlessly, combined in an almost endless variety of combinations. And each of these elements has a specific pattern of events associated with it. [But] *the elements... keep varying, and are different every time that they occur.*

Beyond its elements *each building is defined by certain patterns of relationships among the elements.* Evidently, then a large part of the “structure” of a building or a town consists of patterns of relationships. These relationships are not extra, but necessary to the elements, indeed a part of them. [Indeed] *the elements themselves are patterns of relationships. And finally, the things which seem like elements dissolve, and leave a fabric of relationships*

*behind, which is the stuff that actually repeats itself, and gives the structure to a building or a town.*

Each pattern in the space has a pattern of events associated with it. It is just the patterns of events in space which are repeating in the building or the town; and *nothing else*.

And, what is most remarkable of all, the number of the patterns out of which a building or a town is made is rather small.

Of course the patterns vary from place to place, from culture to culture, from age to age... But still, in every place and every age the structure of our world is given to it, essentially, by some collection of patterns which keeps on repeating over and over and over again.

## **6 Patterns which are Alive (101)**

**The specific patterns out of which a building or a town is made may be alive or dead. To the extent they are alive, that let our inner forces loose, and set us free; but when they are dead they keep us locked in inner conflict.**

A man is alive when he is wholehearted, true to himself, true to his own inner forces, and able to act freely according to the nature of the situations he is in.

*A person is so far formed by his surroundings, that his state of harmony depends entirely on his harmony with his surroundings.*

A pattern lives when it allows its own internal forces to resolve themselves.

*Saying that patterns are alive is more or less the same as saying they are stable.*

The quality without a name in us, our liveliness, our thirst for life, depends directly on the patterns in the world, and the extent to which they have this quality themselves.

Patterns which live, release this quality in us.

But they release this quality in us, essentially because they have it in themselves.

## **7 The Multiplicity of Living Patterns (123)**

**The more living patterns there are in a thing – a room, a building, or a town – the more it comes to life as an entirety, the more it glows, the more it has this self-maintaining fire, which is the quality without a name.**

*The quality without a name appears, not when an isolated pattern lives, but when an entire system of patterns, interdependent at many levels, is all stable and alive.*

## **8 The Quality itself (137)**

**And when the building has this fire, then it becomes a part of nature. Like ocean waves, or blocks of grass, its parts are governed by the endless play of repetition and variety, created in the presence of the fact that all things pass. This is the quality itself.**

When a town or a building lives... it always has to certain geometric character... This is the character of nature.

*There is always repetition of the patterns. But there is always variation and uniqueness in the way the patterns manifest themselves.* Each pattern is a generic solution to some system of forces in the world. But the forces are never quite the same. If the system is responsive to the forces it is subject to, it follows that the system, too, must be unique.

The repetition of patterns is quite a different thing from the repetition of parts. Indeed, *the different parts will be unique because the patterns are the same.*

And from the repetition of the patterns, and uniqueness of the parts, it follows, as it does in nature, that buildings which are alive are fluid and relaxed in their geometry.

*The character of nature can't arise without the presence and the consciousness of death.*

## **THE GATE (155)**

**To reach the quality without a name we must then build a living pattern language as a gate.**

### **9 The Flower and the Seed (157)**

**This quality in buildings and in towns cannot be made, but only generated, indirectly, by the ordinary actions of the people, just as a flower cannot be made, but only generated from the seed.**

This hinges on a simple scientific proposition: the great complexity of an organic system, which is essential to its life, cannot be created from above directly; it can only be generated indirectly. – This cannot happen unless each part is at least partly autonomous, so that it can adapt to the local conditions in the whole. – A building which is natural requires the same. – And the same in the town.

But of course, autonomous creation of the parts, if take by itself, will produce chaos. – *What makes a flower whole, at the same time that all its cells are more or less autonomous, is the genetic code, which guides the process of the individual parts, and makes a whole of them. So I began to wonder if there was a code, like the genetic code, for human acts of buildings? ... It turns out that there is. It takes the form of language.*

### **10 Our Pattern Languages (167)**

**The people can shape buildings for themselves, and have done it for centuries, by using languages which I call pattern languages. A pattern language gives each person who uses it, the power to create an infinite variety of new and unique buildings, just as his ordinary language gives him the power to create an infinite variety of sentences.**

*Each pattern is a rule which describes what you have to do to generate the entity which it defines. – As a “fact”, this pattern merely has certain characteristics... The same pattern “in the farmer’s mind” ... contains... two other aspects. First, it includes the knowledge which is required to build a system of terraces like this. ... And there is an imperative aspect to the pattern. The pattern solves a problem... It is a desirable pattern. – It is in this sense that the system of patterns forms a language.*

*A pattern language... is a finite system of rules which a person can use to generate an infinite variety of different buildings – all members of a family – and that the use of language will allow the people of a village or a town to generate exactly that balance of uniformity and variety which brings a place to life.*

*In this sense, then, we have found an example of the kind of code which does, at certain times play just the role in buildings and in towns that the genetic code plays in a living organism.*

### **11 Our Pattern Languages: continued (193)**

**These pattern languages are not confined to villages and farm society. All acts of building are governed by a pattern language of some sort, and the patterns in the world are there, entirely because they are created by the languages people use.**

The patterns of our time, like all other patterns in the built environment, come from the pattern languages which people use.

*All these rules of thumb – or patterns – are part of larger systems which are languages. Every person has a pattern language in his mind. Indeed it is the system of these rules that is your present language.*

*So the use of language is not merely something that happens in traditional societies. It is a fundamental fact about our human nature, as fundamental as the fact of speech.*

*Every single part of the environment is governed by some portion of a pattern language. And the enormous repetition of patterns, which makes up the world, comes about because the languages which people use to make the world are widely shared.*

## **12 The Creative Power of Language (211)**

**And, beyond that, it is not just the shape of towns and buildings which comes to them from pattern languages, it is their quality as well. Even the life and beauty of the most awe-inspiring great religious buildings came from the languages their builders used.**

We have a habit of thinking that *the deepest insights, the most mystical, and spiritual insights*, are somehow less ordinary than most things – that they are extraordinary. In fact, the opposite is true: ... *they are more ordinary than most things.*

*Even though the rules are simple, it takes almost inhuman singleness of purpose to insist on them – not to let go of them. But of course, the fact that these rules are simple does not mean that they are easy to observe, or easy to invent.*

We tend to think of patterns as “things”, and keep forgetting that they are complex, and potent fields.

## **13 The Breakdown of Language (225)**

**But in our time the languages have broken down. Since they are no longer shared, the processes which keep them deep have broken down: and it is therefore virtually impossible for anybody, in our time, to make a building live.**

All the ugliest and most deadening places in the world are made from patterns as well.

In a town with a living language, the pattern language is so widely shared that everyone can use it. – *When the language is shared, the individual patterns in the language are profound. The patterns are always simple. Nothing which is not simple and direct can survive the slow transmission from person to person. There is nothing in these languages so complex that someone cannot understand it.* – The language covers the whole of life. – The connection between users and the act of building is direct. – The adaptation between people and buildings is profound. Each detail has meaning. Each detail is understood. Each detail is based on some person's experience.

*But, by contrast, in the early phases of industrial society which we have experienced recently, the pattern languages die.*

Most people believe themselves incompetent... People lose touch with their most elementary intuitions. – And those few patterns which do remain within our languages become degenerate and stupid. Of course, even now a town still gets its shape from pattern languages of a sort. *The architects and planners and bankers have pattern languages... The users have a few shattered patterns left...* But these remnants of our former languages are dead and empty. – *In panic, people try to replace the lost order of the organic process, by artificial forms of order based on control.* But this makes things still worse. The variety... disappears altogether. – Adaptation of buildings to people becomes impossible. – And, finally, people lose this ability to make life altogether.

## 14 Patterns which can be Shared (243)

**To work our way toward a shared and living language once again, we must first learn how to discover patterns which are deep, and capable of generating life.**

To start with this requires simply that we find a way of talking about patterns, in a way that can be shared. – In order to make patterns explicit, so that they can be shared in this new way, we must first of all review the very complex structure of a pattern.

*Each pattern is a three-part rule, which expresses a relation between a certain context, a problem, and a solution.*

*As an element in the world, each pattern is a relationship between a certain context, a certain system of forces which occur repeatedly in that context, and a certain spatial configuration which allows these forces to resolve themselves.*

*As an element of language, a pattern is an instruction, which shows how this spatial configuration can be used, over and over again, to resolve the given system of forces, wherever the context makes it relevant.*

*The pattern is, in short, at the same time a thing, which happens in the world, and the rule which tells us how to create that thing, and when we must create it. It is both a process and a thing; both a description of a thing which is alive, and a description of the process which will generate that thing.*

Patterns can exist at all scales. – And a pattern may deal with almost any kind of forces.

*To make a pattern explicit, we merely have to make the inner structure of the pattern clear. –*

We must first define some physical feature of the place, which seems worth abstracting. –

Next we must define the problem, or the field of forces which this pattern brings into balance. –

Finally, we must define the range of contexts where this system of forces exists and where this pattern of physical relationships will indeed actually bring it into balance.

*In order to discover patterns which are alive we must always start with observation. – Try to discover some property which is common to all the ones which feel good, and missing from all the ones which don't feel good. – Knowledge of the problem then helps shed light on the invariant which solves the problem. – Sometimes we find our way to this invariant by starting with a set of positive examples. – At other times, we may discover the invariant by starting from the negative examples, and resolving them. – And occasionally, we do not start from concrete observation at all, but build up the invariant by purely abstract argument.*

It is hard to be precise, because there is never any one formulation of the pattern which is perfectly exact. – *To strike the balance between being too narrow and too loose, you must express and visualize a pattern as a kind of fluid image, a morphological feeling, a swirling intuition about form, which captures the invariant field which is the pattern. – Then, once you discover a fluid field of relationship like this, you must redefine it, as an entity, to make it operational. – We must make each pattern a thing so that the human mind can use it easily and so that it may take its part among the other patterns of our pattern languages. For the same reason you must be able to draw it. – And finally, for the same reason too, you must give it a name. – At this stage, the pattern is clearly sharable.*

Gradually, by hard work, it is possible to discover many *patterns* which are deep, and which can help to bring a building or a town to life. They *vary from culture to culture*; sometimes they are very different, sometimes they are versions of the same pattern, slightly different, in different cultures. But it is possible to discover them, and to write them down so that they can be shared.

## 15 The Reality of Patterns (277)

**We may then gradually improve these patterns which we share, by testing them against experience: we can determine, very simply, whether these patterns make our surroundings live, or not, by recognizing how they make us feel.**

*How can we distinguish patterns which work, which are deep and worth copying, from those which are simply pipe dreams, mad imaginings... – One test says that a pattern is alive if its individual statements are empirically true... that it meets the following two empirical conditions: 1. The problem is real. 2. The configuration solves the problem. – But a pattern is not alive just because its component statements are true. – A pattern only works, fully, when it deals with all the forces that are actually present in the situation. – The difficulty is that we have no reliable way of knowing just exactly what the forces in a situation are. – What we need is a way of understanding the forces which cuts through this intellectual difficulty and goes closer to the empirical core. – To do this, we must rely on feelings more than on intellect. – By contrast, patterns made from thought, without feeling, lack empirical reality entirely. – There is a fundamental inner connection between the balance of a system of forces, and our feelings about the pattern which resolves these forces. – We can always ask ourselves just how a pattern makes us feel. And we can ask the same of someone else. – It is not the same, at all, as asking someone his opinion. – It is also not the same as asking for a person's taste. – And it is also not the same as asking what a person thinks of an idea. – It simply asks for feelings, and for nothing else.*

*The success of this test hinges on a fact ... the extraordinary degree of agreement in people's feelings about patterns. – These feelings which are in touch with reality are sometimes very hard to reach. – Yet it is only this true feeling, this feeling that requires attention, this feeling that requires effort, which is reliable enough to generate agreement.*

*But even so, feelings themselves are not the essence of the matter. – What is at stake at last, is nothing but the quality without a name itself. – It is reality itself which makes the difference. – And it is in the end only when our feelings are perfectly in touch with the reality of forces, that we begin to see the patterns which are capable of generating life. – Yet it is hard to give up preconceptions of what things "ought to be," and recognize things as they really are. – In this respect attention to reality goes far beyond the realm of values. – By seeming to be unethical, by making no judgements about individual opinions, or goals, or values, the pattern rises to another level of morality. – Then it becomes a piece of nature.*

## 16 The Structure of a Language (305)

**Once we have understood how to discover individual patterns which are alive, we may then make a language for ourselves, for any building task we face. The structure of the language is created by the network of connections among individual patterns: and the language lives, or not, as a totality, to the degree these patterns form a whole.**

*The structure of a pattern language is created by the fact that individual patterns are not isolated. – Each pattern depends both on the smaller patterns it contains, and on the larger patterns within which it is contained. – And it is the network of these connections between patterns which creates the language. – In this network, the links between the patterns are almost as much a part of the language as the patterns themselves. – It is, indeed, the structure of the network which makes sense of individual patterns, because it anchors them, and helps make them complete.*

*The language is a good one, capable of making something whole, when it is morphologically and functionally complete. – The language is morphologically complete when I can visualize the kind of buildings which it generates very concretely. – And the language is functionally complete, when the system of patterns it defines is fully capable of allowing all its inner*

forces to resolve themselves. – In both cases, the language is complete only when every individual pattern in the language is complete. – We must therefore invent new patterns, whenever necessary, to fill out each pattern which is not complete. – *When every pattern has its principal components given by the smaller patterns which lie immediately below it in the language, then the language is complete.* And you see then what a beautiful structure a pattern language has.

*So, the real work of any process of design lies in this task of making up the language, from which you can later generate the one particular design.* You must make the language first, because it is the structure and the content of the language which determine the design. *The individual buildings which you make, will live, or not, according to the depth and wholeness of the language which you use to make them with.* But of course, once you have it, this language is general. If it has the power to make a single building live, it can be used a thousand times, to make a thousand buildings live.

### **17 The Evolution of a Common Language for a Town (325)**

**Then finally, from separate languages for different building tasks, we can create a larger structure still, a structure of structures, evolving constantly, which is the common language for a town. This is the gate.**

As we make the different individual languages, we find the patterns overlap. – And, more subtly, we find also that different patterns in different languages, have underlying similarities, which suggest that they can be reformulated to make them more general, and usable in a greater variety of cases. – *Gradually it becomes clear that it is possible to construct one much larger language, which contains all the patterns from the individual languages, and unifies them by tying them together in one large structure.*

Such a language is ... a living language only when each person in society, or in the town, has his own version of this language. – *A living language must constantly be re-created in each person's mind.* Even the ordinary language in a person's mind (English, French, whatever) is *created* by him – it is not learned. – Then, as each person makes up his own language for himself, the language begins to be a living one. *And just as there will be variations from person to person, so too there will be even more noticeable variations from culture to culture.* We see then that a language which is shared within a town is a vast structure, far more complex than an individual language.

*The same thing happens in genetics.* – The genetic character of a species is defined by its gene pool. – Just so, a common pattern language is defined by its pool of patterns. – *And, once people share a language in this way, the language will begin evolving of its own accord.* – The language will evolve piece-meal, one pattern at a time. – As people exchange ideas about the environment, and exchange patterns, the overall inventory of patterns in the pattern pool keeps changing. – *Since there are criteria for deciding which patterns are good, and which ones are bad, people will copy good patterns when they see them, and won't copy bad ones. This means that good patterns will multiply and become more common, while bad patterns will become rarer, and will gradually drop out altogether.*

*Of course, this evolution will never end.* – *Yet, changing as it is, each language is a living picture of a culture, and a way of life.* – It is a tapestry of life, which shows, in the relationship among the patterns, how the various parts of life can fit together, and how they can make sense, concretely in space. *And, above all, it is not just a passive picture.* – *It ... has the power to let men transform themselves, and their surroundings.*

*In early times the city itself was intended as an image of the universe – its form a guarantee of the connection between the heavens and the earth, a picture of the whole and coherent way of life. A living pattern language is even more. It shows each person his connection to the world in terms so powerful that he can re-affirm it daily by using it to create new life in all the places around him. And in this sense ... the living language is a gate.*