

# Let Christopher Alexander design your life

In the second installment of our summer series, Curbed's architecture critic re-reads *A Pattern Language*

By [Alexandra Lange](#) Jul 11, 2019, 12:15pm EDT

Illustration by [Naomi Elliott](#)

## This story is part of a group of stories called **OverDue Books**.

Curbed's architecture critic Alexandra Lange takes a fresh look at classics of the architectural canon.

I received my copy of “A Pattern Language” as a high school graduation gift. I had already declared my intention to be an architect, so my aunt and uncle bought me the design equivalent of the Bible—thick and minimally illustrated, with a specialized system of numerical classification and a studiously typographic cover. If a non-architect is looking for a gift for a wannabe, there it is. As a design-enthusiast, you may have gotten a copy once too; the 42-year-old book is parked at the top of Amazon's Architectural Criticism bestsellers list.

It looked handsome in my dorm room alongside my new dictionary and [Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia](#). And like both of those tomes, I barely opened it. The architecture library was filled with books with lovely glossy pictures. My rudimentary word processing program had a thesaurus. What was a “pattern” anyway? And why were there 253 of them?

The book was enshrined but unread. But “[A Pattern Language](#),” which was written by Christopher Alexander with Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein, Max Jacobson, Ingrid Fiksdahl-King and Shlomo Angel (all colleagues at Berkeley's Center for Environmental Structure in the 1970s) turns out to be an ideal place candidate for a re-read. A pattern is the way physical design responds to human relationships. I didn't need it as a teenager, but I turned to it after I got married, and then again after I had kids. Patterns that were meaningless at 17 – like Pattern 73, “[Adventure Playground](#)”—feel like breadcrumbs charting a new way of looking at cities now that I'm a parent.

Meanwhile, I shake my head at how much my 17-year-old self would have loved Pattern 154, Teenager's Cottage, had I bothered to crack the book: “He needs a place from which he can come and go as he pleases, a place within which his privacy is respected. At the same time he needs the chance to establish a closeness with his family that is more mutual and less strictly dependent than ever before.”

If I have learned any lessons since high school, it is that teachers seemed unwilling to tip you off when Very Important Works are also hilarious. (See: Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, which is

chockablock with devastating satire and tenterhooks romance, written with incredible flair and stylistic flexibility.)

Alexander isn't being funny on purpose. There's a vegetarian-stew earnestness about his enterprise that has put off modernists for decades — but sometimes you need to be earnest. Over time, especially in contrast to most architecture theory, plain speech can ripen into something subversive and amusing.

The book's fixation on thick walls and overhanging roofs, its Berkeley origins, Alexander's own English-academic-gone-West-Coast biography suggested a cozy-cottage vibe that didn't sit well with the profession of architecture at the time of its publication. Neither did Alexander's emphasis on DIY. Forty years on, however, I would like to think we could all be a little less doctrinaire about style, and while Alexander is not a fan of giant expanses of glass, there is little in the book that precludes modernism.

Nothing, that is, except his hatred of skyscrapers, as expressed in Pattern 21, Four-Story Limit: “There is abundant evidence to show that high buildings make people crazy.” On the one hand, nobody's perfect. On the other hand, I would argue that for most families [buildings of five-stories or less](#) work best. At that height, it is still possible to access the ground without relying on an elevator and, if apartments are constructed around a courtyard, a parent can actually call down to a child from their residence. Multifamily dwellings at that height [are dense enough to support transit, too](#).

“A Pattern Language” is not about architecture, but about how specific design choices can help us build better relationships. By fitting a series of those choices — the patterns — together, you get a room, a house, a neighborhood and eventually a city. It's very self-help, if you like that sort of thing (I don't), or if you like to talk about renovations (you know I do). So let's dive in.

## **1. Design isn't about looks; it's about relationships.**

The first daunting thing about “A Pattern Language” is the sheer number of patterns: It begins with “Independent Regions” at the scale of a state map and ends with “Things from Your Life” at the scale of the cupboard. Let me focus on a handful. The patterns get layered, building up a vision of a city or a home rather than remaining distinct elements.

Pattern 253, “Things from Your Life,” is the only Alexander-identified pattern on décor. It considers decor as a way to reflect moments in your life rather than as framing artful object vignettes.

So much design content these days is only décor (vignettes), and the pattern-based approach (decades) is a concept nearly impossible to categorize on Pinterest.

People “have replaced their natural instinctive decorations with the things which they believe will please and impress their visitors,” Alexander writes. Professionals play on our anxieties, “telling people they have no right to move anything, paint the walls, or add a plant, because they are not party to the mysteries of Good Design.”

Today we don't need to hire an interior designer to tell us what is capital-S stylish – we have Instagram for that – but the lack of personality that results from interiors group-think can be draining. I was surprised to find that Alexander's 1970s anti-modernism wasn't that far from Marie Kondo's famous question, "Does it spark joy?" He has Jung, she has Shintoism, but their advice is the same: You do you. Decor "is most beautiful when it comes straight from your life—the things you care for, the things that tell your story."

## **2. Put the sofa in the kitchen.**

I didn't build my relationship with *A Pattern Language* until my husband and I bought a house we were planning to renovate. I know other architects who ask clients to choose favorite patterns before starting a home design project. If you have been pinning from websites or, in the olden days, tearing images from magazines, *A Pattern Language* can work the same way. I desperately wanted to choose tile, but my husband (a licensed architect) knew that was the last step. First we had to figure out how we wanted to live, first as a couple and then with the two kids I had down on my mental planner. The decisions we made in 2007 still affect our family life in 2019, starting with the kitchen.

My husband refers to Pattern 139, Farmhouse Kitchen, as one of his design ideals. The entry begins, "The isolated kitchen, separate from the family and considered an efficient but unpleasant factory for food is a hangover from the days of servants; and from the more recent days when women willingly took over the servants' role."

We have come a long way from the "unpleasant factory for food" days. And yet, how often is the kitchen really the heart of the home? Even if it is the room in which residents spend the most waking hours — and [most studies say that it is](#) — the kitchen isn't necessarily furnished so that everyone can be comfortable. The ever-expanding terrain of the kitchen island separates cook from eaters. It is clear who hanging out and who is doing the work. Bar-height stools are tricky for kids, and tippy for those under 5' 4".

Alexander's solution is to re-orient the room, pushing the counter to the edge and putting a round, standard-height table in the middle. A sofa sits in front of the window, rather than in some separate family room. At the table, games can be played, homework can be completed, and food prep can be made communal. The cook(s) can relax and still keep an eye on the stove.

With the kitchen sorted, other patterns define areas just for the parents, just for the kids (Pattern 137, "Children's Realm"), or just for the introvert (Pattern 141, "A Room of One's Own"). The headnote for the latter reads: "No one can be close to others, without also having frequent opportunities to be alone." Even if you don't have children, the frank acknowledgement of the need for separate realms for anyone you might share a house with feels remarkably honest.

The book includes crude sketches of how these parts—his, hers, theirs, ours—might fit together. Plan from life, those sketches say, even if you don't know how to draw.

## **3. Foster the element of chance.**

In 2017, New York Magazine's women's site The Cut called *A Pattern Language* "[the most calming book I've ever read.](#)"

In 2011, on an episode of [Studio 360](#) devoted to *A Pattern Language*, computer scientist Ralph Johnson defines a pattern as "things that repeat." Why do things repeat?" he asks. "Because there's a problem that repeats."

*A Pattern Language* isn't a soothing hippie tome but a call to action.

The next time I read Alexander, I did have two kids and was thinking about families on a larger scale. There are a series of housing projects from the 1970s that I'd always associated with the book: brown and terraced, arranged around courtyards and accessed via picturesque, hedge-lined passages, such housing combines the sweeping geometry of late modernism with the quirky planning of the Italian hill town. These projects, like one I visited in Vancouver, seemed to have successfully made family-friendly urbanism from scratch.

The pattern that united them was Pattern 68, "Connected Play." "Children need other children. Some findings suggest that they need other children even more than they need their own mothers," Alexander writes. Indeed, one of the chief difficulties of contemporary parenthood is connecting your children to other children in healthy, inexpensive ways. Can urban design make helicopter parents extinct? It might if we had more play spaces right outside our front door ... and not blocked off by lines of parked cars and traffic.

In my own early childhood in Cambridge, Massachusetts, children in my neighborhood emerged from their houses and congregated on the brick sidewalks, occasionally taking over the narrow street for kickball, or tunneling through centers of blocks by jumping the fences between adjacent yards. My favorite photograph of me and my first best friend is of us, perched on stools, conversing over the fence between our backyards.

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Alexander has this covered: "A typical suburban subdivision with private lots opening off streets almost confines children to their houses. Parents, afraid of traffic or of their neighbors, keep their small children indoors or in their own gardens: so the children never have enough chance meetings with other children of their own age to form the groups which are essential to a healthy emotional development.”

A key word here is *chance*. In the age of activities, even casual interactions between children often get scheduled, but the dream for parents and children is to be able to step outside and play ... wherever, with whomever.

It isn't just children and parents who would benefit from this common space. One of the most romantic things about romantic comedies is the fantasy that your Get-A-Grip-Friend can just pop over at any time. I'd love to be able to talk to my best friend over the backyard fence now, perhaps with a glass of wine. Another pattern stresses the importance of multigenerational living, Pattern 40, "Old People Everywhere." Yet another, Pattern 27, "Men and Women," asserts that both men and women must influence all parts of the city, rather than the dominant postwar sex-

segregated geography of men working downtown office jobs and women running family life in the suburbs.

The authors write in the first section, “no pattern is an isolated entity... When you build a thing you cannot merely build that thing in isolation, but must also repair the world around it.” The reverse could be true as well. If you isolate people spatially, interpersonal relationships may also fall apart.

#### **4. The car ruins everything.**

At the largest scale, “A Pattern Language” concerns itself with regional planning. But, Alexander cautions, a region (or a city or town) cannot be planned all at once, either by laws or a central authority. This was the chief takeaway from his 1965 essay, “The City is Not A Tree,” which is his second-most-quoted work. He talks about how the historical, organic city is not a bounded entity that grows in a predictable way. Leaders may set patterns for it, but those patterns change over time in reaction to cultural, physical and environmental change. The tree encounters other trees. Branching happens in three dimensions, rather than on a linear and two-dimensional flow chart.

Alexander stacks the deck with three patterns, grouped together, that provide a rough sketch of a livable city: Pattern 9, “Scattered Work”; Pattern 10, “Magic of the City”; and Pattern 11, “Local Transport Areas.” In an ideal city, [people do not have to spend too much time in their cars](#).

Alexander wrote, “Cars give people wonderful freedom and increase their opportunities. But they also destroy the environment, to an extent so drastic that they kill all social life.”

What is startling is how closely the language in these patterns follows our own debates, four decades later. He tells us we should take a 20 minute walk everyday for our health. He says speed is what makes cars dangerous in neighborhoods. He says “the use of cars has the overall effect of spreading people out, and keeping them apart.”

#### **5. People are the scoring system.**

There’s a final scale the patterns apply to: a digital one. Alexander was one of the first architects to use a computer, Molly Wright Steenson writes in her recent book “[Architectural Intelligence](#),” about architects of the 1960s and 1970s who were early adopters of interactive tools for design. His interdisciplinary work, from his doctoral studies on, included researching cognitive science, cybernetics, and artificial intelligence.

Alexander’s frustrations with the way architects were using the computer mirrored his frustrations with décor. He feared it would narrow the way we thought about design; architecture would be reduced to problems that had to be posed to a computer, and questions made simple enough that code could provide the answer. He wanted the computer to allow design to become more complex: the flat, dull, authoritarian planning trees were supposed to be overtaken by a more complex, three-dimensional and evolving organizational structure [called the semi-lattice](#).

As best as I have ever understood it (which is not as well as you or I might wish), the semi-lattice is a three-dimensional, branching structure that visualizes both the planned physical structures that make up a city AND the unplanned adjacencies, both physical and interpersonal, that contribute to our daily lives.

In the suburban town plans Alexander analyses, every branch is based off the family as the smallest and most important unit. But is this really how most people live? He writes, in a nice parallel to his thoughts on “Things from Your Life”: “In simplicity of structure the tree is comparable to the compulsive desire for neatness and order that insists the candlesticks on a mantelpiece be perfectly straight and perfectly symmetrical about the centre. The semilattice, by comparison, is the structure of a complex fabric; it is the structure of living things, of great paintings and symphonies.”

The patterns were supposed to allow everyone to discuss, then build, while maintaining some level of coherence. Programmers liked his idea of a layered language because it suggested every program didn't need to be written from scratch: sections of code could be re-used. Ralph Johnson, the computer scientist quoted above, eventually co-wrote a book called “[Design Patterns](#)” that includes 23 replicable software design patterns. These are solutions in code to repetitive interactions in the digital realm, akin to Alexander's spatial solutions to repetitive interactions in the real world.

Alexander inspired Will Wright, the creator of “The Sims,” a game that is the most perfect (or at least the most popular) melding of code and architecture. [Wright told Icon](#), “He would say what is the human interaction I'm trying to facilitate with this structure, and so the Sims really started out as an architectural game — you were designing a house and then the people were the scoring system.”

In his interview, Wright demonstrates a deep understanding of Alexander's writings, one that future technologists attempting to pattern via programs would do well to acknowledge.

In a [keynote speech](#) at the 1996 conference on Object-Oriented Programs, Systems, Languages and Applications (OOPSLA), Alexander asked the programmers the same questions architects have found challenging. Are you building a better environment? Does what you build make sense?

“People have asked me what kind of a process was involved in creating the architectural pattern language? One of the things we looked for was a profound impact on human life. We were able to judge patterns, and tried to judge them, according to the extent that when present in the environment we were confident that they really do make people more whole in themselves.”

As New York, Toronto, Singapore, and more places around the globe build so-called smart cities, maybe we need to read “A Pattern Language” again in that context. [Who is the audience for the smart city?](#) [Who has access to the data?](#) Who has the ability to make design decisions based on that data? Is this city going to build better relationships? People are the scoring system, whether you're deciding on a rug for the living room, or a light rail system for the city.