Author's Response

Christopher Alexander’s Battle for Beauty: Any Prospects of Victory?

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Abstract
Commenting on an essay of mine about the scientific aspects and potentials of Christopher Alexander’s lifelong “battle for beauty” in architectural and urban design, Professor Nikos Salingaros challenged me to take a stand on the political-activist aspect of Alexander’s battle. Although politics and activism is not my turf research-wise, I venture, in this reply to Salingaros, to conjecture possible tactics for continuation of the battle and, on the basis of that, a cautiously optimistic estimate of the prospects of victory.

Keywords
Aesthetics; architectural and urban design; Christopher Alexander; reform of the building industry; sources of ugliness

Introduction
I would like to thank Professor Nikos Salingaros for doing me the honor of writing a substantial and thought-provoking commentary on my essay, “Christopher Alexander’s Battle for Beauty in a World Turning Ugly: The Inception of a Science of Architecture?”2 The present short article constitutes my reply to Salingaros.

Toward the end of the original essay I proposed a classification of the intellectual heritage from Alexander into three fields of theoretical ideas, each of which suggests a line of future research and development: (1) causal principles about how properties of our built environment affect the quality of our life (beneficially); (2) methodology about how to construct, develop, and preserve the built environment according to those principles; and (3) organization, about how to re-organize the building
industry, and change the attitude of users, architects, and other stakeholders of architecture to make the methodology work in full-scale real life.

In the essay I concentrated on fields 1 and 2, because these ideas are concerned with developing architecture (and design, more broadly) as a science, a topic at the core of my own research experience. So most of the essay was a constructively critical review and evaluation of Alexander’s contribution to architecture as a science; but to do him justice I also mentioned field 3, because his ideas of organization play a prominent part throughout his career. Field 3 is where his thinking became most controversial, politically opinionated, agitatorial, and activist. In short, field 3 is where he fought his “battle for beauty,” whereas fields 1 and 2 are where he forged his suit of scientific armor.

Salingaros, who was main editor of Alexander’s magnum opus *The Nature of Order,* offers new insights about Alexander’s way of thinking and working. His commentary also features a discussion of what I wrote about the religious aspect of Alexander’s thinking, and—based on Salingaros’s own research—expands on my argument that Alexander’s predilection for ancient or traditional architecture should not be held against his theory of aesthetics. I appreciate these valuable supplements to my essay, and feel no need to question or discuss them.

What I think calls for a proper reply here is the fact that Salingaros challenges me—ever so amicably—to take a clear stand regarding field 3: the one about Alexander’s battle for beauty. Unlike Salingaros, I am not a soldier enlisted for that battle. Yet despite my lack of combat experience, and my nonexistent research expertise regarding field no. 3, I accept the challenge, also much appreciated. So, I shall venture to speculate, as best I can, on how to continue where Alexander—now long retired—left his battle for beauty. More specifically, I will consider two related questions: (1) What might the tactics be? And (2) what are the prospects of victory?

### Salingaros’s Challenge

First, however, I will take a closer look at some passages in Salingaros’s commentary where he puts forward various aspects of his challenge. This will provide a suitable background for addressing the two questions.

- In the essay I raised and discussed the question whether Alexander is right when he claims (rather polemically) that architects are hankering after the glamor of magazine covers, and that “the spread of ugliness” is a massive problem. To this Salingaros remarks that—given his personal involvement in Alexander’s battle—he can “unequivocally answer YES,” and continues, “And yet Galle’s essay does not provide a firm answer that helps convince the reader through Alexander’s arguments [even though] Galle is sympathetic and can see the obvious ugliness that practitioners deliberately inflict on the world…”

Yes, I agree with Alexander that ugly (self-importantly contrived, or slick, machine-like, uninviting, and utterly boring) architectural and urban design is a genuine problem, and I believe that defending our built environment against the spread of such ugliness is fundamentally a good cause. That is why I let myself be persuaded to speculate on the tactics and prospects of Alexander’s battle for beauty (which I will do in the next two sections).

And yes, quite possibly some architects are more concerned with boosting their own reputation than with boosting the well-being of people who live in or around the buildings and townscapes the architects design. Such narcissism may be one source of spreading ugliness. But I think it is of fairly marginal importance.

Another source—much more significant, I believe—could be ignorance on the part of architects: if they fail to communicate properly with people outside their own professional circles, and if they fail to familiarize themselves with relevant research on the effect of architecture on people living with it, that could lead to spread of ugliness at a large scale.

A third source—also likely to be significant—could be inability. To me it seems plausible to assume, with Alexander, that some architects are well aware something is wrong with the way we design and construct our built environment. Yet they may be unable to put a finger on what that is. And if they can, they may be unable to act on it, because it means going against the grain of their entire professional culture and the building industry, which would soon render them unemployable. (So if Salingaros is right that practitioners deliberately inflict ugliness on the world, fear might explain it.)
When Salingaros complains that my essay does not “help convince the reader through Alexander’s arguments,” I must reply that it never was my aim to convince anyone that Alexander was right (even though personally I think he was in many respects), nor did I write to reiterate his arguments. My aims were to make a case that Alexander significantly contributed to the inception of a science of architecture, and to persuade readers to consider his theoretical ideas with an open mind, despite his unconventional approach to research.

- Salingaros furthermore writes, “The central question about the value of Alexander’s work is how to position it within architectural culture. Is Alexander [and those whom he influenced] a curious and interesting phenomenon at the edge of the profession, or is he situated instead at the very center of human architecture?” In the latter case, Salingaros continues, “mainstream architectural culture … and the global building industry [should be considered] a century-long aberration.” He declares his support to “this revolutionary view of things, whereas Galle is non-committal on this crucial point.”

- In the next paragraph he politely notes that my lack of commitment in the matter of the battle for beauty is why he is not fully satisfied with my essay (despite the merits he kindly ascribes to it), because “the world urgently needs to be made aware of provocative material that will spark off a total re-definition of architecture.”

I agree that positioning Alexander’s work in the architectural culture is a central issue. It is correct, though, that in my essay I did not commit myself to the revolutionary view Salingaros endorses — because the essay was not essentially concerned with field no. 3, and the aim was not to enlist new soldiers for Alexander’s battle for beauty. So I did not agitate for the good cause of the battle in the essay, but I think it is fair to say the essay makes readers aware of Alexander’s ideas, including highly provocative material.

- Finally, Salingaros quotes the following skeptical remark of mine about Alexander’s claim that his ideas may support the agenda of sustainability: “[Adopting Alexander’s] approach … might enhance people’s sense of responsibility towards the Earth and its ecosystems. But despite his considerable talent and the merit of his ideas, [they] will hardly save us from climate disaster.” Salingaros challenges me by asking us to “imagine a world where Alexander’s ideas are central, and help to instill a deep respect for human health, and the health of the earth, instead of present-day extractive global imperialism being the dominant force. Wouldn’t that put humankind in a far better situation?”

Indeed it would. And that is what I meant when I wrote that adopting Alexander’s ideas might increase environmental responsibility. Which, of course, might pave the road for requisite political action.

But that is not enough. To stop or reduce global warming we need to resolve numerous technical problems, not only overcome political obstacles. For example, how to save energy, how to produce the necessary energy safely without CO₂ emission (or how to capture and remove CO₂ and other greenhouse gases from the atmosphere), how to prevent thawing tundra areas from releasing huge amounts of methane (a potent greenhouse gas), how to make our economy more circular, and so on. And I fail to see how constructing more beautiful architecture and urban environments the way Alexander proposes can help us solve those problems.

**Tactics for Carrying on Alexander’s Battle — a Conjecture**

Now let us consider the first of my two related questions about how Alexander’s battle for beauty could be carried on: What might the tactics be?

Taking my cues from the above discussions, I would suggest beginning with the notion that paving the road for political action is indispensable. Political action is obviously necessary if we are to reorganize the building industry along the lines suggested by Alexander. I shall assume we are talking about political action in a democracy.

To render such radical changes politically feasible, the general public must be convinced that the changes are worthwhile, and so must the political decision makers. But no democratic politicians worth their salt would try to force a radical re-organization upon the entire building industry without seeking some degree of consent and cooperation from people with a legitimate vested interest in that industry. (This excludes mafia types like the ones Alexander
came up against during construction of the Eishin Campus.\textsuperscript{12} I must confess I have no idea how to win the support of the building industry for the good cause of the battle, but I have a fairly clear idea about how not to do it.

I think it is essential not to get carried away by the bellicose connotations of “battle” and “revolution,” which may very easily lead to demonizing people with other interests, values, or views than oneself. Turning people into enemies is no doubt effective and perhaps indispensable when literally fighting a battle or waging a war. But Alexander’s battle for beauty—like any other struggle for radical reform in a democracy—cannot be won by demonization. It must be won by convincing people that things can be done in new and better ways.

This principle applies beyond the building industry, of course. It also extends to members of the public in general, and to members of the architectural community in particular. The means of convincing people are evidence and sound arguments. There are other means as well, such as misinformation, half-truths, coercion, and so on, but those we can rule out. Foul play was never Alexander’s game, and neither should it be ours.

As Salingaros pointed out, positioning Alexander’s work in the architectural culture is important—and, I would add, so is making it known to the general public. To achieve this, continued theoretical development of Alexander’s ideas and practical experiments based on them is needed. The results should be followed up by efficient dissemination of the results to both laypersons and specialists. To achieve sufficient credibility, respectable academic institutions, presumably in collaboration with practicing architects, should carry out this new work. To achieve sufficient momentum in terms of large-scale experiments, funding bodies may have to be involved too, until new design and construction practices have been consolidated.

Unfortunately, Alexander got himself ostracized from the architectural community (as described in the essay). His theoretical ideas (on principles, methodology, and organization) were controversial, because they differed radically from the prevailing paradigm of architecture. But I wonder if that is the reason he was marginalized? After all, the Modernists had fairly radical ideas, too, but got away with becoming mainstream all the same. I suspect Alexander’s harsh attacks on his colleagues and the profession at large—verging on demonization—was a mistake, and is the real reason why his ideas have received relatively little attention and acceptance among architects. Those who dedicate themselves to carrying on Alexander’s battle should not repeat that mistake.

Last but not least, I would suggest the three sources of the spread of ugliness be taken into account, as follows.

The inability of architects to create works of beauty along lines suggested by Alexander might be overcome (only, I suspect) by winning support of the building industry for the cause, as discussed at the beginning of this section. (To the extent the inability is due to ignorance, rather than fear, the cure would be like that for ignorance, below.)

Architects’ ignorance of the effects of their work on people could be overcome by research and knowledge dissemination as just discussed. In particular, students of architecture should be offered research-based teaching carried out by scholars working with or developing the intellectual heritage from Alexander.

What about narcissism, then? If or when other architects learn and begin to produce works of “visceral beauty” (to use a nice phrase from Salingaros’s commentary\textsuperscript{13}), we can hope the narcissists will follow suit and perform their reputation-boosting by doing likewise. Otherwise, let’s just ignore them.

**Prospects of Victory**

So, given these speculations about tactics for Alexander’s battle for beauty, what are the prospects of victory?

None of the actions suggested are easy (except the last one about the narcissists). It seems the political action towards a reformation of the building industry is the most difficult of them all, the one on which the most depends, and it is certainly the one I could say the least about. On the other hand, Alexander’s experiments with methods for financing and managing the construction of the Eishin Campus project, as extensively reported by him,\textsuperscript{14} are a convincing proof of concept, showing that his methods can work in a large-scale real-world project. So with this in mind, I think there is reason to believe that proceeding by my list of dos and don’ts (or something like it) might bring Alexander’s battle to a victorious conclusion.
Notes


3 So named after his struggle against the prevailing aesthetic ideals of architectural and urban design (originating with the Modernist movement in the early 20th century), and current practices of the building industry. Alexander advocates a new theory of aesthetics based on a sophisticated concept of beauty that he had developed over many years of research. See Christopher Alexander, Hans Joachim Neis, and Maggie Moore Alexander, The Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth: A Struggle between Two World-Systems (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).


5 As he writes, “Since I’m personally involved in Alexander’s battle against intentional ugliness and for promoting beauty in architecture.…” Salingaros, “It’s Time for World Architecture to Learn from Christopher Alexander,” 377.


7 Although the sentence might be read as an unconditional generalization over all practitioners, I don’t believe that was Salingaros’s intention.


9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 379.

11 Ibid.

12 A major project near Tokyo, described in detail in Alexander et al., The Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth.


14 Alexander et al., The Battle for the Life and Beauty of the Earth.

References


