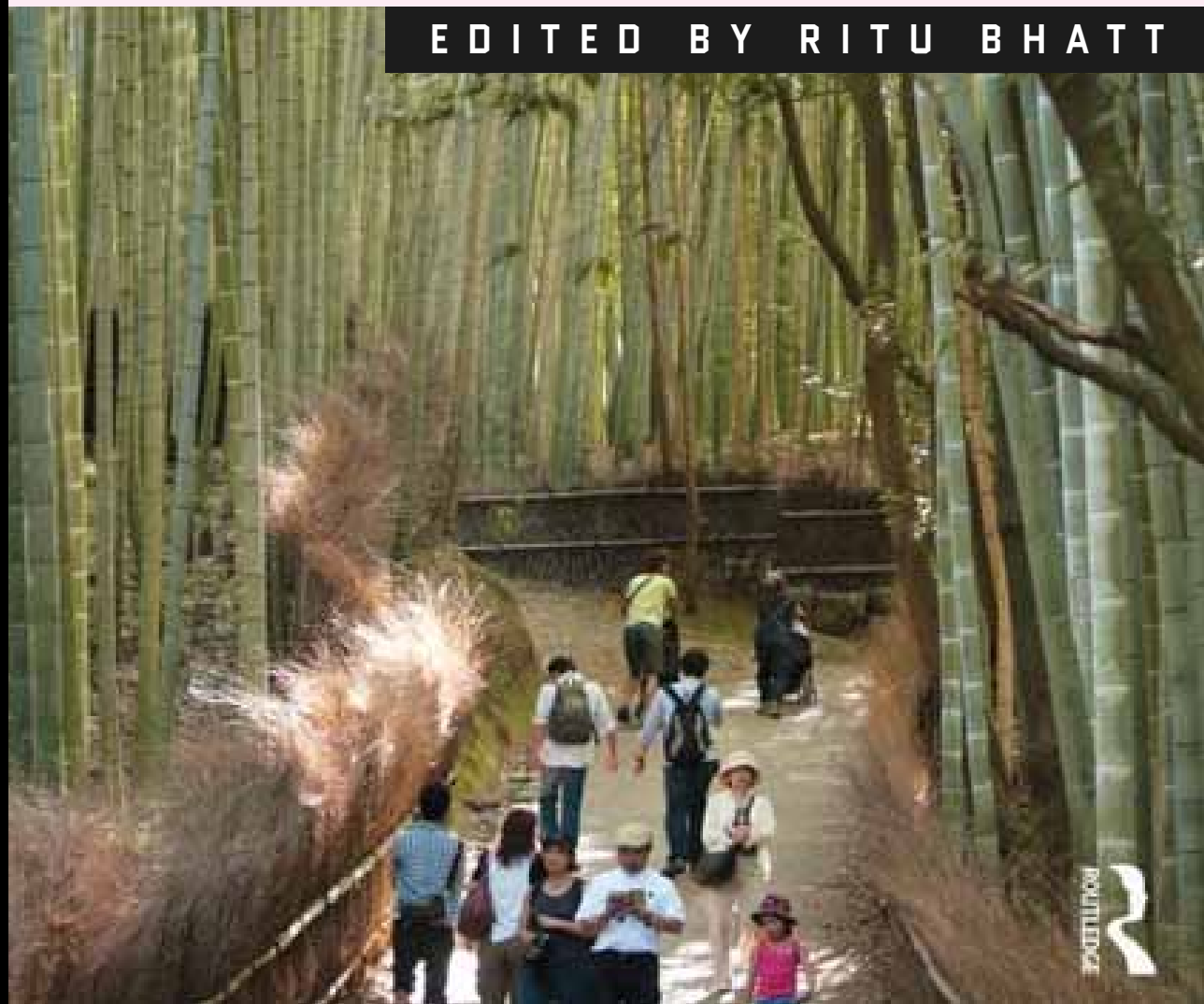




rethinking aesthetics
THE ROLE OF BODY IN DESIGN

EDITED BY RITU BHATT



**traditional
knowledge for
contemporary uses**
an analysis of everyday practices of
self-help in architecture

ritu bhatt

drawings provided by alex stark,
feng shui specialist

INTRODUCTION

During the last thirty years of the millennium, a critical turn in architecture transpired in which inquiries into the history, theory, and criticism of architecture increasingly shifted their concerns from form-making to exploring the social, cultural, and political factors that inform built form. During this phase, architectural theory shifted from what might be termed theory's earlier normative concerns—such as, what architecture should be, how architecture informs social change, and how architecture affects human behavior—to interpretive and discursive analyses that focus on examining tacit ideologies and assumptions that have informed the discipline. One of the key theoretical insights of this epistemic shift has been how “conscious” decisions cannot be attributed to individuals alone, but need to be understood as consequences of socio-cultural-political discourses. Similar debates expressing skepticism—around authorship, the use of tradition, the politics underlying the writing of colonial as well as post-colonial histories, and the impossibility of knowing the “other”—have brought to the fore an epistemology that views all references to a subject's experience, or references to traditions, as mere myths or inventions.¹

This critical project, which coupled Marxian critical theory, post-structuralism, orientalism, and post-colonial theory with readings of architectural modernism, continued from the publications of Manfredo Tafuri's books in the late 1960s to the turn of the millennium. For many theorists and architects, this emphasis on underlying politics would eventually allow for a form of self-consciousness that would lead to emancipatory action. More recently, however, this skeptical stance toward critical theory has been redirected through a series of influential essays loosely labeled under the rubric of the “post-critical turn.” The essays written by Sylvia Lavin, Sarah Whiting, Robert Somol, Stan Allen, and Michael Speaks have opened a provocative examination of the operative role of theory and the relevance of “critical” or “neo-critical” positions;² in addition, they have attempted to probe deeper into architecture's active agency to play a broader social and cultural role. An important concern of this debate is the “post-critical,” or what might be termed “non-skeptical,” attitude toward “other” traditional (often pre-modern) knowledge systems. This focus on the non-skeptical is especially relevant in light of our contemporary society's inherently contradictory attitudes wherein traditions (in the conventional sense) no longer constitute the basis for our actions, yet traditional modes of knowledge are freely re-conceptualized through “self-help” practices that range from oral communications to self-help books to DVDs etc. This cultural phenomenon of “self help” also includes a broad range of traditional pre-modern somatic practices such as yoga, tai chi, and meditation, among others, that are currently being re-modified for contemporary uses. Such an attitude of self-determinism brings to light a transformed subjectivity in which we begin to choose and control parts of our everyday lives, wherein, as Anthony Giddens says, “we are not what we are, but what we make ourselves into.”³

In order to further understand the complex role that traditional knowledge plays in the formation of contemporary subjectivity, I examine here the

everyday practices in architecture that refer to pre-modern/traditional thought and that have remained marginal in academic discourses. These practices include the contemporary practice of Feng shui, the Chinese art of placement; and Christopher Alexander's contested work in *A Pattern Language* (1977) and *The Timeless Way of Building* (1979).⁴ I compare these disparate modes of thoughts because they share striking parallels in their emphasis on unconscious relationships with space, day-to-day cognition, and normative frameworks of knowledge. Ironically, both also argue for a contested claim in architecture: that qualitative aspects of spaces directly correlate with human well-being, and that day-to-day acts of designing can contribute to qualitative improvement in people's lives. My aim here is *not* to posit these popular practices as solutions to the predicaments of contemporary architectural theory. Rather, through a close examination of these practices, I wish to explore the role that intention, active agency, and normative philosophical claims play in the pragmatic approaches that everyday users employ when they consider, choose, and experiment with traditional knowledge systems, and how those insights might inform the current impasse between essentialism and skepticism in architectural theory.

Pattern language and Feng shui have evolved historically in very different contexts. Christopher Alexander wrote *A Pattern Language* and *The Timeless Way* during the 1970s, when critiques of modernism were exploring a deeper understanding of pre-modern traditional environments. During the 1970s and 1980s a surge of interest in Alexander's pattern language transpired in academia that focused on user empowerment, the use of patterns in the design process, and community participatory design. Later, however, this interest leveled off to a quiet, punctuated by the occasional laudatory or disparaging review, mainly criticizing Alexander's work for its determinism and authoritarianism.⁵ Since its publication, however, *A Pattern Language* has continued to find enduring success with builders and contractors as well as do-it-yourself homeowners who use it mainly as a self-help practice.

Feng shui, on the other hand, originated many centuries ago in China. The earliest trace of it dates from the Chou Dynasty (1030–722 BCE). It has continuously been transformed and reformed over dynastic rules, communist regimes, and democratic revolutions. Geographically, too, the practice is varied and is practiced differently in different parts of the world. During the Communist revolution, Feng shui was banned in China and practitioners were forced to either leave China or practice secretly. As a result, in China, traces of the practice are found more in rural areas. In *Feng Shui in China: Geomantic Divination Between State Orthodoxy and Popular Religion* (2003), Ole Bruun points out that throughout its history, Feng shui has evolved into an agglomerative tradition, adopting various popular currents and defying any singular categorization.⁶ Furthermore, due to various historical reasons, Feng shui has come to acquire an anti-authoritarian force—practitioners operate outside established institutions, offering an alternative worldview that deals with almost any aspect of life.⁷ Recently, however, Feng shui has been interpreted in various ways from fashion to trustworthy cosmology, practical

science, superstition, and quackery, and receives much criticism for the ways in which it is currently being popularized as a self-inventive, self-help practice in parts of North America, Europe, and Asia, particularly in Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, and Beijing, among other places. It has primarily been disseminated through self-help books and well-respected schools, the most popular of which are the Form School, the Compass School, and the Black Hat sect of the Tantric Buddhist school of Feng shui.

Practitioners of Feng shui, who re-contextualize ancient knowledge of space-making for contemporary uses, have flourished outside of established architectural institutions, allying more with alternative holistic medicine. Despite the inevitable distortions inherent in the ways Feng shui is currently practiced as a freestyle inventive practice, I argue that insights can be derived from the methods of analysis that contemporary Feng shui practitioners use to understand buildings. I delve into Feng shui's unique cognitive framework that allows for multiple correlations to be drawn between space perception, mind-body cognition, and human well-being. I also present an analysis of key techniques that Feng shui practitioners employ to understand the body's intuitive and phenomenological interaction with space. Since these techniques share intriguing parallels with Christopher Alexander's arguments, I make comparisons between Alexander's pattern language and Feng shui in order to underscore key arguments about the role of the body in design that might help us rethink the inherent paradoxes of the post-traditional condition.

OVERVIEW OF FENG SHUI

At a very basic level, contemporary practitioners of Feng shui focus on the energy systems inside and outside of the human body. Specialists manipulate lines of energy working with knowledge that relates behavioral and emotional states such as being calm, anxious, or aggressive to specific flows of energy in the human body and in space. Most practitioners commonly use the correlative concepts of chi, yin-yang, and the five elements, which together comprise comprehensive knowledge about human beings' relationships with their environments. By allowing practitioners to look at reality through multiple lenses, this framework allows contemporary Feng shui practitioners to hold multiple associations of the metaphysical as well as the physical within one view of reality. Practitioners employ varied techniques that range from interpreting transcendental, astrological, geological, and climatic data to developing basic intuitive sensory awareness of the human body and its environment.

THE CONCEPT OF CHI

The Feng shui tradition sees the entire environment as integrated and alive with chi, the life force energy that animates both the living and non-living. Written

records emphasizing the invisible nature of chi are evident as early as the Han dynasty (179–104 BCE). One of them reads, "Within the universe exist the ethers (chi) of the yin and yang. Men are constantly immersed in them—just as fish are constantly immersed in water. The difference between them and water is that the turbulence of water is visible while the turbulence of the latter is invisible."⁸ Understanding chi in Feng shui involves developing an enlarged self-consciousness that remains aware of and attuned to energy systems and dynamic processes inherent in the environment.

THE CONCEPT OF YIN YANG

The vital force of chi is understood through the concepts of yin and yang, according to which all phenomena are the outcome of endless interaction between opposing states of chi: yin and yang. To keep the proper relationship between yin (feminine) and yang (masculine) energy, it is necessary to maintain a balance. Only in the complete harmony of yin and yang is an altered state of consciousness revealed. Feng shui, however, emphasizes that each space has different needs, which depend on the particular use and function of that space; thus, "balance of energy" has a different meaning in different contexts. For instance, a bedroom needs to have more yin than yang energy, with a rough ratio of 2/5 yang versus 3/5 yin. A retail store, on the other hand, needs more yang energy, with a ratio of 3/5 yang and 2/5 yin. In a classroom, where the space must help people stay grounded yet active, the energy balance is a close approximation of equal parts yin and yang (1/2:1/2).⁹

FORM SCHOOL

Furthermore, each of the primary directions holds great power in Feng shui philosophy and ideally is composed of certain geographical features that enhance its particular energy. For instance, the ideal site for a house is surrounded by an elevated terrain such as a mountain to the north, providing protection from the back; flanking ridges to the east and the west that cradle the site; open land with water in the front, facing the south; and possibly a river at a distance. Each direction is metaphorically associated with an animal: black tortoise to the north, green dragon to the east, white tiger to the west, and a phoenix in the front, with each animal symbolizing a particular form of energy (Figure 8.1).

Such metaphorical associations are not arbitrary. At a very basic level, landscapes and architectural structures are considered in Feng shui to be dynamic, responsive living entities that continuously interact with the forces of climate and light topography as well as socio-cultural forces. For instance, green dragon, as the most yang of the animals in Feng shui philosophy, encourages plant growth, falling in the east, the direction where the sun rises. Low-rolling hills manifest this energy; thus, when determining where to locate

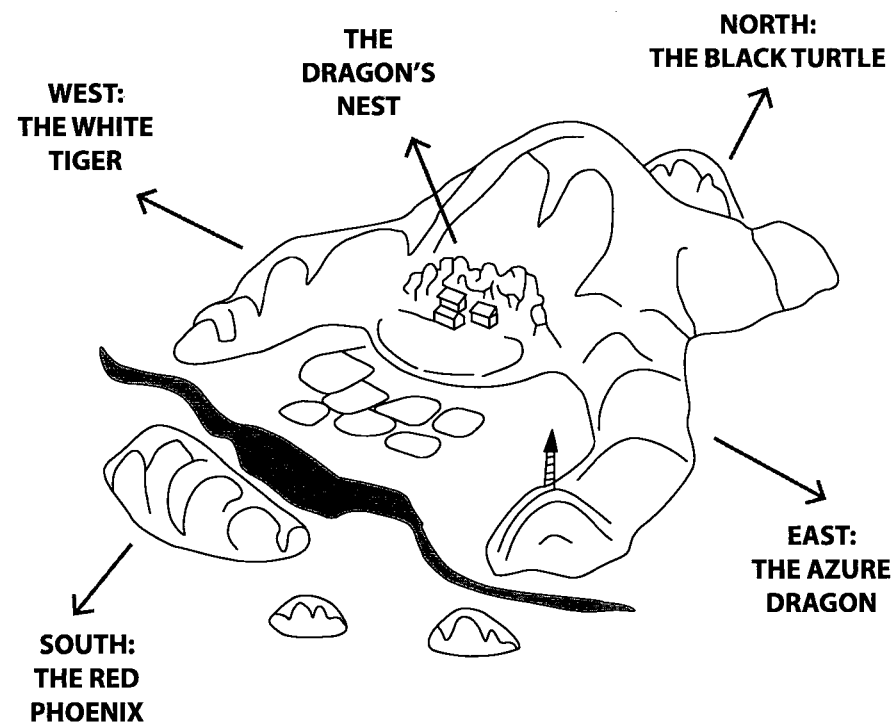


Figure 8.1 According to Feng shui, a house is ideally situated within the following landscape: a mountain or other elevated land features to the north, adding protection in the back; ridges bordering the east and the west to cradle the home; an open space with a water element in the south, facing the front; and possibly a river in the south, further in the distance. These directions all have metaphorical associations with particular animals. Black tortoise guards the north; green dragon, the east; white tiger, the west; and phoenix, the front of the site. Furthermore, each animal brings a certain type of energy to the site; for example, green dragon encourages the growth of plants. (Provided by Office of Alex Stark, Feng shui consultant. Redrawn by Andrew Blaisdell.)

a building, a Feng shui practitioner would look for a setting with low, rolling hills to the east. White tiger, to the west, brings protective yin energy, also in the form of low hills. Together, white tiger and green dragon cradle the site from the east and west. Alfred B. Hwangbo provides an explanation for such metaphorical associations:

In East Asia ... cities and buildings were designed in relation to a form of number symbolism tied to the dichotomous yin/yang, five elements, and eight trigrams. The aim was to organize the built environment to be in harmony with nature, often by determining symbolically auspicious directions. The application of Feng shui undoubtedly brought ancient East Asians peace of mind, for in using it they believed themselves to be in tune with Heaven and Earth. This presumably produced in them what would be

termed an aesthetic experience, but it was a cognitive experience dependent on specific beliefs and values.¹⁰

COMPASS SCHOOL

While these metaphorical associations are more commonly used in the Form school of Feng shui, the Compass school employs orientations in space to understand the energy flows within a site. A house that faces south, for example, is seen as receiving more cosmic energy in the form of light and heat than one facing north. Energy is said to decrease as the sun moves through the southwest, west, and northwest, returning to its calmest position in the north. Because of those associations, north is considered to possess calming, quieting energy due to its relative lack of sunlight. It is therefore suitable for tranquil activities such as sleep, recuperation, and intellectual pursuits. South, on the other hand, is considered to be highly energized, and therefore supportive of strongly active endeavors such as social interaction, business, and sports. The eastern sector of a site or structure, on the other hand, is said to be more suitable for active functions such as living rooms, home offices, and workshops. The western side is best suited for calmer spaces such as dining rooms, bedrooms, and dens. Openings such as windows and doors are seen as allowing for the penetration of energy emanating from one of the compass directions, and thus are believed to have the ability to harness the potential of that type of energy. Walls without openings, conversely, are said to block or diminish such potential. In addition, any objects that block the compass directions outside the structure are also detrimental to the particular energy from those directions, as they impede that energy from reaching the structure. Most contemporary Feng shui practitioners view such ideas as key to understanding human and architectural responses to the movement of the sun, shade, and varying temperatures.

FIVE ELEMENTS

Once Feng shui practitioners discern the flows of chi, they modify spaces using a variety of approaches. They employ color and light while introducing or taking away different types of elements such as wood, metal, water, or earth, and further combine these elements with breathing exercises, physical training, and meditation as recommendations to balance and enhance inhabitants' personal energies. In fact, Feng shui specialists work with remarkable ease through trial and error, allowing for resolutions that are variable and in constant interaction, inciting a range of after-the-fact alterations to existing spaces. Each element is conceived of as a transient state of primal chi, rather than as a stable element in itself, and the theory of five elements further delineates this understanding, as the five elements of water, wood, fire, earth, and metal are understood to be moving through a continual cycle of transformation involving mutual "production" and mutual "overcoming" or "destruction."

Between elemental energies there are also important contradictions, which show how within productive flows lie destructive flows. For instance, water will put out fire, but fire and water are also engaged in a productive cycle, with fire changing liquid water to steam.¹¹ Neither the productive nor the destructive cycle is necessarily positive or negative in black-and-white terms; rather, as a whole, they represent ways to balance the energy flow within a space by either introducing or taking away elements.

Auspicious moments occur when two elements come together in a productive relationship and in harmony. Feng shui allows one to introduce elements or remove them within an environment to achieve balance. For instance, if the basic element is wood, one can either introduce wood to enhance wood energy, or introduce water, which feeds and nourishes wood. The fact that elements are not perceived as physical things but as elemental energies allows Feng shui experts to use metaphorical associations to justify solutions, thus allowing for a richer and more concrete understanding of abstract concepts. For instance, wood is taken to be symbolic of spring and is associated with creation, nourishment, and growth. Tree and forest environments are generally tall and soaring. Built environments that are not made up of wood, but are tall and soaring, such as pillars, minarets, chimneys, or skyscrapers, can thus be metaphorically likened to wood, and therefore with creation, nourishment, and growth.¹² Such associations are not arbitrary; they derive meaning through metaphorical reasoning and are part of a larger correlative system of thinking. Through such metaphorical references Feng shui, in its contemporary form, is practiced as systematic interpretive art, and functions in a worldview in which synchronicity rather than causality determines human spatial relationships. While providing a normative framework through which users can make design decisions, Feng shui practice allows room to develop and deepen human intuitive responses in the process.

CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER'S PATTERN LANGUAGE

Christopher Alexander's arguments in *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (1977), *The Timeless Way of Building* (1979), and *The Oregon Experiment* (1975), which proposed a radical rethinking of the everyday in architecture by providing a language of patterns that empower users to design their own environments, share key epistemic concerns with Feng shui. Alexander's central claim that patterns of everyday life indicate the presence of unconscious relationships with space, and that these relationships can be brought to the conscious realm and improved upon is similar to Feng shui's discernment of energy flows and its emphasis on individuals' agency to enhance their own well-being. Moreover, Alexander's critique of architecture brings to light the idea that deep subjective feelings and unconscious processes reframe conceptions of objectivity.¹³ For Alexander, traditional pre-modern built environments remain excellent examples of un-self-conscious methods of construction, through which buildings "cannot be made, but only generated

indirectly, by the ordinary actions of people."¹⁴ Highlighting such attributes of traditional buildings, Alexander criticizes the focus on formal and visual concerns in modern architectural thought, stressing that architects criticize paying conscious attention to buildings, letting processes happen on their own accord in order to enhance "innate human capacities for intuitive learning."¹⁵

Alexander's *Pattern Language* includes 253 patterns that provide suggestions with which to rethink everyday spaces, ranging from living areas to kitchens, secret alcoves, workplaces, and bathrooms. The ability of patterns to reconfigure and evolve naturally into a language forms the basis of Alexander's epistemology. Arguing that a language of patterns develops from a network of connections among individual patterns, and that the links between patterns are almost as much a part of the language as the patterns themselves, Alexander stresses in *The Timeless Way of Building* that whether a language "lives" or not depends on the degree to which the patterns come together to form a "whole" (Figure 8.2).¹⁶

The truest test of patterns' validity lies in how they merge together to affect human experience, ultimately dissolving an individual's need to rely on patterns as she learns to rely completely on intuitive processes when designing environments. Furthermore, the fact that patterns are often placed side by side highlights their correlative influence on one another. When different patterns are joined together, qualitative aspects of space, such as encouraging socialization and providing optimal lighting, accrue cumulatively and influence human well-being. Such understanding, according to Alexander, is key to comprehending how good and nurturing environments can be created. He

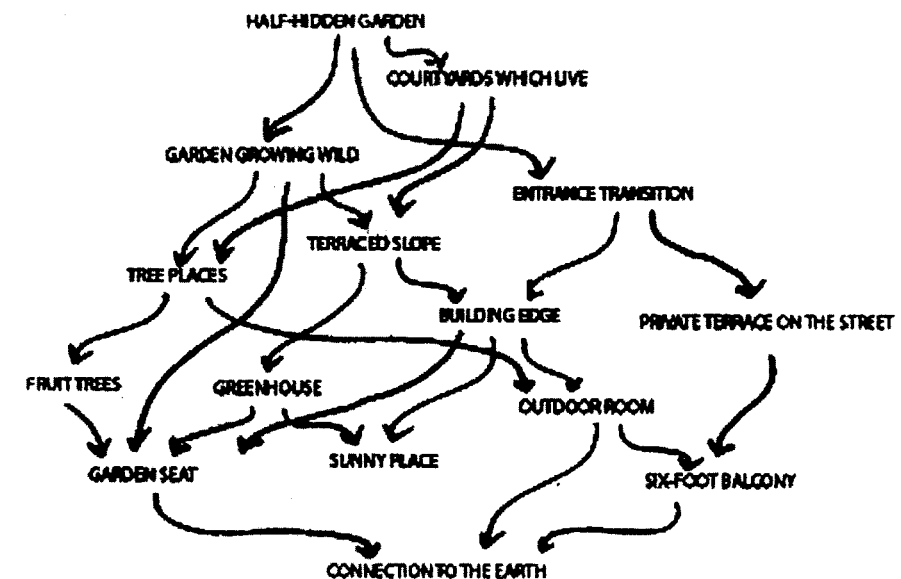


Figure 8.2 Language for a garden. The links between patterns are a vital part of the language of patterns. (*The Timeless Way*, p. 314.)

refers to the creation of this quality of a space as “the quality without a name” in an essay by the same title. Describing it as alive, whole, comfortable, free, exact, egoless, eternal, and ordinary, Alexander argues that while not a single word does it justice, the quality can be argued to be objective and precise.¹⁷ Much like Alexander’s patterns, these metaphors together describe the cumulative qualitative influence that spaces have on the human body.¹⁸

COMPARISONS OF FENG SHUI AND PATTERN LANGUAGE

Feng shui shares with pattern language an emphasis on deeply felt human intuitions and needs as well as a fundamental critique of modern thought. Feng shui, however, defies any categorization using western epistemological constructs. Alfred B. Hwangbo has described Feng shui as “an unnameable discipline,” a *mélange* of arts and sciences that governs design issues of architecture and planning, embracing a wide range of human interests, including ancient cosmology.¹⁹ The parallels between “unnameable discipline” and Christopher Alexander’s “quality without a name” are apparent, and they become even more striking in Joseph Needham’s description of Feng shui in *Science in the Early Civilization of China*, wherein he describes it as a “thought-form” in which “conceptions are not subsumed under one another, but placed side by side in a ‘pattern,’ and things influence one another not by acts of mechanical causation, but by a kind of ‘inductance.’” Needham argues that this “intuitive-associative system has its own causality and its own logic.”²⁰

Similar to Alexander’s illustrative patterns, Feng shui abounds in suggestions by which day-to-day living can be enriched, drawing correlations between human tendencies and spatial layouts. For instance, Feng shui holds that one should not have a direct view of the kitchen space from any other given room because that would stir a response to eat when not hungry (Figure 8.3).

Similarly, a bed directly aligned between a door and a window, or even a bed directly aligned with a door, can cause unrestful sleep because in the first case, energy will flow too swiftly, and in the second, it will flow directly in a straight line like a poisoned arrow toward the sleeping person (Figures 8.4 and 8.5). Such thinking pervades Feng shui even on a larger scale; for instance, the corner of a large building angled toward a small building can send a strong line of *sha-chi* (attacking chi that is considered bad in Feng shui) toward the smaller structure (Figure 8.6), or an interior corner in an office pointed at an occupant’s back can cause psychological discomfort due to the aggressive energy behind the person (Figure 8.7). These suggestions echo the yin-yang philosophy, which emphasizes balance between yin (feminine) and yang (masculine) energy. Similar to Feng shui’s claims that a bedroom needs to have more yin than yang energy, or that a classroom needs to have an energy balance in a close approximation of equal parts yin and yang (1/2:1/2) so students will stay grounded yet active,²¹ Alexander’s patterns also emphasize architecture’s ability to create a positive or a negative social atmosphere. For instance, in a pattern titled “Alcoves” (Pattern: 179), Alexander argues that a “homogenous,”

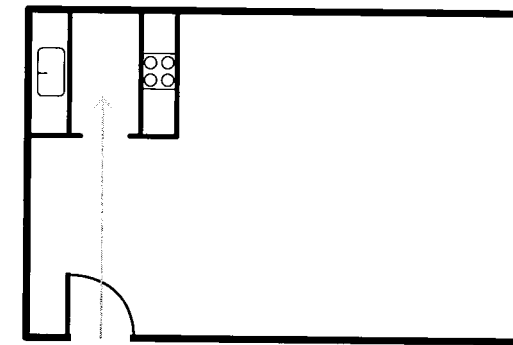
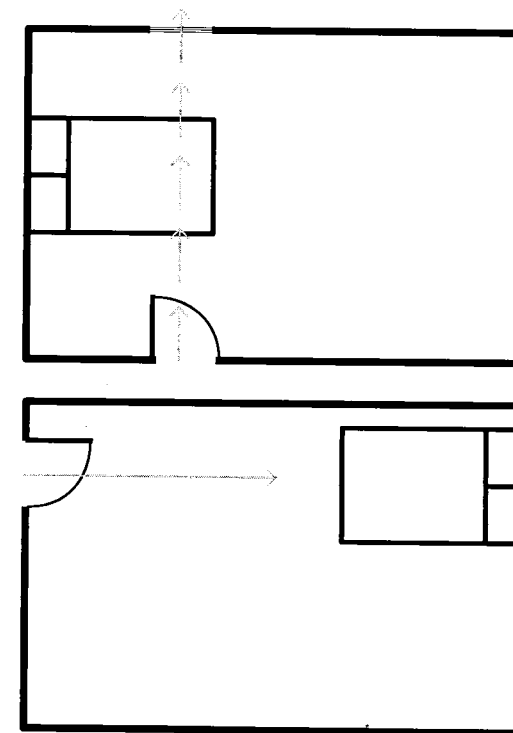


Figure 8.3 Direct view of the kitchen. Feng shui offers much advice for improving everyday life by paying attention to intuitive human tendencies and responses to spatial layouts. For instance, rooms should avoid a direct view of the kitchen, according to Feng shui, since that would prompt inhabitants to eat when they’re not hungry. (Provided by Office of Alex Stark, Feng shui consultant. Redrawn by Andrew Blaisdell.)



Figures 8.4 and 8.5 Poisoned arrow. Placing a bed directly between a door and window causes energy to flow too quickly, and placing it in front of a door draws energy toward the sleeping person in a direct line like a poisoned arrow. (Provided by Office of Alex Stark, Feng shui consultant. Redrawn by Andrew Blaisdell.)

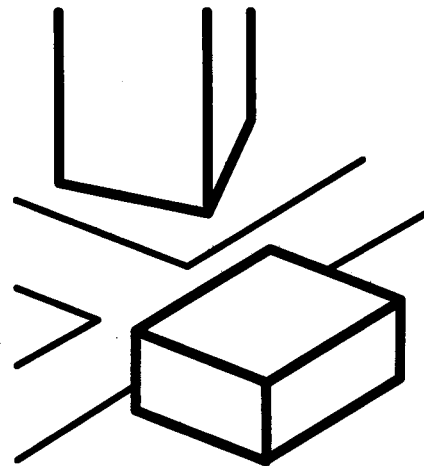


Figure 8.6 Attacking chi. If the corner of a large building points toward a small one, it sends a direct line of *sha-chi* (harmful attacking chi) toward the smaller building. (Provided by Office of Alex Stark, Feng shui consultant. Redrawn by Andrew Blaisdell.)

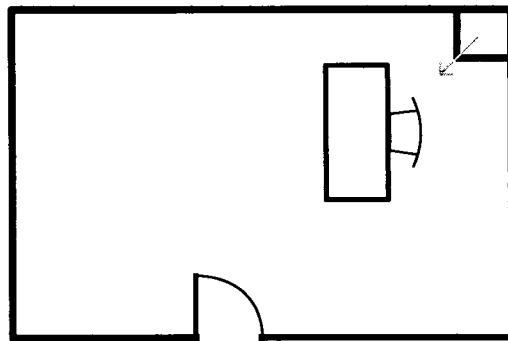
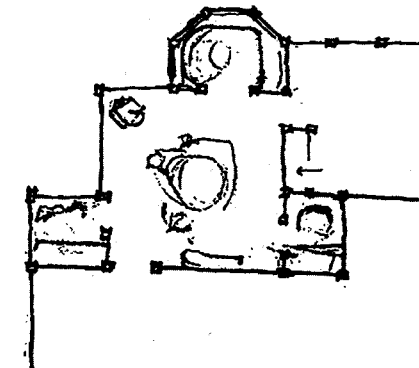


Figure 8.7 Office corner. In an office setting, an occupant may experience psychological discomfort if a corner is pointed at her back, since the corner directs aggressive energy toward the occupant. (Provided by Office of Alex Stark, Feng shui consultant. Redrawn by Andrew Blaisdell.)

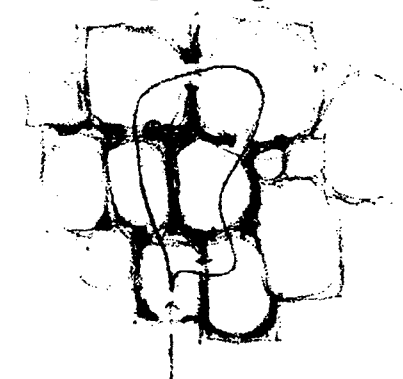
“unresolved” space can drive a family apart, saying a communal room must give people a chance to be alone or in pairs (Figure 8.8). Alexander suggests that such spaces can be differentiated through alcoves encouraging two people to sit, chat, or play, providing niches for privacy. In another pattern, “The Flow Through Rooms” (Pattern: 131), Alexander argues that dark, narrow passages create an inhospitable environment—“rooms open off to them as dead ends; you spend your time moving between rooms, like a crab scuttling in the dark.”²² Arguing that human relations are inevitably subtle, and that spaces must allow a generous flow for those instincts to play out, Alexander suggests avoiding corridors, instead creating loops of public common rooms with linkages to private rooms (Figure 8.9).



Family room alcoves.

Figure 8.8 Alcoves. In a pattern titled “Alcoves,” Alexander asserts that a communal room must accommodate people’s needs for privacy or it will drive them apart. He suggests differentiating family spaces by creating alcoves for two people to sit, chat, or play in. (Pattern 179, “Alcoves,” *A Pattern Language*, pp. 828–32.)

loops through rooms



wide doors

generosity of movement

Figure 8.9 The flow through rooms. Arguing that in a complex social fabric, human relations are inevitably subtle, and that spaces must have a generous flow to allow those instincts to play out, Alexander suggests avoiding corridors, instead creating loops of public common rooms with linkages to private rooms. (Pattern 131, “The Flow Through Rooms,” *A Pattern Language*, p. 631.)

Much like Feng Shui’s emphasis on discerning flows of energy, in which interrupting or severing energy lines or “veins” is considered seriously detrimental to the ability of land to support life and health for its inhabitants, Alexander’s patterns stress the importance of recognizing the natural flow of a space and emphasize how purely functional concerns can be detrimental to human well-being. For instance, in the pattern “Staircase as a Stage,” Alexander

writes: "A staircase is not just a way of getting from one floor to another. The stair is itself a space, a volume, a part of the building; and unless this space is made to live, it will be a dead spot, and work to disconnect the building and to tear its processes apart."²³ He argues that one should design stairs in such a way that they become fully integrated with the rest of the building, providing a gradual and natural transition to the next level wherein people are naturally inclined to sit and chat.

Yet another parallel emphasizing natural human tendencies is evident in a pattern entitled "Hierarchy of Open Space" (Pattern: 114), in which Alexander describes how, when in open spaces, people tend to intuitively find comfort in spots where they have their backs protected, looking out toward some larger opening.²⁴ For Alexander, such intuitive responses of users provide insights for designing better environments. The idea of psychological comfort provided by a strong back is central in Feng shui as well, and it is emphasized at various scales. For instance, within a building's site, good support is known to be provided by somewhat higher and more substantial buildings positioned in the back. Likewise, when sleeping, a strong headboard provides essential support, and the bed should have a solid wall at the back, allowing the inhabitant a full view of the room and the door opening (Figure 8.10). Such recommendations extend to the interior of an office space as well, wherein Feng shui emphasizes that a person should not take a position facing his back to the door, but should face the door directly, fully able to observe who is entering and leaving the room. This position gives the person the psychological comfort of remaining aware of who is in the room and what is taking place within it (Figure 8.11). People naturally feel safer and thus more comfortable when they are in full command of their surroundings, and both Feng shui and pattern language honor these intuitive responses.

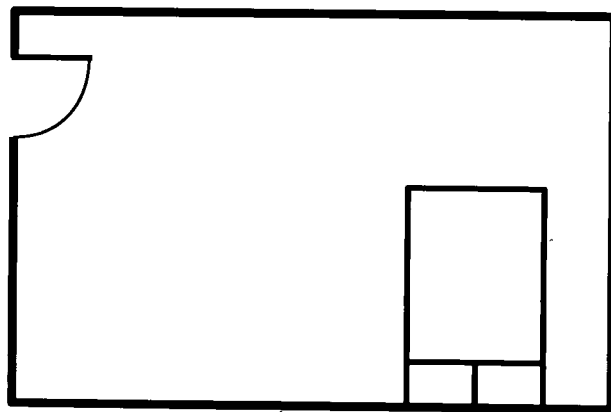


Figure 8.10 Position of a bed. A bed should be situated in a position that lets the occupant fully observe the entryway, and should have a strong back, providing a sense of comfort and protection. (Provided by Office of Alex Stark, Feng shui consultant. Redrawn by Andrew Blaisdell.)

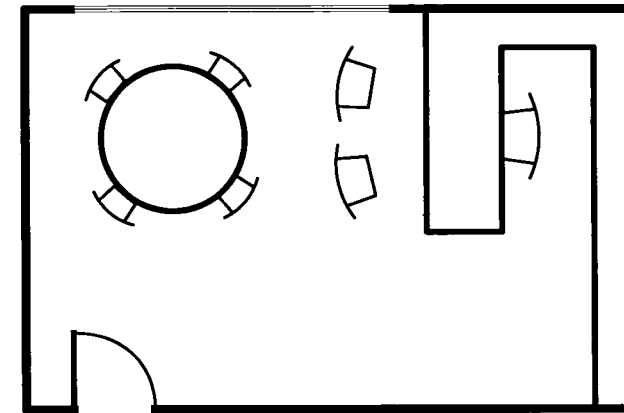


Figure 8.11 Commanding position within an office interior. Within an office arrangement, one should sit with his back to a solid wall and be located diagonally opposite the door to the room. The user should face the door directly, able to see everyone who walks through the doorway, which allows the user the psychological comfort of knowing what is happening within the room. To further enhance feelings of security, sharp corners from columns, beams or overhead soffits should not point at or loom above work spaces. (Provided by Office of Alex Stark, Feng shui consultant. Redrawn by Andrew Blaisdell.)

Following such Feng shui guidelines, users can begin to intuitively discern design solutions through the "felt" experience of energy flow. Feng shui holds that one's intuition can serve as a guide for what is most beneficial. In fact, an emphasis on the felt is well-integrated into a normative understanding of the "balance of energies" and "good" Feng shui. Chi is said to flow in curves in its most natural state, and Feng shui experts emphasize that movement of chi should neither be too swift nor too slow. When chi is forced into straight lines, it starts to behave like an arrow from a bow that threatens to wound anything at the receiving end. For instance, a site located at the end of a long, straight road is considered at risk, as chi is said to accelerate along the road, creating detrimental conditions. Such a normative understanding of the "good" flow of chi in Feng shui functions to further deepen the discernment of the felt experience, which does not remain merely subjective but develops an objective basis in the human body and in architectural space.

The idea that objectivity is not dispassionate and can evolve from deeply embodied subjective feelings is an argument that pervades much of Alexander's work as well. To seek this understanding and knowledge, Alexander argues that architects should let go of all the methods of architecture they know, and move away from paying conscious attention to buildings. This process "will enhance innate human capacities for intuitive learning," he asserts.²⁵ In this framework of knowledge, objectivity and subjectivity are not mutually exclusive but are intertwined and in constant flux. Alexander calls for dissolution of the binary framework of knowledge, describing his work as "a search for the quality of things that is subjective, cannot be named, and yet has an objectivity

and precision to it.”²⁶ Such precision, he clarifies, cannot be attained mechanically, as it is based on deep human feelings and needs. In *A Pattern Language*, his discussion of a pattern for sleeping (Pattern 138: “Sleeping to the East”) serves as a particularly strong illustration of how subjective feelings can be argued to have an objective basis (Figure 8.12). In this pattern, Alexander argues that when deciding which space is most appropriate for sleeping, one must pay attention to the needs of the human body when waking from sleep. He begins by saying that this is one of the patterns that people most often disagree with, for, they argue, “What if one had an intention to sleep late? Why would someone want to be woken up by the sun?” In expressing such concerns, Alexander points out, people often assume that such decisions are only a matter of personal preference. On the contrary, he argues, sensitive biological clocks within the human body work in conjunction with natural rhythms and cycles. The human body is attuned to its own needs for rest, and light will affect it differently depending on how much rest it needs. The description of the pattern reads:

Since the sun warms you, increases the light, gently nudges you, you are likely to wake up at a moment which serves you the best. Therefore, the right place for sleeping is one which provides morning light—consequently a window in the room that lets in eastern light—and a bed that provides a view of the light without being directly in the light shaft.²⁷

Alexander’s pattern “Sleeping to the East” corresponds well with the practice of Feng shui, in which eastern exposure in the morning is associated with arousing yang energy that raises vitality. Often Alexander suggests a “right place,” or “a more or less correct way,” and he argues that this concept of rightness is based on deep human sensations and needs, which aligns well with Feng shui philosophy’s emphasis on intuitive processes through which users relate to and find balance in their environments.

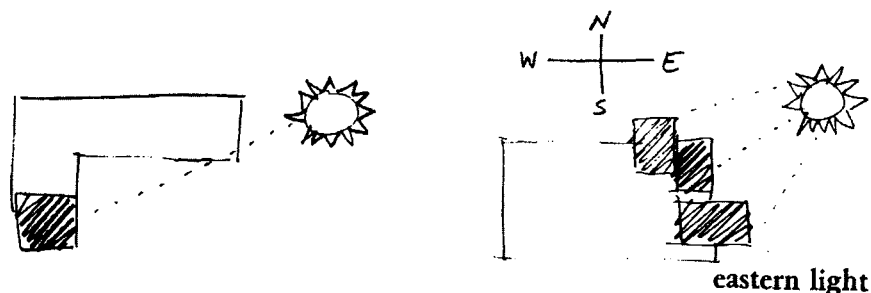


Figure 8.12 Sleeping to the east. Alexander writes, “Give those parts of the house where people sleep, an eastern orientation, so that they wake up with the sun and light. This means, typically, that the sleeping area needs to be on the eastern side of the house; but it can also be on the western side provided there is a courtyard or a terrace to the east of it.” (*A Pattern Language*, pattern 138, pp. 656–9.)

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND AGENCY OF THE EVERYDAY USER

Agency and self-knowledge are central to Christopher Alexander’s pattern language, which aims to improve the cognitive capabilities of its users through its easy-to-understand patterns, which are amenable to modification. In fact, the success of pattern language has been attributed to the patterns’ ability to function as concrete prototypes, in that patterns have the ability to project a reality grounded in concrete experiences that users can immediately relate to and use to reconfigure the most intimate of their spaces.²⁸

Similarly, the effectiveness of Feng shui is largely dependent on the intention and intuition that the user brings to it, and Feng shui achieves its communicability through its easy-to-comprehend tools that users can relate to. One such commonly employed tool in Feng shui is called the *ba-gua*, which is an octagonal figure that allocates eight trigrams to the eight compass directions, drawing comprehensive correlations between the human body, the five elements, and qualitative aspects of spaces in a diagrammatic form. Each trigram or sector relates to parts of the human body, which correspond to colors that signify meanings, which, in turn, further correlate to some aspect of a person’s life or aspirations.²⁹ Besides providing direct correlations based on the flow of energy meridians within the human body and surrounding spaces, the *ba-gua* also functions as an easy-to-understand scheme of representation that creates a trustworthy and knowable framework to encourage human creativity and experimentation within a system of constraints.

Furthermore, Alexander’s key arguments aim to dissolve the boundaries between professional designers and everyday users. In a similar way, Feng shui connects the specialist with the user; in fact, the personal encounter between specialist and client is considered essential to any remedy in Feng shui. Because intentional development of trust, both in the practice and in the practitioner, is an integral part of Feng shui, its mode of functioning has often been likened to that of a placebo. Such an interpretation acknowledges that human perception is not based entirely on outside “objective” reality, but to a major degree on what the human mind expects to happen. The idea that expectancy can trigger massive cognitive and physiological responses that often provide benefits that parallel or transcend the effects of drugs or other therapies is now well-recognized in the medical profession. Through conscious and intentional development of trust and expectations both in one’s ability to develop one’s intuitive capabilities and in the practitioner’s expertise, Feng shui allows for psychosomatic responses that further the effectiveness of the functional correlations between human bodies and spaces.

Such connections between the feelings of individuals and their normative basis are increasingly being explored by emerging somatic practices, which comprise a variety of approaches such as the Feldenkrais method, the Alexander technique, body-mind centering, eutony, yoga, the martial arts, and dance movement therapy. These practices argue for mind-body cognition and place a great deal of emphasis on the student or client’s active participation. Practitioners claim that in modern medicine, the body has been approached as an object and

studied as something external and separate from the self. Somatic practitioners, in contrast, approach the body as a subject, experienced from within rather than from without. In dissolving the object-subject split, somatic practitioners argue for the recognition (“re-cognition”) of the fact that the human body is the grounds from which one needs to explore experience.

Moreover, the key issue that somatic practitioners often focus on is patterns—or rather, the re-patterning of thought, movement and behavior—arguing that unconscious patterns that the body engages in can affect functioning at all levels: physiological, psychological, social, and spiritual. Somatics argues against the objectified, static view of the body and holds that the body, like the mind, remains in constant flux, changing from moment to moment in response to the underlying processes of which it is an expression. In doing so, somatics argues for the unlearning of the cultural conditioning that ignores internal sensory experience, and attends to subtle fluctuations within the body-mind, using various techniques such as touch, tissue manipulation, sensory awareness, body imagery, and movement.³⁰ Through the use of specific techniques, these therapies bring awareness to unconscious patterns, introduce new sensations and choices for response, and support changes leading to greater mind-body integration, health, and well-being. Much like other somatic therapies, Feng shui aims to achieve a re-patterning of thoughts, processes, and behaviors as well as greater well-being through a wide range of spatial reconfigurations which, according to Feng shui, have the ability to refocus energies within spaces to benefit their occupants.

Alexander’s pattern language also emphasizes reconfiguration of spaces, making the argument that buildings can come “alive,” and asking his readers to pay attention to the *moments* when buildings come “alive,” and when buildings could be argued to be “more real” or “less real.” For instance, in the pattern called “Zen View” (Pattern: 134), Alexander shows how the design of a Zen monk’s house provides a beautiful view of the ocean only once—and just momentarily—through a narrow slit in the wall as the monk passes across the courtyard (Figure 8.13). The decision to restrain the view is suggestive of the design’s capacity to counterbalance natural human tendencies toward excess. As Alexander asserts, “the view of the distant sea is so restrained that it stays alive forever.”³¹ Arguing that design decisions can impact and influence the experience of a more “real world” that is radically different from the physical world as seen, Alexander writes, “When I say something is real, I mean that the fundamental neurological processes and deep-seated cognitive processes going on in the brain are actually taking place in a holistic way. ... and the person who is seeing a thing holistically is actually seeing what is congruent within it instead of just its physical geometry.”³² For Alexander, we perceive more than we consciously see, and are affected by it on a deep level, so that the most extraordinary of experiences can be achieved in the most ordinary of lives.

Alexander’s emphasis on paying attention to the moments “when buildings become real” is similar to analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman’s arguments for aesthetic cognition in his *Languages of Art* (1968), in which Goodman stresses that the question to ask is *not* “What is Art?” but “When is Art?” or,

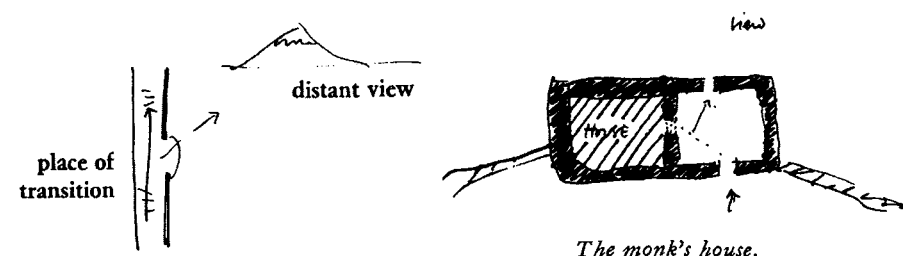


Figure 8.13 Zen view. In a pattern called “Zen View,” Alexander gives an example of a Buddhist monk who lived high in the mountains in view of an ocean. He points out that because of deliberate spatial moves, the beautiful view of the ocean cannot be seen from the monk’s house or the road leading to the house. The monk can view the ocean just briefly when he walks across a courtyard to his house and passes by a narrow slit in the wall, which allows him to view the ocean at that spot. For Alexander, this provides an interesting insight, because “the view of the distant sea is so restrained that it stays alive forever.” Such design moderates natural human tendencies toward overindulgence. By restraining the view, the design allows for a long-lasting appreciation. (*A Pattern Language*, pattern 134: Zen View, pp. 641–3.)

“When Art happens,” arguing that aesthetic experiences are not limited to art, but can happen anytime in our everyday lives. More importantly, “when art happens,” Goodman asks us to pay attention to moments of non-judgment and disinterest that allow the subject to experience the deeply transformative potential of aesthetics.³³ Furthermore, for Goodman, buildings often communicate metaphorically, and one can make distinctions between different metaphorical connotations. For instance, a Gothic cathedral that soars and sings does not equally droop and grumble. Although both descriptions are literally false, the former, but not the latter, can be argued to be metaphorically true.³⁴ Making such metaphorical discriminations allows an understanding of how feelings and emotions affect our perceptions of buildings, and how such deep feelings can be distinguished from one another.

The argument that metaphorical distinctions allow principal insight into understanding knowledge in Feng shui and in Christopher Alexander’s writings also aligns well with the contemporary debates in cognitive sciences wherein philosophers such as Mark Johnson and George Lakoff have challenged conventional understanding of metaphors as mere poetical or rhetorical embellishments, arguing that they are part of everyday speech that affects the ways in which we perceive, think, and act. Therefore, it needs to be recognized that metaphors play a critical role in knowledge formation. Blurring conventional binary distinctions in western epistemology between reason and emotion, Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors are not dispassionate or disembodied, but grow out of bodily capacities, further reinforcing the point that our bodies, our brains, and our interactions with our environments need to be acknowledged as an important unconscious basis for our everyday sense of what is real.³⁵

Furthermore, the claims of contemporary Feng shui and pattern language—to reinsert the body into architectural theory—also align well with Richard Shusterman's recent work on somaesthetics, wherein Shusterman steps outside the traditional domain of art to examine somatic practices, arguing that they not only free us from bodily habits and defects that tend to impair cognitive performance, but also enrich our lives by integrating a rich aesthetic experience into our everyday lives.³⁶ In doing so, Shusterman further argues, these everyday practices reinvent the postmodern subject. Unlike the Foucauldian subject under a constant panoptic gaze, there emerges an agent who—through a focus on self-knowledge and self-interpretation—is capable of challenging the repressive power relations encoded in our bodies.³⁷ However, Shusterman points out that this awareness of the body's feelings and movement has long been criticized in western philosophical traditions as a harmful distraction that corrupts our ethics through fostering self-absorption,³⁸ a point that further highlights the lack of recognition given to the human body in modern western epistemology.

CONCLUSION

Neither pattern language nor contemporary Feng shui is a fully convincing example of a re-conceptualization of traditional knowledge—not that there can ever be a complete and pure translation. Furthermore, there is no denying that they both have their legitimate critics: Feng shui is criticized as a practice in which human gratification is pursued unwaveringly, and Alexander's work has been criticized for being too focused on comfort, legibility, pleasure, ease, and bourgeois satisfaction. However, as self-help practices, they present cognitive frameworks that allow users to experiment with traditional knowledge systems, providing insights about the intuitive and constantly interactive mechanisms by which human bodies relate to space. Although they remain marginal in the academy, they ironically continue to influence architectural thought with the claim that our cumulative experiences of the nature of the spaces we live in affect our mental, physical, and neurological systems. By highlighting how normative frameworks of knowledge that emerge from the body can support and deepen the user's self-knowledge and agency, the two practices, blur the oppositions that exist between essentialist versus skeptical attitudes toward premodern traditional practices. Most importantly, by re-inserting the user's insight and intuition into the design process while emphasizing how design affects the body—both Alexander's pattern language and Feng shui prompt a richer understanding of the concepts “body” and “design” that allows for the generation of designs that more fully enhance human well-being.

NOTES

1 For a critique of skepticism, see Ritu Bhatt, “The Significance of the Aesthetic in Postmodern Architectural Theory,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 53, no. 4 (May 2000): 229–38.

- 2 Advocates of the post-critical position include Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, “Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism,” eds. Michael Osman, Adan Ruedig, Matthew Seidel, and Lisa Tinley, *Mining Autonomy*, special issue of *Perspecta* 33 (2002): 72–7; Michael Speaks, “Design Intelligence, Part 1: Introduction,” *A+U: Architecture and Urbanism* (December 2002): 10–18. See also George Baird, “‘Criticality’ and its Discontents,” *Harvard Design Magazine* 21 (Fall/Winter 2004): 16–21; and Reinhold Martin, “Critical of What? Toward a Utopian Realism,” *Harvard Design Magazine* 22 (Spring/Summer 2005): 104–9. For debates about “critical” versus “neo-critical” and the operative role of theory, see a compendium of essays published in *Critical Architecture*, eds. Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser, and Mark Dorrian, London: Routledge, 2007. The essays as a whole provide an important critique of the post-critical turn in architecture.
- 3 In post-traditional societies, wherein tradition no longer constitutes the basis for our actions, Anthony Giddens postulates that societies evolve a modern reflexivity wherein agents begin to choose and control parts of their everyday lives to a greater extent than before. Anthony Giddens as cited in Kaspersen, “The Analysis of Modernity: Globalization, the Transformation of Intimacy, and the Post-Traditional Society,” 106–9. Giddens argues that self-identity in post-traditional societies must be understood as a reflexive project for which the individual is responsible. By using knowledge developed by expert systems, we are able to control a part of our everyday lives, and we, therefore, become re-skilled. However, the expert system also de-skills us (109). Also see Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in Late Modern Age*, Stanford UP, 1991, 70–108.
- 4 Christopher Alexander, S. Ishikawa, M. Silverstein, M. Jacobson, I. Fiksdahl-King, S. Angel, *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*, NY: Oxford UP, 1977; and Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*, NY: Oxford UP, 1979.
- 5 See K. Dovey, “The Pattern Language and Its Enemies,” *Design Studies* II, no. 1 (Jan. 1990): 3–9. For a reading that highlights the phenomenological leanings of Alexander's work, see D. Seamon, “Concretizing Heidegger's Notion of Dwelling: The Contributions of Thomas Thiis Evenson and Christopher Alexander,” *Building and Dwelling*, ed. E. Fuhr, Munich: Waxmann Verlag GmbH; NY: Waxmann; 2000, 189–202.
- 6 Bruun, “Feng Shui: A Challenge to Anthropology,” *Feng Shui in China: Geomantic Divination Between State Orthodoxy and Popular Religion*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003, 1–33.
- 7 Some respected texts of Feng shui include: Sarah Rossbach, *Feng Shui: The Chinese Art of Placement*; Jami Lin, *The Feng Shui Anthology: Contemporary Earth Design*; and Derek Walters, *Chinese Geomancy*.
- 8 Hwangbo cites a prominent philosopher of the Han Dynasty, Tung Chung-shu (179–104 BCE), who conceptualized chi in his book *Chun-chiu Fan lu* (“Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals”). See Hwangbo, “An Alternative Tradition in Architecture: Conceptions in Feng Shui and Its Continuous Tradition,” 112.
- 9 Alex Stark (Feng shui specialist) in discussion with the author, May 21, 2010.
- 10 Hwangbo, “A New Millennium and Feng Shui,” 196.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 In a similar vein, the element fire is associated with intellect and education, and pointed, sharply angled shapes are seen as symbolic of those qualities. Spaces of learning are generally associated with fire. On the other hand, spaces for cooking, such as kitchens and stoves, are also associated with fire because they use fire. Eyes are also correlated with fire, as well as with human desire, insight, and aspiration.
- 13 See also Ritu Bhatt, “Christopher Alexander's Pattern Language: An Alternative Exploration of Space-Making Practices,” *The Journal of Architecture* 15, no. 6 (Dec. 2010): 711–29.
- 14 See Alexander, *The Timeless Way*, 10–11 for a discussion of pre-modern built environments as un-self-conscious methods of construction. The quotation appears on page xi of the same text.
- 15 Ibid., ix (also see 546).
- 16 Alexander, *The Timeless Way*, xii and 314.

- 17 Alexander, "The Quality without a Name," *The Timeless Way of Building*, NY: Oxford UP, 1979, 19-40.
- 18 The fact that patterns have the ability to reappear, reconfigure, and evolve into a language naturally, allowing people to share and enhance experience and knowledge, attests to the influence pattern language is known to have had on innovations such as wikis—collaborative websites that allows users to compile their collective knowledge—as well as other grassroots communities. Such reception of pattern language beyond architecture further reinforces the point that patterns in everyday life play a critical role in socially distributed processes of cognition, and that reinforcement of human knowledge and cognition does not occur only within individuals, but through complex combinations of individuals, and their interactions with objects and spaces in our environment. The influence of pattern languages now extends beyond everyday users in architecture, and pattern language is well-acclaimed in computer programming and combinatorial design for its ability to provide powerful theoretical frameworks upon which to anchor complex design decisions.
- 19 Alfred B. Hwangbo, "An Alternative Tradition in Architecture: Conceptions in Feng Shui and Its Continuous Tradition," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 111.
- 20 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 2, Cambridge UP, 1956, 280–1. For more on correlative thinking and conceptions, see John B. Henderson, *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology*, NY: Columbia UP, 1984, 1–58.
- 21 Alex Stark (Feng shui specialist) in discussion with the author, May 21, 2010.
- 22 Alexander, *A Pattern Language*, 628–31.
- 23 Alexander, *A Pattern Language*, 638.
- 24 Alexander, *A Pattern Language*, 557–60.
- 25 Alexander, *The Timeless Way*, ix (also see 546).
- 26 Ibid., 12 and 25.
- 27 Alexander cites a study by Dr London at the San Francisco Medical School that claims our whole day depends critically on the conditions in which we wake up. If we wake up immediately after a period of dreaming (REM sleep), we will feel ebullient, energetic, and refreshed for the whole day because certain critical hormones are injected into the bloodstream immediately after REM sleep. If, however, we wake up during delta sleep (another type of sleep, which happens in between periods of dreaming), we feel irritable, drowsy, flat, and lethargic all day long because the necessary hormones are not in the bloodstream at the critical moment of awakening (*A Pattern Language*, 658).
- 28 Tom Erickson, "Lingua Franca for Design: Sacred Places and Pattern Languages," *The Proceedings of DIS 2000*, eds. D. Boyarski and W. Kellogg, NY: ACM Press, 2000, 357–68.
- 29 For instance, the direction south, Li, is associated with the color red; the element fire; the body part, eyes; and the qualities of insight and clarity; as well as the human aspirations of recognition and fame.
- 30 For more on somatic philosophy, see Hanna, *The Body of Life: Creating New Pathways for Sensory Awareness and Fluid Movement*.
- 31 Ibid., 642–3.
- 32 Alexander was highly influenced by Jerome Bruner, one of the pioneers of cognitive psychology at Harvard's Center for Cognitive Studies. The actual quote reads as follows: "There is a certain sense in which the holistic perception actually corresponds more closely to the real structure of the thing being perceived. But just saying that raises a very interesting topic. I know that this is one of the reasons why some people dislike my work. They say he's so dogmatic; or what does he mean by 'real' or 'not real'?" After all, we have people seeing this thing in such and such a way and how could he dare say that what they are seeing is not real? And this is the sort of typical kind of criticism that is often leveled at my work. However, we happen to be caught in this weird sort of nominalist period of philosophical history at the moment where someone will say that however you choose to see something is the way you see it; or however you choose to name it is the way you name it. And of course that coincides with pluralism and is a genuine reaction against positivism. So what do I mean when I say that there is a certain perception of this that is more real? I am actually making two different

statements: one of them is psychological and one of them has to do with physics. The psychological statement that I am making is that the fundamental neurological processes and deep-seated cognitive processes going on in the brain are actually taking place in the holistic way and that the sequential way is secondary and constructed out of it. That's the first thing that I mean when I say that one is more real than the other. ... Now the second thing is that when I say it corresponds to physics, I mean that the holistic perception is congruent with the behavior of the reality being perceived. ... the person who is seeing the thing holistically is actually seeing what is congruent with the behavior of the thing and not just its physical geometry." Alexander, *Christopher Alexander: The Search for a New Paradigm in Architecture*, 195–6. Also see R. Bhatt and J. Brand, "Christopher Alexander: A Review Essay," *Design Issues* XXIV, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 93–102.

- 33 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976).
- 34 Goodman, "How Buildings Mean," *Reconceptions in Philosophy* (co-authored with Catherine Elgin), London: Routledge, 1988, 40.
- 35 See G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, 1981, 3–24. Also see G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, NY: Basic Books, 1999, 17.
- 36 Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and the Body/Media Issue," *Performing Live*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000, 137–53.
- 37 Shusterman, "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57, no. 3. (Summer, 1999), 299–313. In this proposal, Shusterman also argues that Michel Foucault's seminal vision of the body as a docile, malleable site for inscribing social power reveals the crucial role somatics can play for political philosophy (303–4).
- 38 R. Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, NY: Cambridge UP, ix–14.