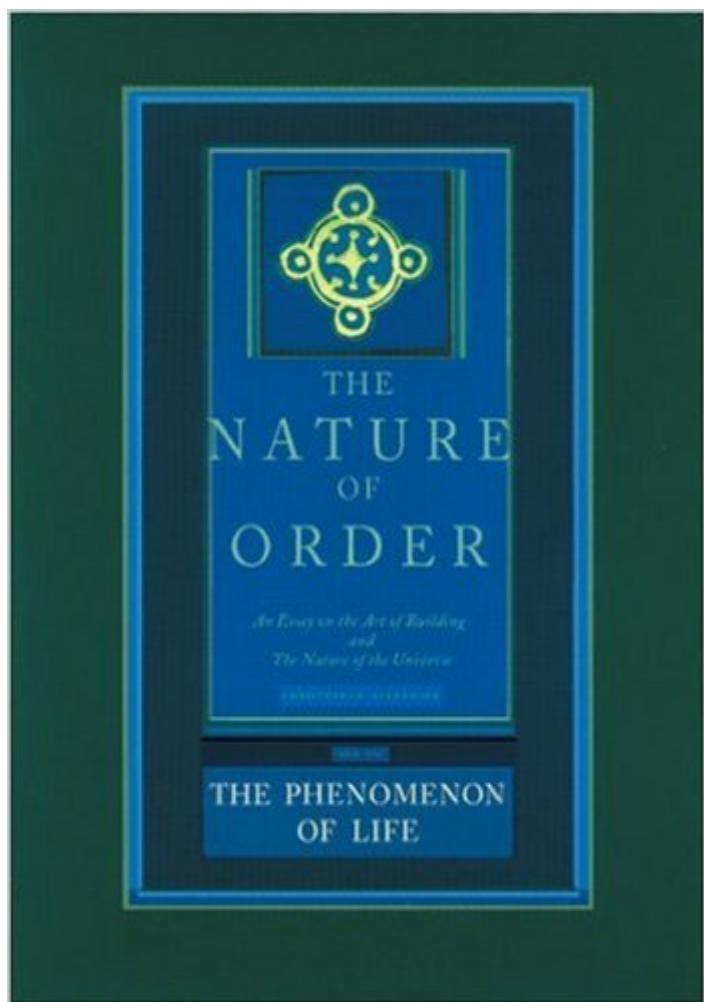


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The Nature Of Order: An Essay On The Art Of Building And The Nature Of The Universe, Book 1 - The Phenomenon Of Life (Center For Environmental Structure, Vol. 9)



Synopsis

In Book One of this four-volume work, Alexander describes a scientific view of the world in which all space-matter has perceptible degrees of life, and establishes this understanding of living structures as an intellectual basis for a new architecture. He identifies fifteen geometric properties which tend to accompany the presence of life in nature, and also in the buildings and cities we make. These properties are seen over and over in nature and in the cities and streets of the past, but they have almost disappeared in the impersonal developments and buildings of the last hundred years. This book shows that living structures depend on features which make a close connection with the human self, and that only living structure has the capacity to support human well-being.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This four-volume work is Christopher Alexander's magnum opus of architectural philosophy, and a book on which he has been working for over twenty years. Like Steven Wolfram's "A New Kind of Science" -- to which it has been compared by a number of authors -- it is long (almost 2,000 pages), richly illustrated, and suggestive of nothing less than a new scientific world view. The essence of that view is this: the universe is not made of "things," but of patterns, of complex, interactive geometries. Furthermore, this way of understanding the world can unlock marvelous secrets of nature, and perhaps even make possible a renaissance of human-scale design and technology. As to the second assertion, one may be appropriately skeptical until more evidence is seen. As to the first,

there are emerging echoes of this world view across the sciences, in quantum physics, in biology, in the mathematics of complexity and elsewhere. Theorists and philosophers throughout the twentieth century have noted the gradual shift of scientific world view away from objects and toward processes, described by Whitehead, Bergson and many others. Alexander, like Wolfram, takes it a step further, arguing that we are on the verge of supplanting the Cartesian model altogether, and embarking on a revolutionary new phase in the understanding of the geometry of nature. This is much more than speculative mysticism, as some poorly-read critics will doubtless be eager to claim. The Cambridge-educated mathematician backs up his beautifully illustrated assertions with copious mathematical formulas and notes, and he includes extensive discussions of the philosophical ideas of Descartes, Newton, Whitehead and many others.

The Nature of Order Volume 1: The Phenomenon of Life Christopher Alexander This is a book that will haunt you. You think you have "seen" its purpose, and then you'll reread something, and see new depths, reach new insights. You'll be frustrated you don't have it with you to refer to at odd moments, when one of its passages starts ringing bells, and illuminating bits of your experience in new ways. Chris Alexander talks about his journey over twenty five years to write the book, and the efforts over five to ten years by students to grasp and articulate and internalise his ideas. But don't let these time scale put you off. It is also a wonderfully illuminating book, and very clearly written. The use of hundreds of contrasting photos of buildings, carpets, ceramics, parking areas, and so on to illuminate the concepts, and the presence of more or less life, is nothing short of breath-taking. I found only one pair of pictures leaving me feeling equivocal about what Chris was trying to communicate. If you are interested in art, architecture, design, learning, cognition, religion, then you will gain immense value from this book, whether from a furiously busy two weeks on a loan from the library, or a purchase to treasure and explore for the rest of your life. The excerpts from the 476 pages identify and briefly explain the fifteen properties, and attempt to give you a hint of the power of this book... the structure I identify as the foundation of all order is also personal. As we learn to understand it, we shall see that our own feeling, the feeling of what it is to be a person, rooted, happy, alive in oneself, straightforward, and ordinary, is itself inextricably connected with order.

22. Real life. . .

"The Nature of Order" is a series of four books, a work that has taken 30 years to complete. It is an ambitious attempt at synthesis, a near-impossible challenge to join together, in one generative thought, all the aspects of man in the universe. Consequently, the critical and wary reader will

possibly detect traces of what could possibly resemble an immense megalomania, as Christopher Alexander aims to reunite physics, biology, and the wholeness of human beings in a geometric conception of the universe. Nevertheless, this same reaction is triggered by every real effort of synthetic thought that tries to build a vision of the world less fragmented than today's. Often in the scientific community, great researchers allow themselves, towards the end of their career, some philosophical height in order to consider the world in the light of the particular discoveries they have made. Some of them -- the most reductionistic -- try to explain whole phenomena by a generalisation of laws they had previously discovered in a particular context. In fact, they reduce the whole world to the phenomena they are able to explain, and try to affirm the supremacy of a particular point of view. These are, for example, the common "all is social", or "all is biological", explanations. Some other scientists, much less pretentious, explain that their discoveries come to support or to lighten in some way certain elements of forgotten and ancestral wisdom. Thus, they indirectly point towards a return of those wisdoms, but without necessarily showing the way.

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