

COMMENTS ON ASHRAF SALAMA'S ARTICLE: "...A NEW VITRUVIUS...?"

Nikos A. Salingaros

While immensely flattered (and also not a little embarrassed) by this attention given to my work, I feel I must try to set the record straight on one matter. I am very grateful for Dr. Salama's efforts to acquaint readers with my books, which they might hopefully find useful for design. But if anyone ought to be named the New Vitruvius, it is surely Christopher Alexander, not myself. I came into the architectural arena relatively late. Christopher was already making ground-breaking contributions with his first book "Notes on the Synthesis of Form" (1964). He followed that with the classic "A Pattern Language" (1977), and the monumental "The Nature of Order" (2002-2005), which proved such a turning point for my own career. My earliest paper on architecture dates from 1995, and is directly inspired by "The Nature of Order", on which I was working with Christopher at the time, helping him with editing.

Moreover, perhaps instead of singling out an individual to give credit for a new awakening of architecture — and I do believe there is indeed such a new awakening — it is more accurate to describe this as a group effort. Actually, we are seeing the convergence of

several group efforts, up until now isolated from each other. Christopher Alexander without any doubt represents a major branch of that effort, and his own work has been widely influential in many fields besides architecture, notably computer software. Another branch of the architectural movement I am talking about includes the growing efforts supporting vernacular architecture as it is found around the world. Yet another branch is the group of prominent Classical Architects as well as those designing in a traditional style, in the West and elsewhere. There is a very good reason these forms of building have endured for thousands of years: they are highly adaptive!

Each one of these branches has numerous names associated with it, and together all these people support a new, more humane architecture. Their unifying characteristic is a primary concern for the human being: as user, or as observer. Joining this already substantial group of persons is the Biophilic design movement, whose practitioners argue for an innate, genetic basis for human response to architectural forms. Coming from science, those arguments tie things together in a powerful way.

It is important to understand that this is not a single-minded "school" of architects and writers, since their immediate focus is very different in each case. A contemporary architect working in the Islamic world who wishes to use some elements of tradition in new buildings is not likely to be very interested in Classical Architecture. A Neoclassical architect working in Europe will not be interested in the mathematics of fractals. A biophilic architect may not be too interested in local socio-cultural traditions. And yet, there is a common goal, generating sharable lessons: the primacy of the user's experience. Whatever the focus, and whatever style one uses, we wish above all to create a healthy environment for human beings from the physiological, psychological, and spiritual aspects. The artistic expressiveness must take its place within this discipline.

Unfortunately, this is not the norm today. All of these diverse groups comprising a new, human architecture stand apart from the architectural mainstream. Western architectural institutions continue to concentrate on outdated images of modernity, even as they move into ever more inhuman expressions of artistic egotism. Ordinary people become confused, because they see a small but monolithic group of established power players praised by the magazines and media, awarding each other prizes and commissions. The very broad movement to which I belong is marginalized away from the central sources of architectural influence, and that is why it is difficult for the ordinary person to get a good picture of where architecture is moving.

But it is clear that there is a wider convergence going on. In the field of urbanism, we have other

distinct groups that are now designing cities for human use rather than purely for occupation by machines. More thoughtful investigators are moving away from the disastrous modernist planning that erased tightly-knit urban fabric in order to build monstrous high-rises set in vast parking lots.

Again, by all accounts, Christopher Alexander played a seminal role in this process (together with the great urban scholar Jane Jacobs) with his seminal paper "A City is Not a Tree" (1965). By virtue of incredible serendipity, I happened to get interested in urban structure just as remarkable investigators like Michael Batty, Paul Drewe, Pierre Frankhauser, and Bill Hillier were already working out models of a city that try to understand (instead of stubbornly ignoring) its complexity. New Urbanists Léon Krier and Andrés Duany made impressive advances (sometimes criticized for uneven results, but remarkably effective nonetheless) in implementing the ideas of human-scale neighborhoods, in a world that had all but forgotten urbanism. At the same time, we saw a convergence of scientific results such as small-world networks, inverse power-law scaling, and fractal structure coming out in the literature. These could be used to explain how cities can be alive in a mathematical sense.

Most recently, a broad group of these investigators has come together to conduct research and exchange ideas. The "Environmental Structure Research Group" includes urban scholars, leading practitioners, scientists such as myself, and others from a wide range of disciplines: biology, computer science, ecology, economics, medicine, and sociology. Even this group, diverse as it is, is but a

smaller representation of an even broader shift beginning to take place.

I am proud to belong to this broad group of innovative thinkers, and also excited to live in this time when the foundations of our conception of architecture and the built environment are shifting in a more positive direction. I agree with Christopher Alexander that this represents a drastic and revolutionary reversal of our view of the world. My own recent efforts have been directed towards educating the public to the possibility of such a change: and actually arguing forcefully for its implementation in our lifetimes.

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