

Position Paper: The City at Risk

Culturalist Position – Christopher Alexander “A City Is Not A Tree” parts 1 & 2

Synopsis: “The City is not a Tree” is an analysis of two distinct methods of city organization. More correctly the author states that there are two types of cities one that evolves and develops a dynamic therefore a natural city and the second type is the artificial city which is deliberately created. In a natural city there occurs spontaneity that only it can possess. By sharp contrast the artificial city is like a two-dimensional tree and is at times planar in its existence. The natural city is co dependent on very many activities and they all contribute to the complexity of the city like the components in lattice, which is used as an analogy. The semi-lattice city derives its strength and dynamic from the connections that it has with all the possible adjoining neighboring components. This is contrasted by the two dimensional tree that leads from tips of branches to larger and larger branches until it finally inserts itself into the trunk. In the second part of “The City is not a Tree” Christopher Alexander the author expands upon the theory to rationalize the way people tend to think and visualize in planar mode instead of in multiple parallel dimensions at once. The unfortunate reality is that people are generally not capable of comprehending the complexity of the semi-lattice and would rather rationalize and reduce down to the tree form.

This paper will attempt to explore the reasoning and perhaps rationalize the preference for the tree form over the semi-lattice in the thought pattern of society. Other examples besides that of the city will be examined in an attempt to uncover or isolate various elements in the patterns of society. The position that this paper presents will be to expose the values that planing and society use to gain comfort in the thought process. Attempting to find comfort is one of the common traits of society. By this the position that I would like to establish is that most members of society would rather attempt to simplify actions rather than expose the ominous truths that exist. As Noam Chomsky has advocated for years people seem to enjoy being pacified. There are many diversions in life that society will take instead of facing up to the reality that exists. For example on any weekday afternoon you could find people watching soap operas. These television programs exist to take the viewer away to somewhere that seems more romantic, adventurous and successful in life. Similarly professional sports are available nearly every afternoon (baseball in particular) and even consume much of the weekend also. So it would seem by this analogy that society would rather be pacified than to face reality. This pacification leads to the thought process being planar and two-dimensional. It is not that every person in society is a simpleton, just that society would given the choice opt out for the simple solution to things. But is complex thought not possible? As the papers ‘A City Is Not A Tree’ suggests complex thought is just a parallel analogy to nature itself. As soon as people realize that they can exercise that part of their mind that allows for expansion and comprehension of the semi-lattice the parallels with nature become more evident. Planning theory much like thought itself has at times been trapped in the notion that the simplest solution must be the best solution. I find it interesting that Le Corbusier did a theoretical city plan the contemporary city that seems to capture the essence of the semi-lattice but later in life when he was able to implement a city plan for Chandigarh he developed a tree organization. The surprise here is that the plan of Chandigarh seems contrary to much of the complexity that makes students of architecture and planning admire Le Corbusier. Generally the work of Le Corbusier is anything but planar in thought at least, with complex thought evoking passage and procession very much a part of what he was all about. When we consider only America for a moment perhaps the ideology of suburbia has been the largest contributor to the tree-like planar theory of thought. People mistakenly assume that their life will be simpler and much more serene as soon as they leave the city behind, in fact this has become

the benchmark of success for some. The fact of the matter is that people can be just as comfortable in the semi-lattice city as in suburbia. It is an interesting note that some of us that were born or grew up in rural or suburban settings crave the semi-lattice of the city rather than continue to perpetuate the mundane of suburbia. This is not about suburb bashing but the ideology that created it and mutated it to cause its present day prominence. Even in suburbs people cannot let go of the natural tendency to feel part of something more than a flat plot evidenced by the continual popularity of the cul de sac. The nature inspired flowing allows for the resident of such a development to achieve the experience of gracious passage from within their automobile.

Peoples thought may generally strive to condense or distil to the essence most complex situations thereby attempting to make a two dimensional cartoon of life. These same people given the choice will enjoy the experience of the semi-lattice of the city or the parallelism of nature and life if they are able to be a participant in the experience. Perhaps the notion of designing a semi-lattice will continue to be a goal to be attained or a paradigm of the urban designer. The fact that we study urban planning and design is in and of itself evidence that we would like to try to replicate good cities and communities. Perhaps the paradigm is that we should allow and encourage the semi-lattice in thought and planning thus permitting nature to guide us and not be so worried about simplifying to the point that nature is lost in what we do.

I concur with the culturalist position taken by Christopher Alexander in the writings "A City Is Not A Tree" parts 1 & 2. There is a need to let nature run its course within the confines of what we do. Just because it has always been done in a certain way is not a good enough reason to continue. For nature and the semi-lattice to thrive we must let go of some of our control and inhibitions towards chaos that may be possible. If we continue to do what we have always done we will continue to get what we always have seen in return.