

Remarks of Hank Dittmar, Chairman of the Board, Congress for the New Urbanism, on Presenting the Athena Medal to Professor Christopher Alexander

Providence, Rhode Island 3 June 2006

Good morning and thank you all for getting up early for what promises to be a very stimulating day in Providence. This morning I have the distinct honour of inaugurating, along with Andres Duany on Sunday, the first presentation of the Congress for the New Urbanism's Athena Awards. The medal itself, designed and stamped in the manner of an ancient coin, is intended to be a timeless commemoration of the importance of a set of key individuals to the movement. Here is an image of it. Made by a ninety-year-old sculptor, the medal depicts Athena on one side, and an owl on the other.

These new awards are intended to recognize the pioneers of our movement, those who opened the door through which the Founders and the signers of the Charter for the New Urbanism walked. Athena award winners, and there will be a fixed number of them over the next several years, are the individuals who first broke the stranglehold that ideological modernism had on architectural and planning thinking. They are the people who laid the intellectual groundwork for a more participatory, integrated approach to the city and the public realm.

These honourees are not the new urbanists, and indeed most of them still would not call themselves new urbanists. Instead, recipients of the Athena medal are the advance troops, who laid down the first critique, provided the theoretical underpinnings, or created the perceptual space that allowed the reform movement called New Urbanism to grow.

The medallists are not responsible for our mistakes or our successes. But without the Athena medallists, our movement might not have merged. And in this moment of growth for the CNU, this moment when a Next Generation is emerging to follow and challenge the Founders, it is important to remember and recognise upon whose shoulders we stand, and to celebrate their work to date, and the work they continue to do. For these people still challenge us to do better.

It is a great privilege to have the opportunity to say some words of appreciation about the work of Christopher Alexander, as he has not only been a great influence on New Urbanism, but has had much impact on my own thinking over the past twenty-five years. I discovered The Pattern Language as a graduate student in 1979, as I was trying to find my place between an object oriented architecture school and a regulation obsessed planning school. As someone who had lived in the Chicago area throughout University, I had been exposed to the failings of urban renewal, which we called urban removal, to the way that freeways were used to divide and segregate and to the powerfully bad impact that high-rise public housing had

on communities. All of these acts of planning and urban design were profoundly disturbing and alienating.

In short I was primed. Like most young people who came up in the Seventies, I had been transformed by the environmental movement and by the ideas of ecology and ecosystems, and though I found doses of Le Corbusier strangely invigorating, somehow I doubted in the machine analogy, and had been taught by Rachel Carson to disbelieve the notion that technology could save us.

Above all, I was experiencing profound moments of cognitive dissonance, reading these tremendously stirring calls to battle by urban reformers, and modernists, and finding the built products unsettling and infinitely less harmonious or comfortable than older neighbourhoods of Chicago and Evanston where I went to university, or the classrooms designed by Cass Gilbert at the University of Texas where I was imbibing these heady thoughts of the new order and the future.

And so when I chanced upon the Pattern Language In 1978 it was a transformative moment, causing me to drop my thesis project, and to try to undertake a project to design a whole systems approach to public engagement and community participation that embodied the pattern language. So the intellectual debt I owe to Christopher Alexander is profound, and to him I owe three core ideas that have permeated my own work ever since:

- The city is a complexly layered system, and human systems that try to reduce these patterns of interaction to a hierarchical system of collection and distribution are inherently destroying the complexity that makes the city a place of creativity and life. Hence my twenty-five year campaign against the functional classification system of the highway engineers!
- To paraphrase Korzybiski, who said “The map is not the territory”, Alexander has taught me that the plan is not the project, and that it is the process of interactions between the plan and the community, the regulatory system, the financial system, the other professions, and the trades and contractors that makes the project.
- And finally, and most importantly, Christopher Alexander teaches that at the heart of making place is seeing, and understanding the things that touch us in nature, in our houses and in our cities, and not being afraid to trust our senses, and our emotions. In a hyper rational world, Christopher Alexander has provided an opening to look at questions of quality, of ease of comfort and of beauty, and in aligning these ideas with nature, and with a series of principles in Nature of Order, he has begun to provide us with some tools for thinking about imbedding these qualities in our work.

Alexander was elected fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1996, is a fellow of the Swedish Royal Society, has been the recipient of innumerable architectural prizes and honors including the gold medal for research of the American Institute of Architects, awarded in 1970.

He was raised in England, and holds a Master's Degree in Mathematics and a Bachelor's degree in Architecture from Cambridge University, and a PhD in Architecture from Harvard University.

In 1958 he moved to the United States, and lived in Berkeley, California from 1963 until he moved to England several years ago. In Berkeley he was Professor of Architecture at the University of California Berkeley and President of the Centre for Environmental Structure.

Professor Alexander is a licensed contractor. He has built over 200 buildings on virtually all the continents, ranging from schools to houses to public facilities. And his work on patterns has been enormously influential in the software world, inspiring the whole field of object-oriented programming.

His books include the Pattern Language, A Timeless Way of Building, A New Theory of Urban Design, The Oregon Experiment and the four volume series The Nature of Order. His new website livinglanguage.com depicts his next effort the creation of a process of unfolding through generative codes.

Why is this important to new urbanists, and why have we asked him to come before us and talk about his work, which is difficult philosophical and even epistemological, at this Congress which is about implementing the new urbanism, which focuses on the hard practicalities of the development process?

After all the Nature of Order is about some concepts that are as profoundly unsettling today as The Pattern Language was 28 years ago: the idea that inanimate objects like buildings and carpets embody life, the idea that we must create processes for building that unfold and generate over time, the idea that building places that work for the long haul involves doing things in close proximity with the land, with ordinary people and in a certain order, and that we've got almost all of those things wrong in the conventional processes today.

In short, Chris Alexander's work challenges new urbanists by suggesting that seeking to engage as we do with the existing processes of production and modify them through the creation of new tools and systems may be insufficient. For example, charrettes, as important as they have been in moving toward collective participatory process, may not be the end point. The Nature of Order implies that the very ways that we finance and build are antithetical to creating places that will evolve organically over time, and so on.

All this may be very hard to swallow. Aren't we on the cusp of some very profound changes as a movement? Hasn't the past decade and a half of struggle been hard enough?

But we all know that as we peel back one layer of the onion, we find another layer, and that as we gradually begin to replace use based zoning or road standards, we find that short term financing and contracting processes inhibit us. And so it is rather like pulling on a loose thread on a sweater, it's probably not going to be possible to stop.

In looking deeply at systems in nature and society, and at human aspirations and needs and in challenging us to understand that improved methodologies for urban design are not enough, Christopher Alexander is asking us to keep the eye on the prize: the creation of enduring, organic places that can grow and deepen in complexity and character over time.

In some very enjoyable conversations with Chris and Maggie Moore leading up to today, Maggie and Chris quite gently probed me about the direction of the CNU, and how we saw the infrastructure we had developed: charrettes, smart codes, regional visioning processes, pattern books and the like, and then reminded me of the profound aspirations of the Charter of the New Urbanism and particularly its preamble. And therein lies the reason why people like Chris and Leon Krier are so important to us.

We are a practical set of reformers, composed of practitioners, who must engage in the world as it is, making improvements a bit at a time and building systems and tools that at the end of the day have to be grafted onto an existing system.

But the Charter, like the Declaration of Independence is a lofty document, describing aspirations and an end state that cannot be reached in a short period of time, or with the tools we have, or even the ones we have developed to date. Surely the underlying tensions in the movement about the life of our places, about affordability, about sustainability and the environment, and about financing and regional economics tell us that this is the case.

Chris Alexander, in describing the necessity for open source, generative, processes that embody life, seems to be setting an impossible task. He is really reminding us of the inherent and creative tension within our movement. It's the tension between being true to our calling and making a living.

We are a set of visionary reformers who at the end of each day have to make it work in the world as it is, and Alexander reminds us that better isn't good enough, for the problems and pathologies we are trying to solve are deeply rooted in a set of processes that must be comprehensively transformed.

Almost 30 years ago Christopher Alexander opened a set of doors and challenged architects and urbanists to walk through them. In this century with the Nature of Order, he has opened a further set of doors and issued a next challenge. It is for that reason, that on behalf of the Congress for the New

Urbanism, I am proud to present Christopher Alexander, with one of the two inaugural Athena Medals. Christopher, could you join me on the stage, and then provide us with a conference keynote?
