

**HOW HAVE CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER AND NIGEL COATES'  
IDEAS OF URBAN PLANNING THROUGH COLLAGE, DISCARDED  
MODERNIST VIEWS, WHILST ALSO REFERRING TO CURRENT  
THINKING IN URBAN DESIGN?**

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Christopher Alexander an architect who seeks to formalise architecture and the principals behind it, wrote "*Synthesis of Form*" This is a book which describes a "*design method*' that will generate for each building firstly an exhaustive list of requirements and then a Cartesian formula that will break the list down into manageable 'sub-problems.'" <sup>2</sup> He seeks to work out all the problems that would occur before the design is started, he then splits these problems into smaller manageable sub-problems, which are categorised in/to similar themes enabling an easier process to finding a solution. Nigel Coates approach to architecture is about seeing where the design takes you; he tries to work with the existing context and see how this relates and affects the design as a whole. "*Its about getting under the skin of the city*'... '*about going with the flow, seeing where it takes you and then responding in appropriate ways.*" <sup>3</sup> His approach and theories under the publication; *A "Guide to Ecstacity (2003)"* <sup>4</sup> is about experiencing a city. The city is a narrative of contrasting experiential explorations. Coates chooses to solve the problems as he progresses the design, it becomes part of the design process. This assignment will compare and contrast the connections between Alexander and Coates. It will look into why they both reject modernist values in favour of other approaches to urban planning. The essay will progress to look into the theme of collage or placing together of urban patterns as a way of approaching city planning. Within this overall collage theme, focuses will include the users experience and how they participate in the city and how the architects define the edges/boundaries within the overall context.

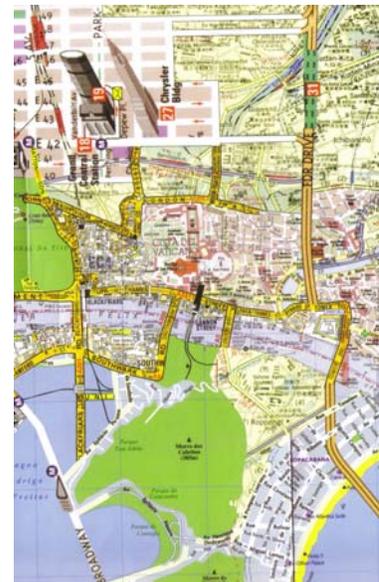


Figure 1: Map of 'Ecstacity' showing the Overlapping city maps  
Image: Coates, N (2003) *A Guide to Ecstacity*, Laurence King Publishing Ltd, London

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander, C (1964) *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London.

<sup>2</sup> St John Wilson, C (2000) *Architectural Reflections: Studies in Philosophy and Practice of Architecture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York. Pg 45

<sup>3</sup> Glancey, J (1999) *Nigel Coates, Body Buildings and City Scapes*, Thames and Hudson, London, Pg 14

<sup>4</sup> Coates, N (2003) *A Guide to Ecstacity*, Laurence King Publishing Ltd, London

Alexander's next series of work included "*A Pattern language (1977)*"<sup>5</sup> and the later publication; The "*Timeless Way of Building (1979)*"<sup>6</sup> examines the relationships of traditional ideas with patterns of Urban design. The 253 patterns that make up Alexander's 'Pattern language' range from large urban scales such as the size of regions, to squares, buildings, construction, and the interiors of buildings. He found out in his analysis of Urban Patterns that there was a link between tradition and those patterns that were constantly used. The example he uses is of a courtyard in which he found that all courtyards have the same three geometric patterns within them that make a courtyard successful in its form. "*First the building's circulation system always passes through the courtyard; second it always has a view to a more distant space; and third, it always has a transitional arcade or veranda*"<sup>7</sup> His analysis of several courtyards showed that users of the space orientate themselves the same as in traditional courtyards. Both Coates and Alexander take this idea of the city as a collage, a layering of urban patterns fitted together to form a bigger city. However Coates uses technology as inspiration rather than tradition as a tool to planning and layering 'Ecstacity'.

Alexander says of the 94 Patterns that focus on the make-up of a town that as long as they interlinked with other similar urban patterns they will work efficiently to make up a larger successful urban fabric. "*Each pattern can exist in the world, only to the extent that is supported by other patterns: the larger patterns in which it is embedded, the patterns of the same size that surround it, and the smaller patterns in which embedded in it*"<sup>8</sup> An example of this is "*community of 7000; Pattern*

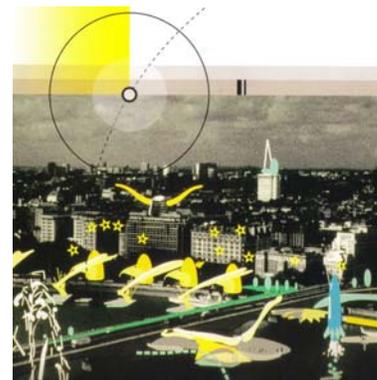


Figure 2: Image of 'Ecstacity' showing how Technology has influenced the city idea  
Image: Coates, N (2003) *A Guide to Ecstacity*, Laurence King Publishing Ltd, London

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, C, Ishikawa, S, Silverstein, M (1977) *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, New York.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander, C (1979) *The Timeless Way of Building*, Oxford University Press, New York

<sup>7</sup> Gelernter, M (1995) *Sources of Architectural Form, A Critical History of Western Design Theory*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York. Pg 275

<sup>8</sup> Alexander, C, Ishikawa, S, Silverstein, M (1977) *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, New York. Pg xiii

*Number 12*<sup>9</sup>, which is a pattern for creating a self-governing community, 7000 habitants is the maximum amount of people suggested for it to work efficiently as a self-bodied district. The 'community of 7000' can include several smaller patterns such as "*Identifiable Neighbourhoods; Pattern Number 14*"<sup>10</sup>, which suggests that the residents of the neighbourhoods need clear indications of the boundaries of theirs. This can then in turn be made up of smaller patterns such as "*Eccentric Nucleus; Pattern Number 28*"<sup>11</sup> which are a centre in these neighbourhoods.' Ecstacity' on the other hand is an imaginary city in which Coates overlaps seven cities from around the world, ranging from those that are designed on a grid to those based on medieval planning. The range of cities he chooses are "*London, Bombay, Tokyo, New York, Rio de Janeiro, Rome and Cairo; their street plans mapped onto a fictional terrain derived from the forms of male and female bodies*"<sup>12</sup> The fabric of each of the seven cities are split, moved and placed according to different cultures creating a vast mix of overlapping and entwining street patterns resulting in a mix of cultures. "*It's a patchwork city. You can see huge avenues below and fleshy tangles of streets nearby. It's a city of suburbs and Kasbahs, one of sweeping freeways and what looks like landing strips which cross the city*"<sup>13</sup> Alexander realises that transport is essential part of everyday life, therefore he does not propose to get rid of roads but does suggest that they are moved to the outskirts of communities to disturb as little as possible. ("*Ring Roads; Pattern Number 17.*"<sup>14</sup>) This is different to Coates as he suggests that roads should be mixed up with the public to add to the city experience.

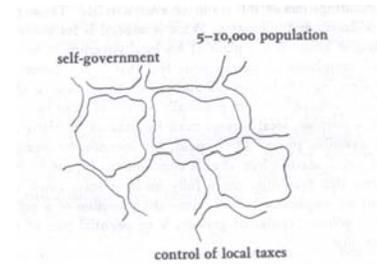


Figure 3: 'Community of 7000' – Pattern 12  
Image: Alexander, C, Ishikawa, S, Silverstein, M (1977) *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, New York.

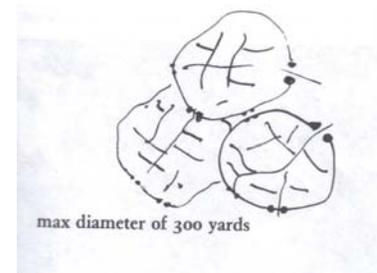


Figure 4: 'identifiable Neighbourhoods' - Pattern 14  
Image: Alexander, C, Ishikawa, S, Silverstein, M (1977) *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, New York.

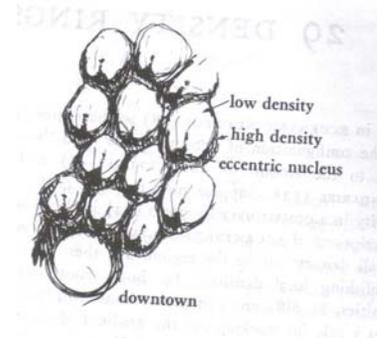


Figure 5: 'Eccentric Nucleus' - Pattern 28  
Image: Alexander, C, Ishikawa, S, Silverstein, M (1977) *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, New York.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander, C, Ishikawa, S, Silverstein, M (1977) *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, New York. Pg 70-74

<sup>10</sup> Alexander, C, Ishikawa, S, Silverstein, M (1977) *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, New York. Pg 80-85

<sup>11</sup> Alexander, C, Ishikawa, S, Silverstein, M (1977) *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, New York. Pg 150-55

<sup>12</sup> Coates, N (2003) *A Guide to Ecstacity*, Laurence King Publishing Ltd, London, Pg 25

<sup>13</sup> Coates, N (2003) *A Guide to Ecstacity*, Laurence King Publishing Ltd, London, Pg 81

<sup>14</sup> Alexander, C, Ishikawa, S, Silverstein, M (1977) *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, New York. Pg 96-98

The idea of collaging aspects of the city reflects Colin Rowe and Koetter's *"Collage City"*<sup>15</sup> in which they talk about *"rejecting the grand Utopian visions of "total planning" and "total design," propose instead a "collage city" that can accommodate a whole range of utopias in miniature."*<sup>16</sup> they piece together smaller utopias rather than have a big utopian city image of Modernism. This is in line with Coates' views *"forget about utopia and make the best use of what there is"*<sup>17</sup> in which he is saying that when planning the city you should be thinking about working with the existing and collage new architecture into the spaces that need it rather than starting from a 'blank canvas' or use a process of 'rubbing out' as modernist architects have done. Kevin Lynch is another architect who has the same view as Rowe and Coates, he also suggests working with the existing in his approach to planning. Alexander and the 'Pattern Language' is about creating a new town, neighbourhood, building or park in a way to suit the needs of the users. However, he does suggest in some of his patterns that you should look for inspiration from the existing when trying to place your shops for example in the right locations.

Both Architects as well as Kevin Lynch take to viewing the city from a regional perspective by looking at the activities that would occur in these areas first. Coates and Alexander differ in how they achieve this. Alexander looks at this in a more practical view allowing a certain amount of theory and logic in how things work together to make up this larger region. Whereas Coates takes an experimental approach where he has placed these existing maps together and created what looks like a fun, playful landscape.

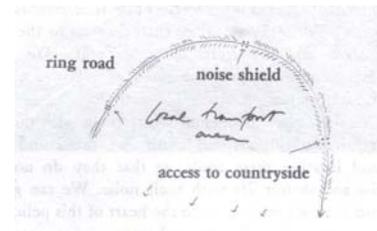


Figure 6: 'Ring Roads' – Pattern 17  
Image: Alexander, C, Ishikawa, S,  
Silverstein, M (1977) *A Pattern Language*,  
Oxford University Press, New York.

<sup>15</sup> Rowe, C + Koetter, F(1978) *Collage City*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>16</sup> Rowe, C + Koetter, F(1978) *Collage City*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Blurb on Back of Book.

<sup>17</sup> Pawley, M (May 1992) In search of the spirit of Ecstacy, *Blueprint*, No.87. Pg 14.

Both Coates and Alexander move away from the modernist movements approach to planning a city. Alexander "*complained, Modernism cut our ties to this traditional language and imposed upon us an artificial language of design*"<sup>18</sup> and Coates wanted to move away from the symmetrical, planning from above perspective seen in many modernist examples such as Le Corbusier's *Ville Contemporaine*. Contradictory to this, however, he wants the visitors to experience 'Ecstacy' from air by looking from above onto the site as they 'enter' the city. However, as a visitor looks down on the city its topography is different from Modernist patterns in which it is very different from an ordered symmetrical landscape. Even though both of them move away from Modernist values, they both have contrasting influences in how they approach urban design planning. Alexander who prefers to take a traditional approach, which links to some structuralist values such as he '*sees individual designs as variations worked out within constraints of a larger shared structure...and it stresses the essential role of designer's preconceptions in acquiring those traditions.*'<sup>19</sup> This is typical of how Alexander has described how any of the urban patterns will work in the 'A Pattern Language'; the designs need to work within a wider context of patterns such as "*Independent Regions (Pattern Number One).*"<sup>20</sup> . Coates view on the other hand moves away from tradition all together and takes on a non-preconception view to planning/designing. Many architects of today realise that technology and media influences are key to the approach to designing architecture today. Alexander also in the 'Notes on the Synthesis of Form' suggests we think of the process of designing forms in a non-preconception view.



Figure 7: Map of 'Ecstacy' showing locations Of several landmarks  
Image: Coates, N (2003) *A Guide to Ecstacy*, Laurence King Publishing Ltd, London

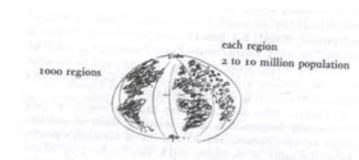


Figure 8: 'Independent Regions' - Pattern 1  
Image: Alexander, C, Ishikawa, S, Silverstein, M (1977) *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, New York.

<sup>18</sup> Gelernter, M (1995) *Sources of Architectural Form, A Critical History of Western Design Theory*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York. Pg 276

<sup>19</sup> Gelernter, M (1995) *Sources of Architectural Form, A Critical History of Western Design Theory*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York. Pg 277

<sup>20</sup> Alexander, C, Ishikawa, S, Silverstein, M (1977) *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, New York. Pg 10-14



*reaction to the modernist attitude to the past*<sup>23</sup> Current Thinking on technology is the same as Coates in which it is a positive attribute in helping design new opportunities in architecture.

'Ecstacity' is all about experiencing the city first hand with or without a map, this even includes the way the book acts as a travel guide to the city. It tries to engage you and pull you in to the experience. *"The city should be a place of experiences – it puts experience before the formal stylistic or functional qualities of buildings"*<sup>24</sup> Alexander has the same concept behind this in which he wants the user to experience the city/town they live in. However, his approach is more functional and practical, in that they are about the needs of the users. The patterns in his ideal city are designed to work together smoothly rather than a random juxtaposition of clashes of culture and functions in 'Ecstacity'. Alexander's city is about the everyday experience whereas 'Ecstacity' is about the unknown experience; both architects underpin their ideas and approaches to experimentation by creating scenarios of how a person should experience the city.

The 'Guide to Ecstacity' is split down into six ways that a tourist would experience the city *'tuning in; locking on; undressing; letting go; cranking up and flipping out.'*<sup>25</sup> These Urban Modes work best when they are all together to allow the visitor to engage in the city as a whole. The city mixes aspects of the everyday such as walking, cycling with elements of impracticality as a way creating this involvement through relationship with the commonplace. Inspiration for this ever-changing experiential city comes from the City of Tokyo *"a city replacing one quarter itself every year."*<sup>26</sup> Alexander and Coates differ in how they

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<sup>23</sup> Carmona M, Heath, T, Taner Oc + Tiesdell, S (2003) *Public Spaces Urban Spaces, The Dimensions of Urban Design*, Architectural Press, London. Pg 69

<sup>24</sup> Coates, N (2003) *A Guide to Ecstacity*, Laurence King Publishing Ltd, London, Pg 42

<sup>25</sup> Coates, N (2003) *A Guide to Ecstacity*, Laurence King Publishing Ltd, London, Pg 18

<sup>26</sup> Pawley, M (May1992) *In search of the spirit of Ecstacity*, *Blueprint*, No.87, Pg 14

think a city should evolve over time Alexander says it should remain static as once it's achieved under the 'pattern language' it is ideal and fits the needs of the user. Coates however thinks that a city should be constantly evolving over time.

Coates wants the users to engage in the city from a tourist perspective whereas Alexander wants the users to design a place first so that the community can become involved from the offset in the running of the town. The big difference between the two involving matters of participation is that Alexander wants the city to be run and built by the users of that city and become like previously mentioned a self running body. Whereas 'Ecstacity' is an ever-expanding community city and it is more about the user's experience than the user being involved in how the city runs itself. He wants the users to engage in the city in a different way to Alexander; physically rather than politically. Throughout 'Ecstacity' Coates uses installations to engage the community in the overall experience. Adding to this idea of using new technology as a strategy *"Ecstacity is the new software with the appropriate menus enabling the individual user to create his own urban landscape"*<sup>27</sup> therefore allowing the public to create their own city and experience.

Current thinking on participation as a way of engaging users by involving them within the method will create this sense of ownership over the cities both Alexander and Coates suggest. Creating this sense of ownership will in Coates view help the visitor experience the city as if it was theirs to explore. In Alexander's vision it would emphasise his view of self-governing communities work more efficiently in the long run.

Coates approach to planning was to take each of the cities individually and work *'up a matrix of interrelations within the space defined by the*

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<sup>27</sup> Melhuish, C (May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1992) Living for the moment, Building Design, No.1081, Pg 28

*edges.*<sup>28</sup> As previously stated Coates' splitting of the city maps into culture zones creates a context formed boundary in which he places a variety of cultures together, not physically separating them. In a slight contrast to this Alexander believes a heterogeneous city is dull, due to the lack of freedom to have your own lifestyle and that a city full of Ghettos prevents individuals from venturing to different cultures. He suggests that a city broken down into smaller differentiated sub-cultures, in which culture boundaries separate one from the next. This allows the individual to choose and grow within their preferred culture. The close proximity of these sub-cultures allows *'each person...access to the full variety of life styles in the subcultures near his own'*<sup>29</sup> The main difference between the two is that Alexander completely splits the cultures up with a physical boundary whereas Coates uses an invisible boundary defined by a map.

Current thinking on boundaries around neighbourhoods is that placing a territory is a positive aspect as this allows for social, interactive and functional developments within each boundary. This is in line with Alexander's view. However he also suggests the tenants of each neighbourhood should have the flexibility to be able to visit others, to allow for greater personal developments. Coates also believes that there is need for possibilities to move between cultural zones.

Overall, through 'A Guide to Ecstacy' and 'A Pattern Language,' both Alexander and Coates have similar views about how a city should be planned. The idea of the city as a collage is strong from both Architects. However they differ in the type of method they use under this theme. Alexander's 94 patterns that make up a town are built on researching and analysing existing urban patterns of which most of them reflect tradition, each of these patterns work in conjunction with others to create a vast

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<sup>28</sup> Coates, N (2003) A Guide to Ecstacy, Laurence King Publishing Ltd, London, Pg 17

<sup>29</sup> Alexander, C, Ishikawa, S, Silverstein, M (1977) A Pattern Language, Oxford University Press, New York. Pg 50

urban space. Coates, on the other hand, is similar in the way he has resorted to tradition by his use of existing city maps, however, unlike Alexander who has redefined these terms into a readable pattern language so that others can design their own neighbourhood, he has used the seven cities as a tool for creating a new city in which he has overlapped and interlinked them through culture. Both Architects also move away from Modernist values to planning, however, they differ in the direction they take. Alexander looks back at tradition in his routes to analysis, whereas Coates looks forward to technology as a tool for creating his city. In line with current thinking, both Alexander and Coates take on the same stance in rejecting Modernist Values in Urban Planning. Unlike Alexander though, current thinking is in line with Coates views of technology playing an important part in Architecture of the future with its endless possibilities. Both Architects are about creating the experience within a city. 'Ecstacity' plays on the idea that it is a holiday destination and becomes a tourist guide to talk the visitors through the 'city', whilst engaging and absorbing them in its mix of cultural zones. Alexander's ideal city is about engaging the users by allowing them to design it, run it and use it. Unlike Coates however, his experience is a practical experience of the everyday and the best way you can achieve this. Coates with 'Ecstacity' is trying to create a more inspiring city through technology and experience rather than form.

In engaging the users both Coates and Alexander are allowing the user to take a sense of ownership over the city, This is in line with current thinking about involving the community in projects should in effect create a sense of ownership over that project. 'Ecstacity' is a mix of interrelated cultures, which define the plan; this creation of a mix of cultures creates this sense of boundary which in line with modern day thinking allows for personal developments to occur. Alexander suggests the same, however, he also suggests that the users need to be able to cross these boundaries to create the freedom for greater social developments. Overall through the

use of collage and patterns both Alexander and Coates move away from modernist values to an approach that creates a more experiential place through the use of interlocking and interrelating the existing fabric or existing traditional urban patterns into their ideal cities.

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