

Contrasting Concepts of Harmony in Architecture:

The 1982 Debate Between Christopher Alexander and Peter Eisenman

Editors' Introduction: This legendary debate took place at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, on November 17th 1982. Not long before it, Alexander had given a talk on *The Nature of Order*, which was to become the subject of his magnum opus of architectural philosophy. The original version he envisaged was less than half the size of the final four-volume work as it now stands, but its main ideas were already formulated.

Before the debate Eisenman had listened to the tape of Alexander's talk – one of the first public presentations of the ideas in *The Nature of Order*. What followed was thus partly shaped by those ideas. What ensued can be said to represent an historic occasion: Alexander is presenting his basis for the New Paradigm in Architecture at the same time as Eisenman presents his competing, diametrically opposed, deconstructivist claim for such a Paradigm.

The importance of the debate has been widely recognised. Twenty years later, the Harvard Graduate School of Design republished it alongside three other seminal documents from the post-1969 period: an early piece by Alexander Tzonis on the “end of ideology in architecture”, excerpts from a 1994 conference on “De-naturalized Urbanity”, and a recent debate on urbanism between Rem Koolhaas and Andres Duany. Some people may only have heard of the 1982 encounter because Alexander said Eisenman was “fucking up the world” in a public forum; but if this is all one knows about it, one is not prepared for the generally good-natured tone of most of the exchanges.¹

¹ First published in *Lotus International* 40 (1983), pages 60-68. Reprinted in *Studio Works 7* (Harvard University Graduate School of Design), and Princeton Architectural Press (2000), pages 50-57.

THE DEBATE

Peter Eisenman: I met Christopher Alexander for the first time just two minutes ago, but I feel I have known him for a long time. I suddenly sense that we have been placed in a circus-like atmosphere, where the adversarial relationship which we might have – which already exists – might be blown out of proportion. I do not know who the Christian is and who the lion, but I always get nervous in a situation like this. I guess it is disingenuous on my part to think that with Chris Alexander here something other than a performance would be possible.

Back in 1959, I was working in Cambridge, U.S.A., for Ben Thompson and The Architects Collaborative [Gropius's firm]. I believe Chris Alexander was at Harvard. I then went to Cambridge, England, again not knowing that he had already been there. He had studied mathematics at Cambridge and turned to architecture. I was there for no particular reason, except that Michael McKinnell told me that I was uninformed and that I should go to England to become more intelligent.

Christopher Alexander: I'm very glad you volunteered that information. It clears things up.

Audience: (Laughter)

PE: In any case, Sandy [Colin St. John] Wilson, who was then a colleague of mine on the faculty at Cambridge and is now professor at the School of Architecture at Cambridge, gave me a manuscript that he said I should read. It was Alexander's Ph.D. thesis, which was to become the text of Chris's first book, “Notes on the Synthesis of Form”. The text so infuriated me, that I was moved to do a Ph.D. thesis myself. It was called

“The Formal Basis of Modern Architecture” and was an attempt to dialectically refute the arguments made in his book. He got his book published; my thesis was so primitive that I never even thought of publishing it.

In any case, I thought that today we could deal with some of my problems with his book. But then I listened to the tape of his lecture last night, and again I find myself in a very similar situation. Christopher Alexander, who is not quite as frightening as I thought ~ he seems a very nice man ~ again presents an argument which I find the need to contest. Since I have never met him prior to this occasion, it cannot be personal; it must have something to do with his ideas.

Chris, you said we need to change our cosmology, that it is a cosmology that grew out of physics and the sciences in the past and is, in a sense, 300 years old. I probably agree with every word of that. You said that only certain kinds of order can be understood, given that cosmology. You said the order of a Coke machine is available to us because of our causal, mechanistic view of the world. And then you brought up that the order of a Mozart symphony is not available to us. Don't you think that the activity of the French “Structuralists” is an attempt to find out the order of things as opposed to the order of mechanisms, the ontology of things as opposed to the epistemology of things, i.e., their internal structure? This kind of philosophical inquiry has been part of current French thought for the last 20 years. Don't you think that it is something like what you're talking about?

CA: I don't know the people you are talking about.

PE: I am talking about people like Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida.

CA: What do they say?

PE: They say that there are structures, in things like a Mozart symphony or a piece of literature, and that we can get beyond the function of a symphony or the function of a piece of literature to provide a story of knowledge, that we can get beyond those functions to talk about the innate structure or order of these things. And that this order has little to do with the hierarchical, mechanistic, and deterministic order of the past 300 years. Rather it is based on an alternative to Western values as determined by metaphysics. This order sug-

gests not so much an opposition as an alternative view, which suggests that structures are not dialectical in nature but, rather, that they are made up of differences.

I was very much in sympathy with the things you were saying in your lecture. In fact, I would like to think that for the past 10 or 15 years of my life I have been engaged in the same kind of work. My postfunctionalist essay in *Oppositions 6* proposed an other aspect of architecture outside of function.

CA: I am not sure I know what you are driving at. See if this is right? One of the people on our faculty, I think, would probably espouse your point of view in some way. His attitude reflects a whole school of thought that has developed ~ crudely called Post-Modernism or whatever. Anyway, there is a school of thought, a serious group of theorists who have begun to talk about architecture in a quite new way in the last 10 years. And this faculty member says to me, from time to time, something like this: “Essentially, Chris, they're saying exactly the same thing you are. Why are you riding your horse as though you are some lone messenger when, in fact, everybody is talking about the same thing.”

But what these Postmodernists and Structuralists are saying is not the same thing as what I said last night at all. Of course, I think there are people who are very serious and want to move the many with the privileged view of architecture that they have in their heads. But words are very, very cheap. And one can participate in intellectual discussions, right, left, and center, and you can go this way or you can go that way. Now then, I look at the buildings which purport to come from a point of view similar to the one I've expressed, and the main thing I recognize is, that whatever the words are ~ the intellectual argument behind that stuff ~ the actual buildings are totally different. Diametrically opposed. Dealing with entirely different matters.

Actually, I don't even know what that work is dealing with, but I do know that it is not dealing with feelings. And in that sense those buildings are very similar to the alienated series of constructions that preceded them since 1930. All I see is: number one, new and very fanciful language; and two, vague references to the history of architecture but transformed into cunning feats and quaint mannerisms. So, the games of the Structuralists, and the games of the Post Modernists are in my mind nothing but intellectualisms which have little to do

with the core of architecture. This depends, as it always has, on feeling.

PE: Let us just back off for a minute. I wish we had some pictures here. I don't want to polarize this between the heavy, Eastern intellectual and the California joy boy. You cannot ask people, as you did last night, to believe you because you have done 25 years of intellectual work ~ which I have followed very carefully and which is very intellectual ~ and then say "I am California magic". So I want to get away from these kinds of caricatures because we are not going to get anywhere with them. That is number one.

Number two: for you to plead ignorance of ideas that are in current use, does not make me an intellectual and you not, or vice versa; it means that you are interested in your cosmology, and I am interested in mine. So that is a wash. I did not come here to play "do you know" and get anxious about things. I am very interested in the whole self. In the Jungian cosmology, you may be a feeling type and I may be a thinking type. And I will never be able to have the kind of feeling that you have, and vice versa. We all live with the tyranny of the opposite. So I don't want to get into that game, because you win all the time. So why not start over.

CA: Let's have a go. That was a very good first round.

PE: I want to get out of the ring and try again. I came in on the wrong side. I certainly became the lion and you the Christian, and I have always wanted to be a Christian.

CA: I appreciate the very charming way you are bringing this into a slightly nicer state. Actually, with regard to what you said a moment ago, the business of the feeling type and the thinking type does need to be talked about. I know something about Jung's classifications. That we have different make-ups is probably an undeniable fact. But, somehow, the substantive core of the matter, to me, is the essence of what the debate about architecture must lead to. If you say: "Well, look, you're a feeling type, and I'm a thinking type, so let's not discuss that because we are always going to be on different sides", then it removes from this discussion what I feel to be the absolute heart and soul of the matter when it comes to buildings. Now I don't want to deny at all what you are saying about personalities. But I really cannot conceive of a properly formed attitude towards

buildings, as an artist or a builder, or in any way, if it doesn't ultimately confront the fact that buildings work in the realm of feeling. So when you say, "Look you're that type, and I'm this type, and let's agree not to talk with one another about that fact", what's the implication? Is the implication that you think that feeling is not related to buildings? Perhaps you could answer that.

PE: Of course, if you are a feeling type, you would think that feelings are the essence of the matter; and I cannot help thinking, as a thinking type, that ideas are the essence of the matter. It is not something that I can walk away from. We all have a shadow, and my shadow is feeling. I accept that you are that way. I am asking you to accept me the way I am rather than dismissing what I say as not being at the heart of the matter. For you, feeling is the heart of the matter, because it is the only way you can configure the world. I cannot configure the way you do because then I would not be me, and you would not want me to do that.

CA: I'm not so sure about that.

PE: It is not I who is into tyranny. Let's see if we can discuss substantive issues. All I am saying is: do not put people down who cannot get at ideas through feeling. At least 50% of the people here cannot.

CA: You're saying to me, on the level of personal decency and person-to-person respect, let each of us recognize that we have our different attitudes towards the world, and let's not mix them up with the central, substantive matter at hand. That's what you're inviting me to do.

PE: That's what I was hoping.

CA: I will suspend that, if you can deal with that. I fully understand that what you're saying concerns you, and I'm quite comfortable with the person-to-person respect, given our different attitudes and so forth. The trouble is that we also happen to be dealing with a matter that I believe intellectually is the central issue. Intellectually, not from the point of view of feeling. It's very, very difficult for me to stay away from this issue because, if I don't talk about it with you to some extent, I will actually never know what you're really talking about. So, if you will permit me, I'd like to go into this matter and see where we come to. You see, there is a debate going on here, and there is also a disagreement ~ I believe of substance. I'm not even sure whether we

work in the same way. That's why I would like to check out a couple of examples, buildings. Now, I will pick a building, let's take Chartres for example. We probably don't disagree that it's a great building.

PE: Well, we do actually, I think it is a boring building. Chartres, for me, is one of the least interesting cathedrals. In fact, I have gone to Chartres a number of times to eat in the restaurant across the street ~ had a 1934 red Mersault wine, which was exquisite ~ I never went into the cathedral. The cathedral was done en passant. Once you've seen one Gothic cathedral, you have seen them all.

CA: Well, pick a building you like. Pick another.

PE: Let's pick something that we can agree on ~ Palladio's Palazzo Chiericati. For me, one of the things that qualifies it in an incredible way, is precisely because it is more intellectual and less emotional. It makes me feel high in my mind, not in my gut. Things that make me feel high in my gut are very suspicious, because that is my psychological problem. So I keep it in the mind, because I'm happier with that.

You see, the Mies and Chiericati thing was far greater than Moore and Chiericati, because Moore is just a pasticheur. We agree on that. But Mies and Chiericati is a very interesting example, and I find much of what is in Palladio ~ that is the contamination of wholeness ~ also in Mies. I also find alternation, as opposed to simple repetition. And you said things which are very close to my heart. I am very interested in the arguments you presented in your lecture. You said something about the significance of spaces between elements being repeated. Not only the element itself being repeated, but the space between. I'm very interested in the space between. That is where we come together. Now the space between is not part of classical unity, wholeness, completeness; it is another typology.

It is not a typology of sameness or wholeness; it's a typology of differences. It is a typology which transgresses wholeness and contaminates it. If you say A/B A/B, that is an alternation of wholes outside of the classical canon, which tries to take A and B and bring them into symmetry ~ as in B/A/B/A/B. In other words, there are three B's with one in the center, and two A's as minor chords. When you have A/B/A/B/ you have alternating pairs with no center, closure or hierarchy. A/B/A/

B/A is complete. A/B/A/B is not. What is interesting about serial structures is the spaces between, not the elements themselves, but the differences between the two. You were talking about that last night when you gave an example of something that was not dealing with wholeness at all in the classical sense. Maybe we would benefit from talking more about this. Or not?

CA: I don't fully follow what you're saying. It never occurred to me that someone could so explicitly reject the core experience of something like Chartres. It's very interesting to have this conversation. If this weren't a public situation, I'd be tempted to get into this on a psychiatric level. I'm actually quite serious about this. What I'm saying is that I understand how one could be very panicked by these kinds of feelings. Actually, it's been my impression that a large part of the history of modern architecture has been a kind of panicked withdrawal from these kinds of feelings, which have governed the formation of buildings over the last 2000 years or so.

Why that panicked withdrawal occurred, I'm still trying to find out. It's not clear to me. But I've never heard somebody say, until a few moments ago, someone say explicitly: "Yes, I find that stuff freaky. I don't like to deal with feelings. I like to deal with ideas." Then, of course, what follows is very clear. You would like the Palladio building; you would not be particularly happy with Chartres, and so forth. And Mies ...

PE: The panicked withdrawal of the alienated self was dealt with in Modernism ~ which was concerned with the alienation of the self from the collective.

CA: However painful it is, we are doing pretty well right now. We're not being rude to each other, and things are moving along really nicely. It does seem to me, since we have locked into this particular discussion, that we ought to stay with it.

I want to tell a story that I told this morning. About two or three years ago, I was asked by the faculty at Berkeley to show some pictures of things I had been working on, and ended up locking horns with some people who were challenging my work. I recognized that their comments were coming from a place similar to that which you were just talking about, because the things that I make come from a very vulnerable spot. What happened was, one of the people who has been most vocif-

erous in this field, a few days later, whispering privately in a corner said: "You know, I really shouldn't have said those things to you, but I've been making plans like this myself for some time but dare not show them to anybody". And this is, I have found, in dealing with various men in the profession over the last 10, 20, years, quite frequently you have this theme, where there's actually real fear about simple, ordinary, vulnerable stuff.

I will give you another example, a slightly absurd example. A group of students under my direction was designing houses for about a dozen people, each student doing one house. In order to speed things up (we only had a few weeks to do this project), I said: "We are going to concentrate on the layout and cooperation of these buildings, so the building system is not going to be under discussion."

So I gave them the building system, and it happened to include pitched roofs, fairly steep pitched roofs. The following week, after people had looked at the notes I handed out about the building system, somebody raised his hand and said: "Look, you know everything is going along fine, but could we discuss the roofs?" So I said: "Yes, what would you like to discuss about the roofs?" And the person said: "Could we make the roofs a little different?" I had told them to make just ordinary pitched roofs. I asked, "What's the issue about the roofs?" And the person responded: "Well, I don't know, it's just kind of funny." Then that conversation died down a bit. Five minutes later, somebody else popped up his hand and said: "Look, I feel fine about the building system, except the roofs. Could we discuss the roofs?" I said: "What's the matter with the roofs?" He said, "Well, I have been talking to my wife about the roofs, and she likes the roofs" ~ and then he sniggered. I said: "What's so funny or odd about that?" And he said: "Well, I don't know, I ... "

Well, to cut a long story short, it became clear that ... [Alexander goes to the blackboard and draws different types of roofs]. Now, all of you who are educated in the modernist canon know that as an architect, a respectable architect of the 1980s, it is quite okay to do this, you can do this, you can do this, you can do this, but please [he points to a pitched roof design] do not do this.

So, the question is, why not? Why does this taboo exist? What is this funny business about having to prove

you are a modern architect and having to do something other than a pitched roof? The simplest explanation is that you have to do these others to prove your membership in the fraternity of modern architecture. You have to do something more far out, otherwise people will think you are a simpleton. But I do not think that is the whole story. I think the more crucial explanation ~ very strongly related to what I was talking about last night ~ is that the pitched roof contains a very, very primitive power of feeling. Not a low pitched, tract house roof, but a beautifully shaped, fully pitched roof. That kind of roof has a very primitive essence as a shape, which reaches into a very vulnerable part of you. But the version that is okay among the architectural fraternity is the one which does not have the feeling: the weird angle, the butterfly, the asymmetrically steep shed, etc. ~ all the shapes which look interesting but which lack feeling altogether. The roof issue is a simple example. But I do believe the history of architecture in the last few decades has been one of specifically and repeatedly trying to avoid any primitive feeling whatsoever. Why this has taken place, I don't know.

PE: This is a wonderful coincidence, because I too am concerned with the subject of roofs. Let me answer it in a very deep way. I would argue that the pitched roof is ~ as Gaston Bachelard points out ~ one of the essential characteristics of "houseness". It was the extension of the vertebrate structure which sheltered and enclosed man. Michel Foucault has said that when man began to study man in the 19th century, there was a displacement of man from the center. The representation of the fact that man was no longer the center of the world, no longer the arbiter, and, therefore, no longer controlling artifacts, was reflected in a change from the vertebrate-center type of structure to the center-as-void. That distance, which you call alienation or lack of feeling, may have been merely a natural product of this new cosmology.

The non-vertebrate structure is an attempt to express that change in the cosmology. It is not merely a stylistic issue, or one that goes against feeling, or the alienation that man feels. When man began to study himself, he began to lose his position in the center. The loss of center is expressed by that alienation. Whether understood by modern architecture or not, what Modernism was attempting to explain by its form was that alienation. Now that technology has gone rampant, maybe we need to rethink the cosmology. Can we go back to a cosmology

ogy of anthropocentrism? I am not convinced that it is appropriate.

CA: Let me just inject one thing. This is a pretty interesting subject. I just want to make one thing clear. I am not suggesting that it would be good idea to romantically go back and pick up the pitched roof, and say: "Well, it did a certain job for several hundred years, why don't we keep it, or use it again?" I am talking about a totally different language than that.

I think I am going to have to give a rather more elaborate explanation. Up until about 1600, most of the world views that existed in different cultures did see man and the universe as more or less intertwined and inseparable ... either through the medium of what they called God or in some other way. But all that was understood. The particular intellectual game that led us to discover all the wonders of science forced us to abandon temporarily that idea. In other words, in order to do physics, to do biology, we were actually taught to pretend that things were like little machines because only then could you tinker with them and find out what makes them tick. That's all fine. It was a tremendous endeavor, and it paid off.

But it may have been factually wrong. That is, the constitution of the universe may be such that the human self and the substance that things made out of, the spatial matter or whatever you call it, are much more inextricably related than we realized. Now, I am not talking about some kind of aboriginal primitivism. I am saying that it may actually be a matter of fact that those things are more related than we realize. And that we have been trained to play a trick on ourselves for the last 300 years in order to discover certain things. Now, if that's true ~ there are plenty of people in the world who are beginning to say it is, by the way, certainly in physics and other related subjects ~ then my own contribution to that line of thought has to do with these structures of sameness that I have been talking about.

In other words, the order I was sketching out last night is ultimately, fundamentally an order produced by centers or wholes which are reinforcing each other and creating each other. Now, if all of that is so, then the pitched roof would simply come about as a consequence of all that ~ not as an antecedent. It would turn out that, in circumstances where one is putting a roof on a building, in the absence of other very strong forces

that are forcing you to do something different, that is the most natural and simple roof to do. And, therefore, that kind of order would tend to reappear ~ of course, in a completely different, modern technological style ~ simply because that is the nature of order, not because of a romantic harkening back to past years. You probably understand this.

PE: What we have not been able to get at yet is that it is possible to project a totally different cosmology that deals with the feelings of the self. Alternative views of the world might suggest that it is not wholeness that will evoke our truest feelings and that it is precisely the wholeness of the anthropocentric world that it might be the presence of absence, that is, the nonwhole, the fragment which might produce a condition that would more closely approximate our innate feelings today.

Let me be more specific. Last night, you gave two examples of structural relationships that evoke feelings of wholeness ~ of an arcade around a court, which was too large, and of a window frame which is also too large. Le Corbusier once defined architecture as having to do with a window which is either too large or too small, but never the right size. Once it was the right size it was no longer functioning. When it is the right size, that building is merely a building. The only way in the presence of architecture that is that feeling, that need for something other, when the window was either too large or too small.

I was reminded of this when I went to Spain this summer to see the town hall at Logrono by Rafael Moneo. He made an arcade where the columns were too thin. It was profoundly disturbing to me when I first saw photographs of the building. The columns seemed too thin for an arcade around the court of a public space. And then, when I went to see the building, I realized what he was doing. He was taking away from something that was too large, achieving an effect that expresses the separation and fragility that man feels today in relationship to the technological scale of life, to machines, and the car-dominated environment we live in. I had a feeling with that attenuated colonnade of precisely what I think you are talking about. Now, I am curious if you can admit, in your idea of wholeness, the idea of separation ~ wholeness for you might be separation for me. The idea that the too-small might also satisfy a feeling as well as the too-large. Because if it is only the too-large that you will admit, then we have a real problem.

CA: I didn't say too large, by the way, I just said large. Quite a different matter.

PE: You said a boundary larger than the entity it surrounds. I think you said too large.

CA: I said large in relation to the entity. Not too large.

PE: Large, meaning larger than it needs be?

CA: No, I didn't mean that.

PE: Well, could it be smaller than it needs be?

CA: Unfortunately, I don't know the building you just described. Your description sounds horrendous to me. Of course, without actually seeing it, I can't tell. But if your words convey anything like what the thing is actually like, then it sounds to me that this is exactly this kind of prickly, weird place, that for some reason some group of people have chosen to go to nowadays. Now, why are they going there? Don't ask me.

PE: I guess what I am saying is that I believe that there is an alternate cosmology to the one which you suggest. The cosmology of the last 300 years has changed and there is now the potential for expressing those feelings that you speak of in other ways than through largeness ~ your boundaries ~ and the alternating repetition of architectural elements. You had 12 or 15 points. Precisely because I believe that the old cosmology is no longer an effective basis on which to build, I begin to want to invert your conditions ~ to search for their negative ~ to say that for every positive condition you suggest, if you could propose a negative you might more closely approximate the cosmology of today. In other words, if I could find the negative of your 12 points, we would come closer to approximating a cosmology that would deal with both of us than does the one you are proposing.

CA : Can we just go back to the arcade for a moment? The reason Moneo's arcade sounded prickly and strange was, when I make an arcade I have a very simple purpose, and that is to try to make it feel absolutely comfortable ~ physically, emotionally, practically, and absolutely. This is pretty hard to do. Much, much harder to do than most of the present generation of architects will admit to. Let's just talk about the simple

matter of making an arcade. I find in my own practical work that in order to find out what's really comfortable, it is necessary to mock up the design at full scale. This is what I normally do. So I will take pieces of lumber, scrap material, and I'll start mocking up. How big are the columns? What is the space between them? At what height is the ceiling above? How wide is the thing? When you actually get all those elements correct, at a certain point you begin to feel that they are in harmony.

Of course, harmony is a product not only of yourself, but of the surroundings. In other words, what is harmonious in one place will not be in another. So, it is very, very much a question of what application creates harmony in that place. It is a simple objective matter. At least my experience tells me, that when a group of different people set out to try and find out what is harmonious, what feels most comfortable in such and such a situation, their opinions about it will tend to converge, if they are mocking up full-scale, real stuff. Of course, if they're making sketches or throwing out ideas, they won't agree. But if you start making the real thing, one tends to reach agreement. My only concern is to produce that kind of harmony. The things that I was talking about last night ~ I was doing empirical observation about ~ as a matter of fact, it turns out that these certain structures need to be in there to produce that harmony.

The thing that strikes me about your friend's building ~ if I understood you correctly ~ is that somehow in some intentional way it is not harmonious. That is, Moneo intentionally wants to produce an effect of disharmony. Maybe even of incongruity.

PE: That is correct.

CA: I find that incomprehensible. I find it very irresponsible. I find it nutty. I feel sorry for the man. I also feel incredibly angry because he is fucking up the world.

Audience: (Applause)

PE: Precisely the reaction that you elicited from the group. That is, they feel comfortable clapping. The need to clap worries me because it means that mass psychology is taking over.

Someone from the audience: Why should architects feel comfortable with a cosmology you are not even sure

exists?

PE: Let's say if I went out in certain places in the United States and asked people about the music they would feel comfortable with, a lot of people would come up with Mantovani. And I'm not convinced that that is something I should have to live with all my life, just because the majority of people feel comfortable with it. I want to go back to the notion of needing to feel comfortable. Why does Chris need to feel comfortable, and I do not? Why does he feel the need for harmony, and I do not? Why does he see incongruity as irresponsible, and why does he get angry? I do not get angry when he feels the need for harmony. I just feel I have a different view of it.

Someone from the audience: He is not screwing up the world.

PE: I would like to suggest that if I were not here agitating nobody would know what Chris's idea of harmony is, and you all would not realize how much you agree with him ... Walter Benjamin talks about "the destructive character", which, he says, is reliability itself, because it is always constant. If you repress the destructive nature, it is going to come out in some way. If you are only searching for harmony, the disharmonies and incongruencies which define harmony and make it understandable will never be seen. A world of total harmony is no harmony at all. Because I exist, you can go along and understand your need for harmony, but do not say that I am being irresponsible or make a moral judgement that I am screwing up the world, because I would not want to have to defend myself as a moral imperative for you.

CA: Good God!

PE: Nor should you feel angry. I think you should just feel this harmony is something that the majority of the people need and want. But equally there must be people out there like myself who feel the need for incongruity, disharmony, etc.

CA: If you were an unimportant person, I would feel quite comfortable letting you go your own way. But the fact is that people who believe as you do are really fucking up the whole profession of architecture right now by propagating these beliefs. Excuse me, I'm sorry, but I feel very, very strongly about this. It's all very well to

say: "Look, harmony here, disharmony there, harmony here ~ it's all fine". But the fact is that we as architects are entrusted with the creation of that harmony in the world. And if a group of very powerful people, yourself and others ...

PE: How does someone become so powerful if he is screwing up the world? I mean somebody is going to see through that ...

CA: Yes, I think they will quite soon.

PE: I would hope, Chris, that we are here to present arguments. These people here are not people who have rings in their noses, at least as far as I can see, and they can judge for themselves whether I am screwing up the world or not. If they choose to think I am screwing up the world, they certainly would not come here. These are open forums. For you to determine arbitrarily that I am screwing up the world seems self-righteous and arrogant. I have not had much of a chance to do so and neither have you. Precisely because I am uncomfortable with those situations which you describe as comfortable, I find myself having to live in New York. I do not live in San Francisco, even though I think it is a nice place. There is not enough grist there for me, not enough sand in the oyster. And my head starts ~ it may be my own psychological problem ~ but thank God, there is a loony bin called New York where eight million people who feel the way I do are allowed to be!

CA: Actually, New York is not created by that kind of madness. New York is certainly a very exciting place. When you compare it to Denmark or Sweden, I fully understand what you are saying. And I sympathize with you. Your observation seems to me a very reasonable one, objectively speaking. But that is quite a different matter. It's quite different from the original question: why should I feel so strongly, why should I get angry, because you are preaching disharmony? I was trying to explain to you why I get angry about it.

PE: I am not preaching disharmony. I am suggesting that disharmony might be part of the cosmology that we exist in. I am not saying right or wrong. My children live with an unconscious fear that they may not live out their natural lives. I am not saying that fear is good. I am trying to find a way to deal with that anxiety. An architecture that puts its head in the sand and goes back to neoclassicism, and Schinkel, Lutyens, and Ledoux,

does not seem to be a way of dealing with the present anxiety. Most of what my colleagues are doing today does not seem to be the way to go. Equally, I do not believe that the way to go, as you suggest, is to put up structures to make people feel comfortable, to preclude that anxiety. What is a person to do if he cannot react against anxiety or see it pictured in his life? After all, that is what all those evil Struwwel Peter characters are for in German fairy tales.

CA: Don't you think there is enough anxiety at present? Do you really think we need to manufacture more anxiety in the form of buildings?

PE: Let me see if I can get it to you another way. Tolstoy wrote about the man who had so many modern conveniences in Russia that when he was adjusting the chair and the furniture, etc., that he was so comfortable and so nice and so pleasant that he didn't know ~ he lost all control of his physical and mental reality. There was nothing. What I'm suggesting is that if we make people so comfortable in these nice little structures of yours, that we might lull them into thinking that everything's all right, Jack, which it isn't. And so the role of art or architecture might be just to remind people that everything wasn't all right. And I'm not convinced, by the way, that it is all right.

CA: I can't, as a maker of things, I just can't understand it. I do not have a concept of things in which I can even talk about making something in the frame of mind you are describing. I mean, to take a simple example, when I make a table I say to myself: "All right, I'm going to make a table, and I'm going to try to make a good table". And of course, then from there on I go to the ultimate resources I have and what I know, how well I can make it. But for me to then introduce some kind of little edge, which starts trying to be a literary comment, and then somehow the table is supposed to be at the same time a good table, but it also is supposed to be I don't know what; a comment on nuclear warfare, making a little joke, doing various other things ... I'm practically naive; it doesn't make sense to me.



Editors' Comments: Contemporary commentary² tried to paint this as a clash between East and West Coasts, intellect vs metaphysics, abstraction vs empiricism – anything, in fact, to avoid the substance of it. Surely Alexander was being Socratic when he professed ignorance of those “French ‘Structuralists’ Eisenman was so keen on, before he asked his opponent to describe what it was they said. Interestingly, much of what Eisenman then went on to say could as well have been said by Alexander: for example, he talks of an “innate structure or order” which is non-mechanistic; and he is interested in “the ontology ... as opposed to the epistemology of things”. But Alexander's retort provides the crux of the debate: that all sounds very well, he says, but tell me now what kinds of buildings it leads you to make – “words”, he goes on, “are very, very cheap”. In saying this he exposes, at the very beginning of the debate, the fact that Eisenman's architecture is based on what he implies to be empty intellectual discussion: on a new and fanciful language that fails to connect to the product.

Remember that Eisenman has now, for forty years, been turning from one fashionable pretext to another in an effort to justify his architecture of disjunction, rapidly quitting them when they get too stale, or too prone to debunking. His friend Charles Jencks has described his progress thus:

His early designs in the Cardboard Corbu vocabulary were derived from processes based loosely on the transformational grammar of Noam Chomsky. In the seventies, however, Eisenman turned towards post-structuralism and has since 1980 picked up on one *nuova scienza* after another.³

In his debate with Alexander we catch him equally “loosely” in post-structuralist mode, with, as yet, not a shred of “*nuova scienza*” in sight. His performance shows us why Reyner Banham called him “a self-annoying solipsist”.

Of the three Frenchmen Eisenman mentions – two of them broadly structuralist, the other a post-structuralist

² We refer to Georges Teyssot's ludicrously biased “Marginal comments” provided at the end of the debate as published in *Lotus International*, no.40 (1983), pp69ff.

³ Charles Jencks, “The New Paradigm in Architecture”, *Datutop* 22 (absolute motion), Tampere U. of Technology, 2002, p.18.

– he seems closest in spirit (if one can use this word in connection with Eisenman) to Foucault, that denizen of the margins. In his somewhat leaden description of Palladio's Palazzo Chiericati (which conveys only the most etiolated sense of what that building might mean to him) he seeks to relocate the marginal aspects of the building to its centre, describing the quality he is looking for, in a deliberately provocative phrase, as that which "transgresses wholeness and contaminates it". In fact, for Eisenman, without such transgression, architecture doesn't exist: he remembers that Corbusier

"... once defined architecture as having to do with a window which is either too large or too small, but never the right size. When it is the right size, the building is merely a building."

He goes on to give an astonishingly lucid description of the emerging deconstructivist program, in his description of an arcade in the town hall of Logrono, Spain by Rafael Moneo (the architect responsible most recently for the new Cathedral in Los Angeles):

It was profoundly disturbing to me when I first saw photographs of the building. The columns seemed too thin for an arcade around the court of a public space. And then, when I went to see the building, I realized what he was doing. He was taking away from something that was too large, achieving an effect that expresses the separation and fragility that man feels today in relationship to the technological scale of life, to machines, and the car-dominated environment we live in.

This expresses Eisenman's idea of order: it is not about wholeness, but rather the expression – one could say celebration – of separation and frustration. It is this "social narrative" which is all that matters to him.

The debate is, therefore – despite the title given to it at the time, of "Discord Over Harmony in Architecture"⁴ – more about Order than Harmony: Foucault's Order of Things vs Alexander's Nature of Order. On the one hand we have Order presented as something subjective, socially-constructed, with the flavour of repression about it, and on the other Order as something objective, a fundamental property of matter, something essentially generative. Alexander was convinced, as he

4 (Harvard) GSD News, Jan./Feb. 1983. When Lotus published it later that year the title had become "Contrasting concepts of harmony in architecture".

had been for twenty years – well before Eisenman got into bed with any "nuova scienza" – that Order and Harmony were both objective facts, susceptible to scientific method, and, since the debate took place, a number of scientists have begun to come around to this same position. By contrast, Derrida's use of science has now been classed among the Intellectual Impostures,⁵ so here in the debate we see the early stages of the inevitable clash between real science and voodoo science in architecture, which is only now coming out into the open in the wake of the publication of Charles Jencks's *The New Paradigm in Architecture*.

Subsequent architectural history shows that Alexander's "New Paradigm" has been marginalised, as professional opinion steadily embraced Eisenman's paradigm. Many question how this could possibly have happened. Why should people have ignored the sane, reasonable, and humane vision of Alexander in order to embrace the transgressive vision of the deconstructivists – a vision, as Alexander pointed out twenty years ago, that neglects feeling? But of course the deconstructivists don't neglect feeling altogether. Theirs is the feeling generated by abstractions writ large, by the shock of scale and contrast, by the sensationalism and spectacle of the new and the bizarrely transfigured – a totemic architecture of novelty. Eisenman's architecture turned out to be a perfect fit with a late-industrial society seeking ever more thrilling forms, new assemblies, alien geometries – all permutations of the same limited industrial vocabulary. The deconstructivists offered this world a highly entertaining new metallic expression. That it had little nutritional content was not the point.

In this debate, Alexander does not appear to be aware of how well the deconstructivists were already organised. He trusted in the soundness of his ideas to win over the architectural profession – a technique that works in science and mathematics, but not often in the humanities. Alexander clearly did not give sufficient weight to the extra-architectural forces shaping architecture, including the force of fashion in a decaying industrial culture. In a telling exchange, he is confident that the general public is both interested in, and capable of, influencing the direction of architecture.

PE: How does someone become so powerful if he is

5 Sokal, Alan & Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual impostures: Postmodern philosophers' abuse of science*, Profile, 1998.

screwing up the world? I mean somebody is going to see through that.

CA: Yes, I think they will quite soon.

This, of course, never happened. After this debate, as Alexander became more peripheral – his work confined so far to the small- and medium-scale – Eisenman rose to architectural eminence, his buildings becoming ever larger. In a recent review of *The Nature of Order*, Eisenman was quoted as saying that Alexander “sort of fell off the radar screen.”⁶

By 1983 (a year before Charles Jencks announced that Post-Modernism had become a “self-confirming fashion, a socially-accepted fact”) key players in architecture schools, the profession, and the media had already switched their support from modernism to Post-Modernism, which would ultimately lead to deconstructivism. Alexander, despite winning over his Harvard audience, lost the broader impact he could have had on the architectural community.

And yet, as we have noted, his passionate defense of Order as a concrete subject – vastly broader than human social abstractions, and encompassing the subjective and the qualitative – foreshadowed the direction science would very soon take. At a time when deconstructivism holds center stage as the star of the crumbling industrial paradigm, a new generation of scientists and artists is busy exploring the new and broader frontiers of the complex order of nature. And their work increasingly suggests that Alexander will have the last word:

Up until about 1600, most of the world views that existed in different cultures did see man and the universe as more or less intertwined and inseparable ... either through the medium of what they called God or in some other way. But ... [t]he particular intellectual game that led us to discover all the wonders of science forced us to abandon temporarily that idea. In other words, in order to do physics, to do biology, we were actually taught to pretend that things were like little machines

because only then could you tinker with them and find out what makes them tick. That’s all fine. It was a tremendous endeavor, and it paid off.

But it may have been factually wrong. That is, the constitution of the universe may be such that the human self and the substance that things are made out of, the spatial matter or whatever you call it, are much more inextricably related than we realized. Now, I am not talking about some kind of aboriginal primitivism. I am saying that it may actually be a matter of fact that those things are more related than we realize. And that we have been trained to play a trick on ourselves for the last 300 years in order to discover certain things. Now, if that’s true – there are plenty of people in the world who are beginning to say it is, by the way, certainly in physics and other related subjects – then my own contribution to that line of thought has to do with these structures of sameness that I have been talking about.

⁶ Curiously, the “Google number” of Alexander – a web score often cited as an accurate reflection of intellectual influence – is presently over 50,000, whereas Eisenman’s own is around 20,000. Eisenman may have inadvertently pointed up how, other than providing occasional attention-getting entertainment, the architecture profession itself has “sort of fallen off the radar screen” of the larger culture.