

## MAKING COMMUNITY AND PLACE: COMMONALITIES AND CONTRASTS IN THE WORK OF DANIEL KEMMIS AND CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER

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1. Though he does not say so explicitly, one supposes that Alexander's model of the city is grounded very much in the ideas of urban critic Jane Jacobs (1961), who argued that streets are the heart of the city and should be alive with pedestrian activity that accepts both residents and visitors. Jacobs claimed that the grounding for a vital street life is *diversity* - a lively mix of land uses and building types that supports and relies on a dense, varied population of users and activities. She also believed that crucial to diversity and lively streets are qualities of the *physical* city - e.g., small blocks, direct surveillance from buildings to street, high proportion of built-up areas, and so forth.

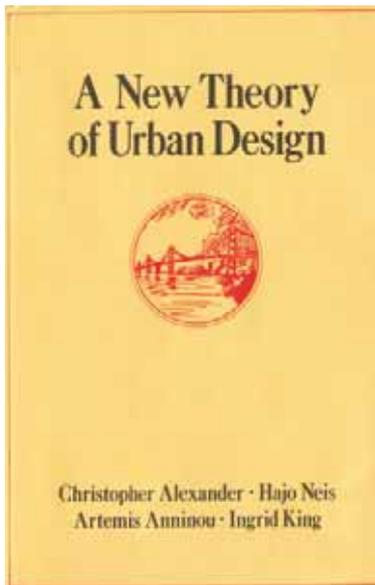
2. Kemmis examines the political basis for this argument in his earlier *Community and the Politics of Place*, which argues for "a politics which rests upon a mutual recognition by diverse interests that they are bound to each other by their common attachment to a place" (Kemmis, 1990, 123). Also see Kemmis, 2001.

### INTRODUCTION

As illustrated by the ideas of political activist Daniel Kemmis (1990, 1995, 2001) and architect Christopher Alexander (1985, 1987, 2002-05; et al., 1977;), there is a practical movement afoot in public policy and community design that attempts to understand useful societal change from the viewpoint of wholes healing themselves.

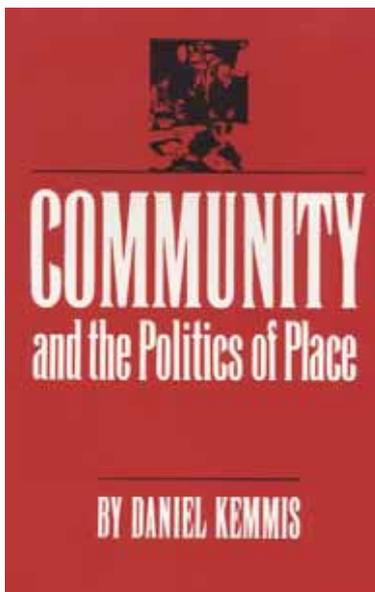
Alexander, particularly in his *A New Theory of Urban Design* (Alexander, 1987), has been the most visible proponent of this perspective. He understands successful urban place making as a collaborative process of healing whereby the city becomes more alive and healthy through an incremental growth of parts that, over time and synergistically, enriches the whole. Key aspects of this healthy city include small blocks, mixed uses, lively streets, physical and human diversity, distinctive neighborhoods, and human sociability, a especially informal interactions in public spaces (1). Crucially important is a design and decision-making process whereby new parts of the city arise in such a way that they strengthen the existing urban fabric and make it more identifiable and coherent.

In *The Good City and the Good Life*, Daniel Kemmis (1995) explores the idea of urban wholeness and healing as it might have meaning for politics and citizenship: "The refocusing of human energy around the organic wholeness of cities, promises a profound rehumanizing of the shape and condition of our lives" (Kemmis, 1995, 151). Kemmis describes a way of urban life that involves the individual citizens' feeling a part of the city because it provides a place for them to belong. Individuals, he argues, "cannot be fully healthy, physically and mentally, in isolation, but only as meaningful players in a meaningful community....the healing (making more whole) of cities is serving to heal—to reknit—the often frayed and sometimes severed strands of our humanity" (Kemmis, 1995, 152) (2).



In this sense, Kemmis says much about the lived-process of making community happen, especially through striking vignettes drawn from his own political experiences as former mayor of Missoula, Montana, and former Speaker of the Montana legislature. Perhaps the most valuable dimension of the book is its speaking to how, in terms of communal and political process, Alexander's theory for healing the city -a theory that Kemmis draws on directly and regularly- needs to happen. In other words, the book answers how the practical steps of urban change are to be decided by the various parties involved. For Kemmis, this decision-making process is innately *political*, whereby he means the realization of the city's possibilities through a civility among different citizens' views.

In this commentary on Alexander and Kemmis's ideas, I argue that Kemmis, in his vision of the good city, sees urban healing fostered largely through civil discourse among citizens and politicians. In contrast, Alexander argues that, before any such discourse can begin, there must first be a basic understanding as to what environmental wholeness is and how it can be strengthened or stymied by qualities of physical design. I argue that, ultimately, *both* aspects of the healing process—material and communal—must be considered and carried out, though I concur with Alexander that a knowledge of how the *physical* city grounds the healing process must found the civil discourse that follows.



#### WHOLENESS GENERATING MORE WHOLENESS

In the first chapter of *The Good City*, Kemmis discusses "The Good Life," which "makes it possible for humans to be fully present- to themselves, to one another and to their surroundings. Such presence is precisely opposite of the distractedness -the being beside- that is so prevalent in our political culture" (Kemmis, 1995, 22).

Crucially, the urbanite does not necessarily need to initiate an active interest in the city; rather, the city in its liveliness and attraction can invigorate the dweller, who in turn contributes to the city. In this sense, urban wholeness begets human wholeness and vice versa. This mutual interplay of part and whole, person, and world, urbanite and city is, for Kemmis, the foundation of civilization: "This fundamental connection between human wholeness and livability and the wholeness and life of the city are all contained in... the word "civilized" (Kemmis, 1995, 12).

What Kemmis discusses here, implicitly, is the basic phenomenological principle that people-are-immersed-in-world-as world-is-immersed-in-people. This relationship is elusive and difficult to give grounded significance. One of the delights of Kemmis's book is his ability to found this principle in his political experience. For example, in his first chapter, he discusses Missoula's lively farmer's market, which provides a place for the city to work on its citizens by gathering them together and providing economic and social exchange. This "gathering role...enables people to come away from the market more whole than when they arrived" (Kemmis, 1995, 11)

In chapters 2-4, Kemmis suggests how this mutuality of wholeness between urbanites and their city might shed new light on urban problems conventionally tackled through piecemeal solutions. In chapter 2, for example, he examines teenagers in the city, who regularly complain, wherever they live, that their city provides no places for them to gather or to be themselves in a positive way. Kemmis reviews several recent initiatives - e.g., the use of mentors, neighborhood programs teaching building trades-

that build “into its children’s very character those elements...crucial to the maintenance of the city, those elements that we generally think need to be expressed in laws and regulations” (Kemmis, 1995, 33).

### THE CITY AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

In chapters 5 and 6, Kemmis examines the city’s relationship to its surroundings and to other cities. These chapters have much to say about a revitalized understanding of economy, recognizing at the start that economics is necessarily grounded in place and region and should be understood on the basis of that lived-geography.

Drawing on the arguments of Jane Jacobs (1984), Kemmis argues that the modernist nation-state is dead. The postmodernist replacement is the *city-state*, perhaps best symbolized by Hong Kong and the powerful way its capitalist economy has influenced its surrounding Chinese region. As economies grow more global, nation-states lose their economic relevance, while cities and their regions become the new economic unit, since “real economies turn out to be nothing other than the organic relationship of cities and towns to their surroundings” (Kemmis, 1995, 106).

Cities are the core of this regional vitality but they also must take responsibility for suburbs, rural communities, and the natural environments of their hinterland. The aim is “learning how to make the region operate as the natural economy it is capable of being” (Kemmis, 1995, 119). Drawing on his own frustrating experiences with federal commissions, Kemmis describes how current economic policies, especially at the federal level, ignore the idea of urban region and, instead, divide it into “city,” “suburb,” and “countryside,” each of which must then separately compete for the same assistance dollars. These policies of division:

- have exploded the natural integrity of city-regions, deluding city centers, suburbs, and rural surroundings
- into ignoring their mutual dependency. The result has been a gigantic and acutely nearsighted
- disinvestment in both central cities and rural areas, to the short-term but unsustainable advantage of that
- other, ultimate nonplace “suburban America” (Kemmis, 1995, 120).

In chapter 6, Kemmis examines the phenomenon of sister cities, which are seen as a practical means for global awareness and citizenship. It is impossible for one individual to relate to the whole earth directly but, by having contact with residents of his or her city’s sister city, he or she can mark the start of a global understanding. The key is that the cities must interact with each other in several different ways, through formal political channels, yes, but also through high school exchanges, sports competitions, artistic performances and exhibits, newspapers, and so forth. The result is a ripple effect that Kemmis describes in terms of a Missoula child who has a pen pal in Missoula’s sister city of Neckargemund, Germany:

- The child is likely to ask his or her parents for help in describing the city; the parents in turn may recount
- the conversation to neighbors or colleagues, who, with so many other links already existing between the
- two cities, are that much more likely to have had first- and second-hand contacts of their own, which are

- then recounted back down the chain. As the threads of these stories circulate, they bring the sister city
- more clearly into focus as a human enterprise, rather than the abstraction it must have been to most
- people at the beginning of the relationship. Conversely, when the relationships are too thin or one-
- dimensional, they never achieve their synergy, and the two cities never come alive to each other

(Kemmis, 1995, 141).

Kemmis makes the intriguing observation that, in generating such a lived-synergy, sister cities become a postmodern equivalent to the golden mean, providing a manageable connection between the smallness of the individual and the vastness of the earth. But this possibility of global healing and wholeness can only happen if, first, each city heals itself. Kemmis writes:

- The city's ancient work of creating presence, in which humans may gladly dwell, is what now enlivens
- the sister cities movement, by making the living planet present to so many of its citizens. The good
- city—the living city—thus in its wholeness provides the context within which global citizenship becomes
- a genuine possibility. But that possibility can only be realized if we become steadily more aware of the
- living wholeness of our own cities. Before they can 'save the earth' cities must understand and live into
- their organic relationships with their own neighborhoods, their own families, and their own immediate
- surroundings, relationships that form the true mediating 'structures of wholeness' between the individual
- and the living earth (Kemmis, 1995, 147).

### GOOD POLITICIANS AND GOOD CITIZENS

In the last two chapters of the book, Kemmis examines the relation between politics and citizenship. All politics, Kemmis emphasizes, are about power, but the kind of politician who can make the good city happen must always remember that his or her power "is only a form of stewardship on behalf of those whose power it really is" (153). Conventionally, power has been regulated in our political system by a system of checks and balances, but this system too often interferes with politicians' and citizens' exercising the personal responsibility of working out solutions together, "which alone can make democracy work" (Kemmis, 1995, 154)(3).

Good politicians remember they are stewards of power, which they barter to make a better city, through listening to what its citizens say but also listening to the city itself. The need is to meet with many different people, get them to talk to each other, and—when the moment seems right—making the best decision possible on behalf of the city. In the end, says Kemmis, the mark of the good politician is "knowing when to let the world work, and when to work on the world" (Kemmis, 1995, 177).

3. Kemmis more thoroughly discusses the differences between republican and federalist approaches to government in his first book; see Kemmis, 1990, chapter 1.

If this phrase sounds Heideggerian, it is. Several times in the book, Kemmis refers to Heidegger's essay, "Building Dwelling Thinking" (Heidegger, 1971), which argues that human beings can only design and make policy if they dwell in place and belong. For Kemmis, the good politician is open both to the needs of people and place so that, as the right moment arises, he or she can use power to make the next step toward healing the city whole:

- if the city is constantly responding to what it has already created and to what fortune brings forward,
- then the next act of creation must always be some paradoxical blend of will and acceptance....This blend
- is precisely the defining characteristic of the good politician.... (Kemmis, 1995, 178-179).
- ...it is the city, in its slow movement of unfolding, which prepares both the places and the time for its
- next (risky and uncertain) step in the direction of its own possibility...it is this possibility...which is the
- true meaning of politics as "the art of the possible" (Kemmis, 1995, 179).

On the other hand, this kind of practical openness to what the city might become cannot happen if ordinary citizens do not partake in the political process. Unfortunately today, community involvement too often becomes special-interest groups fighting for power. The need, says Kemmis, is to draw into the process people who can be civil and take responsibility for mediating extremes and finding a middle point of possibility. To be a citizen involves "the ability to teach or encourage one another to speak so that you can actually be heard by others who do not already share your view" (Kemmis, 1995, 192).

#### ALEXANDER'S HEALING OF THE CITY

As I mentioned earlier, Kemmis's understanding of the city is very much affected by Christopher Alexander's vision of urban healing and wholeness, most thoroughly developed in his *New Theory* (Alexander, 1987), to which Kemmis refers regularly. He also argues, however, that Alexander, as an architect, gives most attention to *physical* healing but that, "as important as the physical body of the city is, it alone cannot make the city healthy" (Kemmis, 1995, 14).

Kemmis's effort to move beyond the physical healing of the city is both *Good City's* strength and weakness. On one hand, he gives an invaluable picture of the process of human give-and-take that must underlie and motivate actual building and policy decisions; on the other hand, he seems to suppose that civilized mediation among participants will somehow lead to the right decisions as to how the city will constructively change without necessarily the need for any precise understanding or specific expertise as to what the physical city is and how it works.

In *New Theory*, Alexander seeks to heal the modern American city, which he sees as chaotic, dehumanizing and placeless. He offers seven *rules*, as he calls them, which he believes could provide a healing action and lead to a renewed sense of urban place. He then illustrates the use of these rules through a simulation experiment conducted with architectural graduate students at

4. These seven rules are: (1) piecemeal growth; (2) the growth of larger wholes; (3) visions; (4) positive outdoor space; (5) building layout; (6) construction rules; and (7) formation of centers. In studying the rules carefully, one realizes that these rules have two related functions: first, rules 1, 2 and 7 help the designer to recognize and understand environmental wholes; second, rules 3, 4, 5 and 6 help to create new parts in the whole that will lead to healing and a stronger environmental order.

5. In the waterfront simulation, Alexander and his group defined physical size in terms of floor space (less than 1,000 square feet, 1,000-10,000 square feet, 10,000-100,000 square feet), while types of uses were defined in terms of "reasonable distribution of functions" (Alexander, 1987, 34). The functions of housing, parking, and community were allotted the most space (twenty-six, nineteen, and fifteen percent respectively) while manufacturing, shops and restaurants, and hotels allotted the least (twelve, seven, and five percent).

Small projects for the waterfront included fountains, kiosks, gateways and individual houses, while medium projects included a cafe, bakery, row houses, and waterfront park. Yet again, large projects included apartment houses, a theater, a community bank, a main square, an electronics factory, and a pier for ship repairs.

6. For example, the very first project was a high, narrow arching gate to mark the entrance to the site. In terms of rule 2, this gate was important because it generated a sense of passage that started beneath the arch and continued south. In this way, the gate hinted at a larger whole—a street and pedestrian mall going south into the heart of the site. This pedestrian street was then defined more exactly by the next two projects: a hotel and a cafe, which fixed its west side and width (an existing building on the east fixed the street's east side). Soon after, another project—a community bank—established the far end of the street, which was then completed by a series of increments that included an apartment house, an office building, and various construction details such as a gravel walk and low wall.

In terms of rule 2, the key point is that each project defining the pedestrian street did several things at once: first, it helped to complete one major center already defined; second, it helped to pin down some other, less clearly defined center; third, it hinted at some entirely new center that would emerge later. One example is the hotel, which wrapped around a garden courtyard. First, in conjunction with the gate, this building helped complete the southern edge of the simulation site; second, it helped to pin down the pedestrian street by fixing its western edge; third, in shaping itself around an outdoor courtyard, it hinted at a new center that in later increments would become a large public garden running south from the hotel and shaped by a series of apartment buildings.

the University of California at Berkeley in a design studio taught by him and colleagues Ingrid King and Howard Davis.

The nineteen students in this studio focused on thirty acres of the San Francisco waterfront just north of the Bay Bridge and destined for development in the near future. The major task the students faced was to transform these thirty acres, for the most part empty, into a district of buildings, streets, plazas and parks that would all contribute to a sense of life, atmosphere, and wholeness. Eventually, the students converted the waterfront site into an a set of places that included such elements as a pedestrian mall, a main square, a waterfront park, and a market and fishing pier.

The seven rules that Alexander and his colleagues developed all attempt to guide the urban-design process by fostering a good fit between new construction and the existing environment (4). For example, rule 1—"piecemeal growth"- says that the best construction increments are small, thus there should be an even mix of small, medium, and large construction projects (5). Building on rule 1, rule 2—"the growth of larger wholes"- directs how specific design projects can be seen to belong together and therefore requires that "every building increment must help to form at least one larger whole in the city, which is both larger and more significant than itself" (Alexander, 1987, 38-39) (6).

## ALEXANDER AND KEMMIS TOGETHER

In presenting such specific directives for urban design, Alexander seems to be saying that there must be some sort of reasoned procedure, or *instrument* as I will call it here, for the actualization of wholeness, which for Alexander is his seven rules through which decision-makers should gain understanding and the city should gain realization.

In contrast, Kemmis appears to have little interest in such a line of practical understanding and clearcut procedure; rather, he seems to believe that, if citizens and politicians begin to put the welfare of their city *first*, an understanding of what the city is and needs to become will automatically arise through civil discussion, mediation, and compromise: "As citizens become more practiced at working together with the city's best interests at heart, it is precisely such structures of wholeness that recommend themselves to their attention" (Kemmis, 1995, 194).

Alexander might not disagree with this perspective, provided the participants had some degree of conscious awareness of what the wholeness of place is and some set of guidelines to hold this wholeness in mind. On the other hand, Alexander says little about how these directives, through citizen involvement, can actually go forth into building. How, in other words, can his instrument -the seven rules- be given *direction* through various human participants?

In the studio experiment, the rules were given direction by the students and teachers of the design studio, who role-played a developer/committee relationship founded in dialogue and continual group awareness as to who was planning what where and when. Procedurally, the students were asked to represent developers and community groups, while the studio faculty -Alexander and his colleagues- took the role of an "evaluation committee." This committee was responsible for guiding the growth process, and no student "vision" could be constructed until the committee had evaluated the idea and suggested strengths and weaknesses. All faculty and students were

7. Interestingly, Alexander points out that this unspoken agreement became stronger as the students had more experience with the rules: "in the last stages of development, the students were able to function almost entirely without guidance from the committee, since the rules had been completely absorbed and understood" (Alexander, 1987, 110).

8. Though here, too, Alexander's picture is incomplete and needs complementary discussion grounded in the efforts of other designers and planners. For example, architects and environment-behavior researchers are only beginning to understand the ways that the spatial patterning of pathways in the city contribute to whether specific streets and districts have or do not have lively, dense pedestrian movement (e.g., Hillier, 1996; Hillier and Hanson, 1984; Seamon, 1994, 2002, 2004).

The key point is that the physical design of the city and its districts plays an integral role as to whether urban life will be successful (see Seamon, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 2000, 2004). The dilemma is that, once pathways, buildings, and other physical elements are in place, they are not easily or inexpensively changed. To start with a clear understanding of the physical dimensions of place and to support design and policy that make use of this understanding is therefore crucial *from the start* of any civil discourse.

involved in all discussions about every project, so there was much mutual understanding as to the project's progress and ultimate aims (7).

Obviously, this method of direction is entirely artificial and arbitrary. Ultimately, students had to agree with the judgements of Alexander and the other instructors and to work in relation to the rules whether they personally agree with them or not. At the same time, the resulting designs were completed only as paper plans and wooden models that never had to face the real-world evaluation of the residents, developers, city officials, politicians, and others who would ultimately provide approval, funding, and participation.

In regard to applied direction, this is where Kemmis's ideas are such an important complement to Alexander's approach: Kemmis provides an extended picture of what is necessary, in terms of getting different parties to discuss and compromise, if urban wholeness and healing is to happen. On the other hand, Kemmis is less aware of how a city works physically and spatially. Again, we come to the basic phenomenological principle that people are immersed in their worlds, which first of all are physical and spatial. The many ways in this materiality supports or stymies human worlds and contributes to or weakens Kemmis's notion of the "good life and the good city" needs the attention provided by Alexander (8).

In Kemmis's inspiring work, we have the start of a phenomenology of the process by which individuals and groups become the engine for a city of distinctive places, liveliness, and wholeness. At the same time, we must better understand how existing "good cities" work, especially the contribution of material qualities like path layout, arrangement of land uses and activities, qualities of architectural form, and so forth. As a politician, Kemmis emphasizes interpersonal and inter-group process; such a focus is crucial, since it is always human decisions and interventions that in the end build the city.

I am much less certain than Kemmis, however, that citizens putting their place first will always envision the next right move that the city must take to become more whole. An integral part to this healing is precise understanding and expertise grounded in the lived-city, especially its physical, spatial, and environmental base. In this sense, Alexander's design vision is an essential complement to Kemmis's hopeful politics of community and place.

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### TOPLULUK VE YER İÇİN TASARLAMAK: DANIEL KEMMIS VE CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER'İN ÖNERİLERİNDE ORTAKLIKLAR VE KARŞITLIKLAR

Bu makale, mimar Christopher Alexander ve siyaset bilimcisi Daniel Kemmis'in topluluk tasarımı ve kentsel tasarım alanında önerdikleri kuramsal yaklaşımları tartışmaktadır. Makaleye göre Kemmis'in ortaya attığı 'iyi kent' anlayışı, 'kentsel iyileşme'yi büyük ölçüde kentli yurttaşlarla siyasetçiler arasındaki sivil söylemden beslenen bir gelişme olarak görmektedir. Buna karşıt olarak Alexander, böyle bir ortak söylemin oluşumundan önce, çevresel bütünselliğin varlığı ve bunun fiziksel açıdan nasıl güçlendirileceği ya da zayıflatılacağı konusunda bir temel anlaşma ve uzlaşma olması gerektiğini savunmaktadır. Yazarın görüşüne göre ise sonuçta, maddesel ve topluluk tasarımı anlamında, her iki 'yer tasarlama' yaklaşımının da ele alınıp birlikte yürütülmesi zorunludur: Yazar, fiziksel tasarım alanında kentin nasıl 'yer tasarlama' etkinliğine zemin

oluşturduğunu ve bunun sivil söylemselliği örnelemesi gerektiği konusunda Alexander'a koşut düşündüğünü de ayrıca ifade etmektedir.

#### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the theories of community and urban design proposed by architect Christopher Alexander and political thinker Daniel Kemmis. I argue that Kemmis, in his vision of the good city, sees urban healing fostered largely through civil discourse among citizens and politicians. In contrast, Alexander argues that, before any such discourse can begin, there must first be a basic understanding as to what environmental wholeness is and how it can be strengthened or stymied by qualities of physical design. I argue that, ultimately, *both* aspects of place making, material and communal, must be considered and carried out, though I concur with Alexander that a knowledge of how the *physical* city grounds the place making must found the civil discourse that follows.