THE WEALTH OF THE COMMONS

A WORLD BEYOND MARKET & STATE

THE COMMONING OF PATTERNS AND THE PATTERNS OF COMMONING: A SHORT SKETCH

By Franz Nahrada

What would you have to think of if you want to build a liveable house? Maybe you would start looking at the environmental factors, an identifiable neighborhood, green areas nearby. You would look at the building site and choose to improve what's there. You would create open space towards the south, and give it a distinct positive form. The building should gently absorb daylight and have different levels of intimacy. Common areas should be in the middle, located on the way in, and close to a kitchen and to the garden. And so on.

These concerns may sound trivial, but they are not. There are a thousand ways of doing things wrong – and only a few ways of doing things right. The choices depend on the situation, resources and goals. But what if we had a toolbox that would allow us to understand and combine solutions in a given field, such as architecture? That's the idea of patterns, an idea introduced by Christopher Alexander in the field of architecture (Alexander 1977).

The idea of patterns is to understand reality as a set of patterns that assume an intrinsic design for connectedness between elements of a "living" reality. In a nutshell, Alexander claims that "good" architecture mostly works by the recognition of the right choices to solve problems, and that good solutions can be found on the basis of proven experience of "what works" for human well-being and sustainability. These solutions can be methodologically described as "patterns" which combine theoretical "reconstructions" of well-working solutions with practical guidelines for construction.

A pattern thus can be defined as a proven solution to a common problem that can be identified, analyzed and reproduced. Almost anything can be a pattern, from physical structures to rules of behavior. Patterns ideally complement each other in efficient and creative ways, and tend to reinforce and enable each other's functions. Thus a "pattern language" helps disclose the manifold relations among design elements. By understanding the "grammar" of such a language, even a non-expert can quickly gain a basic competence in a given field and understand and participate in design and development. Patterns are the best way to condense experience and enable people to go beyond theory and make the right decisions in practical situations.

Alexander developed such a pattern language with 253 patterns. They range from "Organizing the planet as a commonwealth of independent regions" to "using things from your life rather than inauthentic decor for interior design." His patterns span a universe of relevant influences and interdependencies in towns, buildings, and constructions. His innovative method of identifying components by their mutually reinforcing and life-building relations has been successfully transferred to many diverse fields such as object-oriented programming,[1] pedagogy, and political activism. More of these conceptual transpositions seem to be in the works. Some claim that this pattern-based process is heralding a scientific revolution that reverses the shortcomings of analytical and isolating methods that have dominated science since René Descartes. Such a science would allow for more coherent views of a field and eliminate the odd structural contradiction between theory and practice.

In his later work, Alexander left the narrow domain of architecture and sought to analyze what

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lies behind patterns in general. In a very crude way one could say that what lies between patterns are universal laws of life. Or, to be a little bit more precise: patterns are the properties of structures that facilitate the persistence and interplays of different kinds of what we would call energies and potentials. Patterns are like containers for complex, living processes whose energies result in "wholeness," "proportion," "synergy" and "beauty." They are the condensed experience of many successful creations. They talk to us by a "quality without a name," and are recognizable to intuition. They demand visualization, and not just sequential description.

The schools of thought inspired by Alexander have subsequently developed the concept of "anti-patterns," which are social practices that diminish vitality and sustainability. The cult of the genius in current architecture results in buildings that are often not liveable. The management of societies through punishment breeds the very depravities and criminality that it claims to prevent. This is another hint patterns are by no means to be taken for granted – moreover, they are often ignored and suppressed.

I suggest that patterns are a central topic – and maybe even a methodological requirement – for those interested in the commons. There are three main reasons: Patterns are a common denominator for all kinds of social and cultural practices that allow us to consciously shape our world. They designate knowledge resulting in vital, sustainable, fruitful reality. They allow us to generalize what works. Thus they are the ultimate intellectual commons. Commoning of patterns is an old tradition in many professions, crafts, and disciplines. Wherever patterns are respected, there is a social process that lies behind them.

In a time when everything can be produced easily with machines and automation, capital is shifting its methods of growth from its traditional ways (production) to outright "feudal ways" (taxation). In a time of immense devaluation of products by automation, success lies in asserting the ultimate gains through ownership rights to successful patterns, which confers an ability to tax others to use the pattern.

Thus labor and capital are slowly moving apart, a long marriage ending. Patterns of production and products are therefore the strategic nodes that privatizers exploit as they seek to establish their (lucrative) traps to hinder and forbid any successful, competitive activities – or, simply seek to exploit them by trading the licenses. Think of biopiracy and bioprospecting for the sake of commercializing indigenous knowledge. Think also of the gross expansion of patents in all domains of technology. One could think of today's economy as a big preventive endeavor against commoning by enclosing the very essence of free, autonomous labor: the knowledge, experience and procedures required in all professional fields. This enclosure grows as networks and technologies would make it more and more feasible to share knowledge in larger scales and produce in smaller scales – a deadly danger for capital, which needs to do exactly the opposite.

The practice of commoning itself may be understandable as a set of interrelated patterns. Rather than deriving from one single point of departure or axiom, commoning is the product of a multitude of practices that may take many different forms, according to the nature of the collective resource it is built upon as well as many other factors. Thus a pattern language of commoning may be a way to prevent dogmatism and schisms in the commons movement – a way to acknowledge unity in diversity while expanding the applicability and vitality of the core concepts.

THE COMMONING OF PATTERNS

It is important to see that patterns are more than snippets of cultural heritage; they are even more universal in nature. Their essence lies beyond identity and tradition, even if tradition and culture are the most fertile ground through which to discover patterns. Ideally a pattern community consists of people rooted in cultural traditions yet oriented towards global cooperation. Thus, the essential question is: where is a group of people or a community to

effectively take care of a shared resource and shape a whole environment, sets of behaviors, institutions etc.?

We might compare the emerging "pattern communities" to the traditional "scientific community." Although universal in its approach, the latter distances itself from the practical uses and applications of knowledge. There are many ways to reflect on practical use and effects like technology assessment, still science treats its objects in isolation and "neutrally" and often reflects on practice in hindsight.[2] Pattern communities on the other hand seek to reflect constantly on the interchange and interplay of their objects with human practice. We find analogies in old guilds of craftsmen or engineers associations. However, such voluntary or mandatory networks were often overshadowed by professional competition and political power plays. Knowledge was often withheld from non-members. Pattern communities in the full sense – as we envision them – constitute a self-organized society of learning, knowledge and self-determination. They might even be managed by non-experts, based on the essentially democratic idea that the modern individual should not be bound to specific roles in the division of labor.

A good example to meet the full requirements of a pattern community seems to me the communities around PloP, the Pattern Languages of Programs, or of object-oriented programming. As Brad Appleton, founding member of the Chicago Patterns Group, puts it: "Forming a common pattern language for conveying the structures and mechanisms of our architectures allows us to intelligibly reason about them. The primary focus is not so much on technology as it is on creating a culture to document and support sound engineering architecture and design."[3]

The ambitions of pattern communities are enormous. The maintenance of a common body of knowledge, the distillation and identification of the patterns having the highest potential, the presentation of them in intuitive ways – all of these will only exist if the social interest in providing the necessary resources can successfully organize itself.

So we need to ask the question, What is the social base of a successful commoning of patterns? What type of lifestyle as well as economic logic can beget the constant exchange of knowledge, generous sharing, and the collective refinement and abstraction of good solutions? What is the lifestyle and economic logic that can discourage or prevent patterns of separation, monopolization of knowledge and predatory abuses of ignorance?

The answer might be manifold and ambiguous. Commoning can serve the practical needs of individuals and businesses who are too "weak" financially to compete or trade in the realms of intellectual properties. It can be found in the practices of those who seek autonomy and community-based production. It can be found in traditional institutions that had their original framework in nation states and now see that a global educational commons serves their purposes well. It can be found in international organizations, professional organizations, cooperatives, associations of educators, and so on.

Seeds of pattern communities are emerging in many different domains, also in the heart of scientific communities that have largely weakened their traditional focus on cooperation since they have become more oriented to business applications, obtaining patents, compete for funding, etc. While many universities are busy trying to accumulate patents,[4] for example, some are beginning to rediscover the value of generous sharing and form transdisciplinary communities around "pattern repositories." They understand that knowledge will best develop if it is shareable and expandable, and open for review and improvement.

THE PATTERNS OF COMMONING

We can surely say that patterns – in whichever field – are ideally organized as commons. Can we also say that the commons themselves are a set of patterns? Can we identify successful

practices that constitute commons and make them bloom?

The first pattern of commoning we have just met on the way – It is the passive competence pattern[5] that reflexively favors sharing of knowledge with "non-experts" and outsiders. One might think that this is a pattern only applicable to intellectual commons. But if we look deeper, we begin to understand that this is a vital necessity for material commons as well. No commons can exist without widespread knowledge about its nature and widespread acceptance and respect for the groups, institutions, and arrangements that care for it. In Austria, we have a very fine public water system, bringing the water that supplies Vienna from mountains almost 200 kilometers away. I like to think of that as a vast commons, not just as a public institution. There are many educational tours that make people aware of the pathways the water takes, of the many maintenance requirements, and the periods of scarcity and abundance that we can partly but never fully mitigate.

So if a central group of experts and maintainers is needed to guide and guard a commons, how do they themselves organize and get accepted and supported by their environment? There are patterns waiting to be found. We have heard that commons may be mostly built around a social charter.[6] But that might not be the ultimate ground of what holds a commons together. In his contribution to this book, Andreas Weber talks about the natural or "biological" paradigm of an ever- deepening process of exploration, in which individuals discover their roles and niches in a system of mutual dependencies.[7] Social activist Rob Hopkins, who co-founded the Transition movement, seeks to abandon strict charters in favor of pattern languages as a "playground" for experimentation and development built on experience. He gives the following rationale:

> Transition has a number of qualities, which include the following: Viral: It spreads rapidly and pops up in the most unexpected places.
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> - *Open Source*: It is a model that people shape and take ownership of and is made available freely.
> - *Self organizing*: It is not centrally controlled, rather it is something people take ownership of and make their own.
> - *Solutions focused*: It is inherently positive, not campaigning against things, rather setting out a positive vision of a world that has embraced its limitations.
> - *Iterative*: It is continually learning from its successes and its failures and redefining itself, trying to research what is working and what isn't.
> - *Clarifying*: It offers a clear explanation of where humanity finds itself based on the best science available.
> - *Sensitive to place and scale*: Transition looks different wherever it goes.
> - *Historic*: It tries to create a sense of this being a historic opportunity to do something, extraordinary – and perhaps most importantly of all:
> - *Joyful*: If its not fun, you're not doing it right.

Any pattern language designed to communicate Transition therefore needs to be able to embody these qualities.[8]

Hopkins then describes some very interesting patterns. For example, patterns like "dealing with grief," "constructive criticism," and "civility" are meant to overcome feelings of individual superiority and establish communication between the core group of innovators and the outside world in an effective way. Patterns like "critical thinking" and "measurement" are balanced with "visioning" and "arts and creativity." But there are also patterns like "baking a cake" that serve to capture energies of celebration within the movement.

It might not be too speculative to say that pattern languages themselves might prove as an essential tool or pattern for commoning. The knowledge guiding our action is brought into a

form that allows collectives to evolve, seek balance, trace, and value experience and allow them to synthesize the best solution in a given situation.

The narrative that strikes me most in this context – and which makes all the difference in the world when it comes to the distinction of public and common – is the narrative of the Native American Medicine Wheel. Of course this is not one single narrative, but rather a polyphonic one transmitted by several oral traditions. So while my access to it was subjective,[9] I will try to extract the essence of what I feel is another fundamental pattern of commoning – The Circle.

The circle seeks to encompass all concerns and aspirations within and even outside a group it treats them as equal.

The circle is about review, affirmation, and innovation of social practices.

The circle is organized in a ritual way, forcing people to listen and speak with full attention and from a clear perspective that represents an individual situation and a social concern alike.

The circle seeks to weave together those concerns that include creativity; an awareness/sense of reality; emotions that guide us to the perception of threats and opportunities; a sense of purpose and identity; learning about tools and resources; anticipation of future developments and strategy; the need for clarity in decision making and the sense that all voices have been truly heard and considered; and a conviction that the decision is giving a good perspective to all involved.

The circle will continue to run in an iterative process until optimal consensus has been found.

It is noteworthy that this circle pattern is not limited to small numbers of individuals, but is even applied as a system of governance between groups and nations. The ideal is that at any level of a successful solution, a living and nurturing relationship between very different elements will be found, and that the sequence of perspectives to create this relationship is by no means arbitrary. The eight perspectives included above follow a strict pattern of building upon each other; any other combination will fail to produce the desired result.

Can we apply such patterns in today's emerging common practices? We probably will have to, since commons are not possible without balance-seeking processes whose fruits we cannot fully foresee. We need to introduce complementary patterns that facilitate the dynamics of economic relationships. We need to explore patterns of communication that allow us to establish working cooperation and innovation. We need to identify the optimum sizes and qualities of our habitat. We need to balance privacy and individuality with our mutual dependence.

Pattern languages will help us to avoid schematic thinking and grasp the deeper complexity and the degrees of freedom involved in a world that is evolving into true togetherness – because the ways of command and control, of money and power, and conventional economic thinking, have proven to be way too primitive to solve the problems they have created.

REFERENCE

Alexander, Christopher with Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein, Max Jacobson, Ingrid F. King and Shlomo Angel. 1977. *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*. New York. Center for Environmental Structure Series.

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1. Object Oriented Programming treats chunks of code as entities that can be treated like objects with properties and behavior. It is not only a way to accelerate coding, but also a way to make code reusable and more understandable.
2. There are new approaches like "transdiciplinary research" that are aware of this dilemma. But they often lack a clear methodology to include a multitude of perspectives. Pattern languages are a way to organize the

theoretical field in a way that is open to almost anything that exerts relevant influence and coexists in a given field of reality. It is interesting that Alexander has mixed his architectural and planning patterns with a lot of cultural, political and sociological patterns, expressing the needs and wants of humans in their life cycle – simply by understanding that architecture is meant to meet human needs, and social reality is always in immense interplay with spatial reality. Pattern communities therefore not only allow for inclusion of practical perspectives, they live on them.

Brad Appleton, quoted in http://hillside.net/patterns.

See for example the "Ontology Design Catalogue" of the University of Manchester:

http://www.gong.manchester.ac.uk/odp/html/index.html or the "Design Pattern Repository" of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki: http://percerons.

The term "passive competence" stems from linguistics and means to be able to understand a language without necessarily being able to speak it actively. Passive competence means therefore to understand what an expert is doing without necessarily being an expert oneself. Passive competence is grossly neglected in our education systems.

See James Quilligan's essay on pp.73–81.

See Andreas Weber's essay on pp. 6–12.

http://transitionculture.org/2010/06/04/rethinking-transition-as-a-patte....

By the teachers Wind Eagle and Rainbow Hawk of the Ehama Institute. http://www.ehama.org