Organizing Around Pattern Languages
Cultivating New Seeds for Social Change

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I share the assumptions of this workshop that pattern languages can be useful in our efforts to make the world more livable and more beautiful. That was certainly the idea behind my work coordinating the Liberating Voices pattern language (Schuler 2008) work in which 85 authors developed 136 patterns for social engagement and social change over an eight year period.

While I believe that there are more than enough ideas here for a suitable paper or chapter, this "abstract" is more like a prolegomenon to what I believe are the major aspects of our focus on the pursuit of pattern languages for societal change. So while an ultimate paper may be on selected aspects of this discursion I feel that this effort would be very useful at this stage, possibly even by helping to organize our discussions at the workshop.

Although ends and means are often overlapping and not as easily separable as one might hope, I see the many uses of pattern languages as offering a potentially powerful intellectual approach that can aid us in the quest for livability and beauty. As with any organization, medium, meme, perspective, document, or technology, while it may true that they are extremely rich in *potential*, capacity which is latent, ready to be used, to be relied upon, to enable a next step, etc. it is only when that thing is used or animated that it has actually been put into service as a type of deflection from the paths that lead in undesirable directions. (Which the *anti*-pattern work I coordinated in an undergraduate educational setting helps document.) As Mae West stated (presumably in another context) "an ounce of performance is worth pounds of promises." Although, of course, promises sometimes *can* lead to performance.

The body of this abstract consists of several theses or assertions about patterns and pattern languages (which I'll generally refer to simply as *pattern languages*). For me, the purpose of each thesis is to help us learn more about achieving the aim of making the pattern language approach more useful in our pursuit of positive societal change. I believe that collectively addressing these theses intellectually and through actions will be critical to any degree of success in our pursuit. As one might expect they are deeply interconnected. Addressing one of them will help address the others. For example, how we want to use pattern languages will help define audiences for the pattern languages or for the forms that the pattern languages take.

Disclaimer: I decided to include theses below — even if they are not adequately developed. As mentioned above, my intent is to help support the general formulation of our enterprise and this approach seems most appropriate for this task.

Pattern Languages are Especially Relevant Today
I have written (2008, 2009) on the particular suitability of pattern languages for a way to help address today's challenges. This is basically for three reasons: today's problems are complex; today's problems affect people that are not only in one particular jurisdiction; and today's problems are fractal, they exist at small scales as well as large ones. Pattern languages provide — potentially — ways for people to organize around complex issues and ways to indirectly coordinate with other people and groups.

Pattern languages have an inclination towards thought and action. They have specific features that help make sense of the problem domain and point to action. They are systemic, agnostic as to discipline, open-ended, flexible, fractal, and generative. Their inclination towards holism helps promote completeness of the system. In other words, developers notice (and look for) holes in their pattern languages and strive to plug them, i.e. with another pattern.

Pattern Languages Have Intrinsic Appeal
It's indisputable that pattern languages have some type of intrinsic appeal — at least to many of us! Some of my hypotheses are: they appeal to the need for an orderly presentation of knowledge. They seem to represent a "whole" system. They are *illuminating* in that they often bring together disparate facts or observations and provide coherent *meaning* (this was very clear with the anti-pattern work).

Using pattern languages
We need to have a better handle on how pattern languages are actually used in addition to thinking about ways they could potentially be used. For example, my students when using the Liberating Voices pattern cards in hypothetical design workshops, have on occasion changed the title of a pattern when they felt it better suited their needs, while others used the title but changed the narrative of the pattern while keeping the *essence* of the pattern intact.

We need to know who, what, and why people use — or might use — pattern languages. We make assumptions about their users but my students, more than once, have suggested that pattern languages for elementary school children should be developed.

We know — or at least strongly suspect that there are many more uses out there than we generally acknowledge. The University of Oregon, for example, has (or had?) a pattern language as the master plan for its campus. Miguel Angel Pérez Alvarez and his colleagues are using a pattern languages as a *lingua franca* for consolidating their shared knowledge on distance education in Mexican higher education.

Pattern languages as social objects
It's important to realize that pattern languages can in fact be considered social objects. This means that in addition to written forms like books, pattern languages can be manifested as physical cards (such as those in Liberating Voices and the Group Process pattern language) which lend themselves to a wide variety of approaches. We've also used the Liberating Voices patterns in an online "Activist Mirror" game in which players find out what type of activist role they are likely to assume (Moyer, date) and which Liberating Voices patterns might be interesting to them. Another use is a poster (see left, poster for Jaime Alarcon, including English text and translation (also done by Alarcon).

Pattern Language Methodology
While different groups are likely to take different approaches for dealing with pattern languages, including developing, using, evaluating, etc. it still would be worthwhile to somehow pool our wisdom (or at least pool it better) and share it with other people. Alexander's approach, the Groups Pattern Language, Liberating Voices (and the anti-patterns), and the PLOP community all seem to take different approaches. Perhaps it's most useful to better codify what we do find useful and to see where we fall short. I should mention that the Oregon Experiment (Alexander, date) may provide the best example.

Pattern Language Life-cycle
Paired to some degree with the methodology thesis above, looking at the life-cycle of patterns and pattern languages, both development and use, would be useful in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the pattern language approach. For example, it may be a fact that people are inspired by pattern languages but then rely on some other approach to actually realize their intended outcome. If, for example, we knew that fact, we could try to help people with that integration or (and?) we could tweak the patterns in some way to they continued to inspire and inform and through other phases of the life cycle as well.

Barriers to the Use of Pattern Languages
There are presumably a wide range of barriers to the development and use of pattern languages. Some may be absolutely intrinsic — e.g. I've heard criticisms that pattern languages are too general and that they are too specific. Maybe that's a function of it's "middle-range" focus, but maybe there are workarounds even for that. For example, if there were good examples of how pattern languages were used and there was easy access to them, then the problem about a lack of specificity would be diminished. At any rate, we need to become cognizant of the barriers, be they personal or institutional, intrinsic or artificial, if we are to develop strategies for overcoming these barriers. Some barriers, such as lack of motivation, may not just be barriers to the use of pattern languages but to engaging in social change or, even, any meaningful social dialogue at all.

Making Pattern Languages More Useful
We need to examine current usage patterns and the barriers we can identify to think about making them more useful. Letting the world know about pattern languages would obviously help and pointing to successes would also be useful. I believe that making it easier to find (and integrate) appropriate patterns and pattern languages would also be important. And once they find them, examples, ideas for use, additional resources, and other useful commentary couldn't hurt.

Meta Pattern Languages
Basically this is the idea of a pattern language whose domain is pattern languages. Aldo De Moor and I developed a short list of what would be in this language.

Pattern Language Remix
An individual or group might want to use a pattern language approach but doesn't really care which pattern language they are drawing from. (Do you blame them?). They might want one from PL1 and 3 from PL2. They may even want to slice and dice patterns, using the problem statement of one while the solution statements of two others. They may want everything from one pattern except they'd like to use their own introductory image. They may also want to transduce, subclass, or make links across pattern language borders. Computers could make this easier — but it's far from where we are now. And reassembling may be more difficult than tearing apart!

Problem Domains
Perhaps it would be useful — I think it would — to identify certain problem domains that we think should be amenable to pattern language work. Some of these could include sustainability, anti-corruption, anti-poverty, climate change mediation and adaptation. They fit the bill for important, distributed, complex problems. And a long-term community commitment to developing one or more pattern languages, promoting its use, and continuously evaluating and revising it, would be a significant step.

Pattern Language Process Mapping
This builds on the idea of the diagram "which shows the solution in the form of a diagram, with labels to show its main components" (Alexander et al. 1977). If for example, pattern language developers agreed on a graphic modeling approach and, probably, some agreed-upon vocabulary, it might be possible to see to a greater degree how the patterns *worked* but, also, how they could work *together*, in a somewhat more rigorous manner. Based on this approach it might also be quite a bit easier to locate other patterns from a collection of independently developed pattern languages, that would help a given person or group in their assembly of a pattern language that was tailor-made for their specific need. My students and I envisioned deep connections among the anti-patterns we developed but did not go to this step.

Civic Ignorance

Civic ignorance describes how well a group or person ignores the civic ideas, problems, or solutions of those surrounding them. The need to solve problems intelligently and taking account of all solutions is cast away in favor of the quick, the easy, and the brutal. Maybe the problem will just go away? Critics of this should be marginalized, ignored or otherwise disabled or destroyed.

Violence

Much can be achieved through dominance and submission by using violence. If the subject cannot be subdued psychologically through fear, then injury can be inflicted. If injury is not enough, then the subject can ultimately be eliminated by murder. This is ultimately the underlying threat of violence.

Environmental Degradation

The natural environment; including but not limited to soil, water, air, flora, and fauna, has a natural balance. Through pollution, over usage, and lack of stewardship, the balance is broken causing the natural networks that sustain life on this planet to suffer.

Consumerism

Quality of life is ultimately measured by on the acquisition and display of material goods. At the heart of consumerism is the thought that the "good life" can be purchased. Consumerism also contains a set of standards through which people can be judged based on material wealth.

Build the Community
We need to build our community, share our ideas and better coordinate our efforts. We also need to extend our community to include the people who would like to empower their work, work better with allies, etc. but who may never have heard of pattern languages. This group can not only use the patterns languages that are developed but work on the development of new ones. They can also assist the development and theory community who desperately need ideas, data, and feedback from the real world.

Note: While the above theses are admittedly incomplete, I omitted two more — *Pattern language theory* and *Characterizing Existing Pattern Languages* — both of which are important, simply because I ran out of time.

References

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