

PUARL2018 Conference

**Christopher Alexander's Thought  
and Eastern Philosophy  
Zen, Mindfulness and Egoless Creation with a  
Pattern Language**

**Takashi Iba**

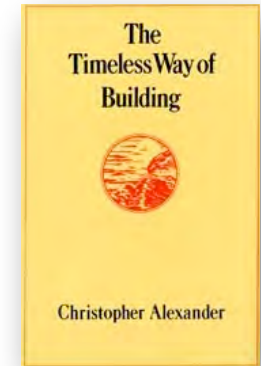
Professor at Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University  
Ph.D in Media and Governance

**Konomi Munakata**

Faculty of Environment and Information Studies, Keio University

In his books including *The Timeless Way of Building* (1979), it is obvious that his thought has been influenced by Eastern philosophy.

Way = 道  
Gate = 門



In fact, he read eastern literatures such as *I Ching* (Book of Changes, an ancient Chinese text) very thoroughly in 1970s (S. Ishikawa, personal communication, 2013).

易經



Hiroshi Nakano, who was a student under Christopher Alexander at UC Berkeley and a member in Eishin school project, pointed out the relationship between ‘*Japanese Spirituality*’ (Suzuki, 1944) and Pattern Language (Nakano, 2015).



日本の靈性

Daisetsu Suzuki, *Japanese Spirituality*, Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science, 1944, translation by 1972  
Hiroshi Nakano, “Japanese Spirituality and Pattern Language”,  
In *AsianPLoP2015* and *PURPLSOC2015*, 2015

We, Asian, also feel Asian spirit and viewpoint in his thought, and thus we started to understand the connection between Alexander's theory and Eastern philosophy which has not yet been deeply discussed.

# Starting with a void

To make a building egoless, like this, the builder must let go of all his willful images, and start with a void. .... you must start with nothing in your mind” (p.538)

“You are able to do this only when you no longer fear that nothing will happen, and you can therefore afford to let go of your images” (p.538)



Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*,  
Oxford University Press, 1979

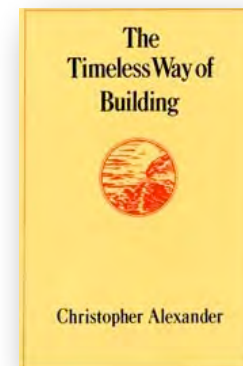


# The Process of creation of its own accord

“the quality without a name cannot be made, but only generated by a process. It can flow from your actions; it can flow with the greatest ease; but it cannot be made. It cannot be contrived, thought out, designed. It happens when it flows out from the process of creation of its own accord” (p.159)

“When a thing is made, it has the will of the maker in it. But when it is generated, it is generated, freely, by the operation of egoless rules, acting on the reality of the situation, and giving birth, of their own accord. ...” (p.160)

Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*,  
Oxford University Press, 1979

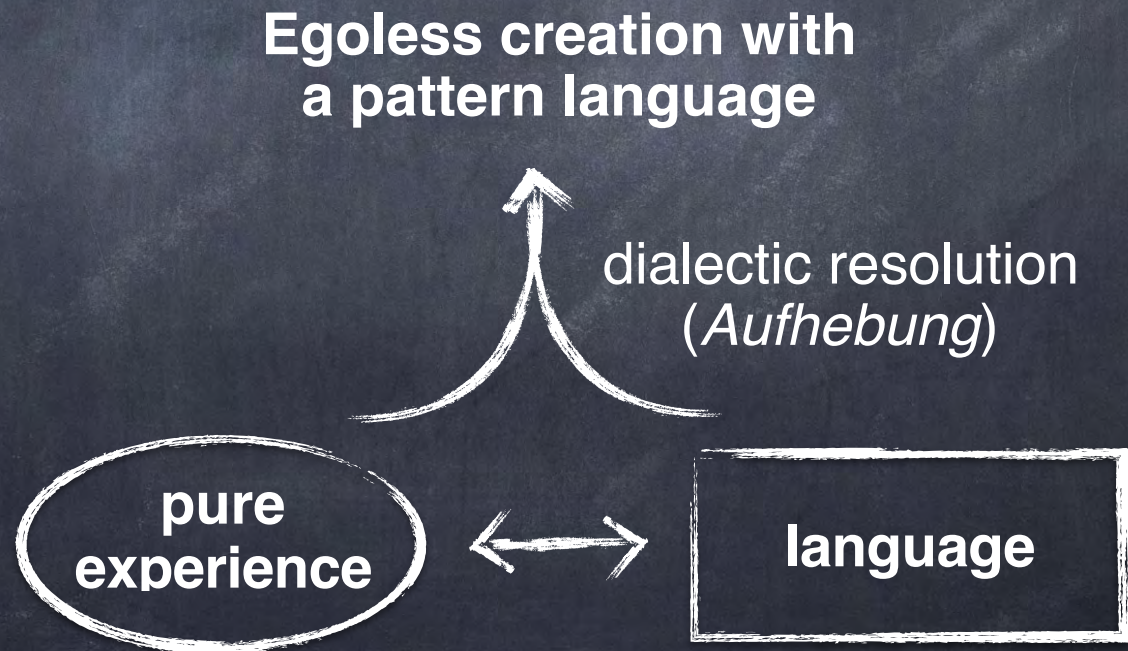


In order to realize “the process of creation of its own accord” put forward by Christopher Alexander, participation as ‘*pure experience*’ without thinking and analysis is necessary.

This is a paradoxical but unique viewpoint; Alexander propose to create a ‘*language*’ (which is a tool for thinking) to share and follow spontaneous rules for generative process.

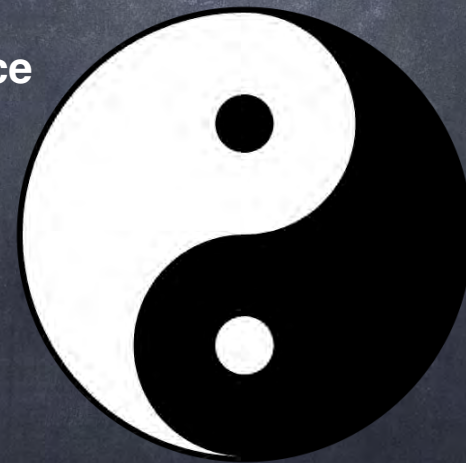
Egoless Creation with a pattern language is a dialectic resolution (*Aufhebung*) of 'pure experience' and 'language'.

Without recognizing this subtle feature, pattern language would be understood just as an operational tool, and would lose its nature and the profound meaning in it.



What Alexander tried to achieve with the Egoless Creation with a pattern language is to consider '*Pure Experience*' and '*Language*' as something inextricably linked together, like "yin and yang" in Chinese philosophy.

pure  
experience



language



# Mind as Medium

“Your mind is a medium within which the creative spark that jumps between the pattern and the world can happen. You yourself are only the medium for this creative spark, not its originator” (p.397)

“It is a fearsome thing, like diving into water. And yet it is exhilarating — because you aren’t controlling it. You are only the medium in which the patterns come to life, and of their own accord give birth to something new” (p.426)

Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*,  
Oxford University Press, 1979



# Takashi Iba, Ayaka Yoshikawa, "Illuminating Egoless Creation with Theories of Autopoietic Systems," *Pursuit of Pattern Languages for Societal Change conference 2017 (PURPLSOC2017), 2017*

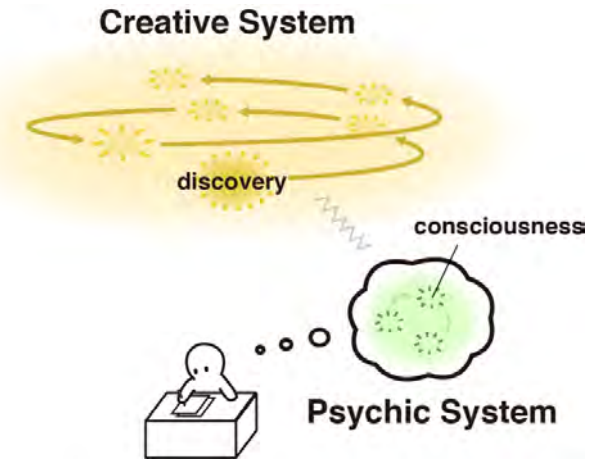
## Illuminating Egoless Creation with Theories of Autopoietic Systems

Iba, Takashi  
Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University, Japan  
[iba@sc.keio.ac.jp](mailto:iba@sc.keio.ac.jp)

Yoshikawa, Ayaka  
Faculty of Environment and Information Studies, Keio University, Japan

This paper examines one of the most important but overlooked concepts in pattern language theory: creation processes without the self (ego). Christopher Alexander, the inventor of the pattern language concept and methodology, focused on a generative mechanism beyond the individual designer level and claimed that creation originated from this basis. In this paper, first, the similarities between Alexander's arguments and those of fiction writers who claim that 'the author does not intentionally create the story; the characters in the story act on their own, and the story unfolds itself' are examined under an 'egoless creator' concept. Then, egoless creation is examined through the theories of autopoietic systems: Social Systems Theory and Creative Systems Theory. It was found that egoless creation is a state in which the chain of generated discoveries within a creative system is experienced by the psychic system, that the patterns in a pattern language work primarily as 'discovery media' within the creative system, and that pattern language facilitates a structural coupling of the psychic and the social systems.

152
153



## Egoless Creation

**Creative System**



▶ action

selection

**Psychic System**



◀ experience

**What is created**

**Creative System**

**Pattern Language**



# Creative Writers said

## Haruki Murakami

“When I start working on a book, I do not have any plan whatsoever. I simply wait, patiently, for the story to come to me. There is not a time when I intentionally make decisions about what kind of story it will be, or what will happen in it.” (Murakami, 2010)



Murakami, H. (2010) *Yume Miru Tameni Maiasa Bokuha Mezameru Nodesu [Wake Up Every Morning in Order to Dream]*, in Japanese, Bungei Shunju.

# Creative Writers said

## Stephen King

‘I often have an idea of what the outcome may be, but I have never demanded of a set of characters that they do things my way. On the contrary, I want them to do things their way. In some instances, the outcome is what I visualized. In most, however, it’s something I never expected’. (King, 2010)



Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, Pocket Books, 2002

# Takashi Iba, Ayaka Yoshikawa, "Illuminating Egoless Creation with Theories of Autopoietic Systems," *Pursuit of Pattern Languages for Societal Change conference 2017 (PURPLSOC2017), 2017*

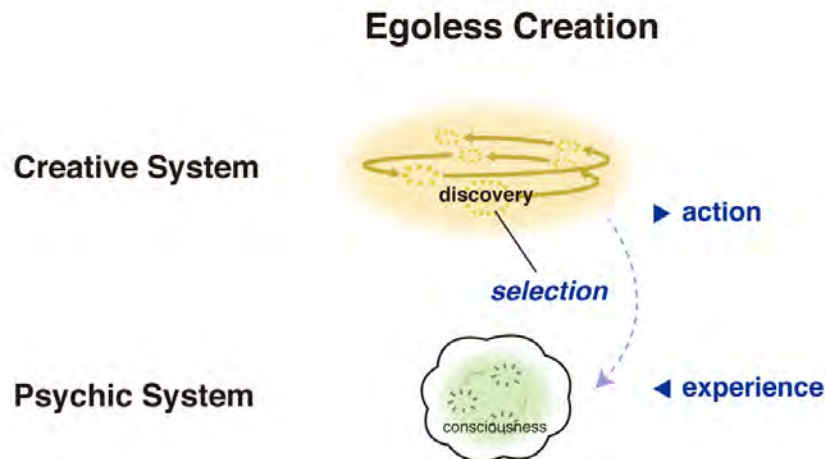
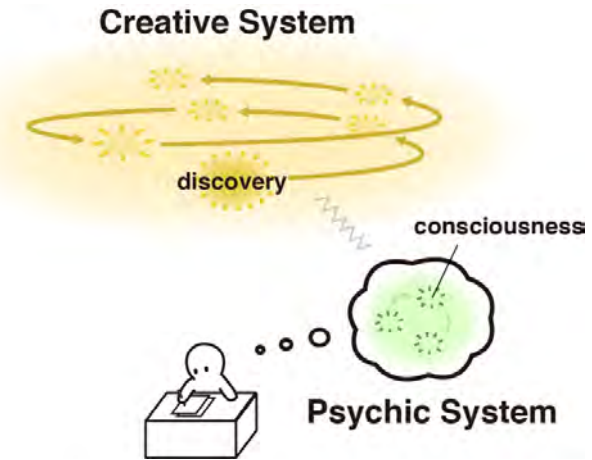
## Illuminating Egoless Creation with Theories of Autopoietic Systems

Iba, Takashi  
Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University, Japan  
[iba@sc.keio.ac.jp](mailto:iba@sc.keio.ac.jp)

Yoshikawa, Ayaka  
Faculty of Environment and Information Studies, Keio University, Japan

This paper examines one of the most important but overlooked concepts in pattern language theory: creation processes without the self (ego). Christopher Alexander, the inventor of the pattern language concept and methodology, focused on a generative mechanism beyond the individual designer level and claimed that creation originated from this basis. In this paper, first, the similarities between Alexander's arguments and those of fiction writers who claim that 'the author does not intentionally create the story; the characters in the story act on their own, and the story unfolds itself' are examined under an 'egoless creator' concept. Then, egoless creation is examined through the theories of autopoietic systems: Social Systems Theory and Creative Systems Theory. It was found that egoless creation is a state in which the chain of generated discoveries within a creative system is experienced by the psychic system, that the patterns in a pattern language work primarily as 'discovery media' within the creative system, and that pattern language facilitates a structural coupling of the psychic and the social sys-

152
153



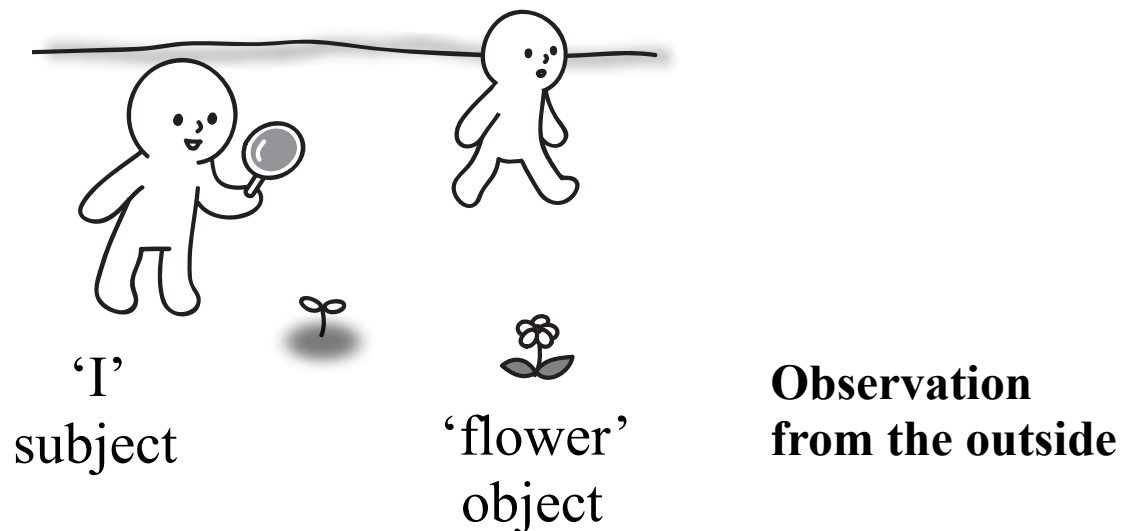
# Pure Experience

Kitaro Nishida, Japanese philosopher, proposed the concept of '**Pure Experience**'. Pure experience is an exact experience without clearly distinguishing its subject and object. (in 1921)

For example, experiencing the feeling of “what a beautiful flower!” should happen before the understanding of “I (as subject) am looking at this flower (as object), which is beautiful”. In other words, when experiencing something, it is always beyond the dichotomy of subject and object.



Kitaro Nishida  
(1870 – 1945)





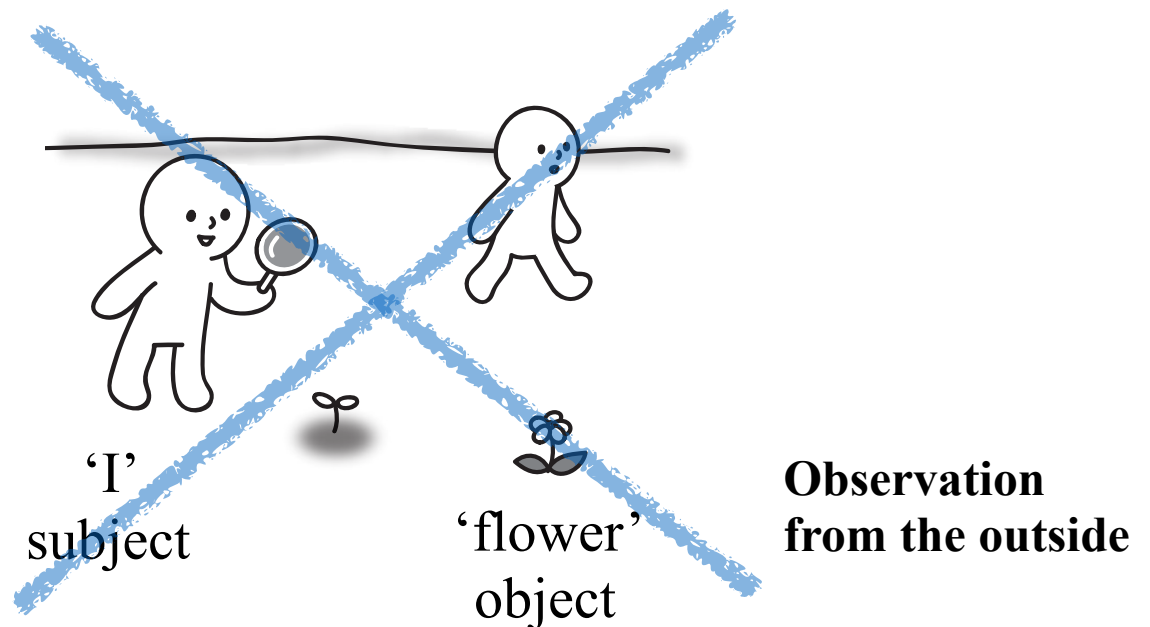
# Pure Experience

Kitaro Nishida, Japanese philosopher, proposed the concept of '**Pure Experience**'. Pure experience is an exact experience without clearly distinguishing its subject and object. (in 1921)

For example, experiencing the feeling of “what a beautiful flower!” should happen before the understanding of “I (as subject) am looking at this flower (as object), which is beautiful”. In other words, when experiencing something, it is always beyond the dichotomy of subject and object.



Kitaro Nishida  
(1870 – 1945)





# Pure Experience also discussed in Pragmatism



William James  
(1842 – 1910)



John Dewey  
(1859 – 1952)

# *Predicate-centeredness in Japanese sentences*

Sentences in some languages, such as Japanese, can exist at all times without specification of pronouns, even when written. This is because Japanese is a pro-drop language that allows sentences to lack an explicit pronoun, without even changing the verb form. Therefore, when writing patterns in Japanese, we can completely omit the pronoun, just as we do when we form inner speech.

The original Japanese version of the patterns we have been writing are all written without specifying a pronoun.



Takashi Iba, Ayaka Yoshikawa,  
“Understanding the Functions of Pattern Language with Vygotsky’s Psychology: Signs, The Zone of Proximal Development, and Predicate in Inner Speech,” 23rd Conference on Pattern Languages of Programs (PLoP2016), USA, 2016

# Poises and Enactive Intuition

According to Kitaro Nishida, there is no such thing as a clear “self-identity” as “I/myself” in the process of producing a thing.

“poiesis”

It is an ‘*enactive intuition*’ which makes us “think and work within the thing”. There is no space for the ‘self-awareness’ to come up and interrupt the process which is entirely driven by the thing. Like so, the world can naturally form itself.



Kitaro Nishida  
(1870 – 1945)

Kitaro Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, 1921, English edition, Yale University Press, 1990.

Note that

**Autopoiesis and Enactive approach referring to Buddhism**

Francisco J Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch (1992).

The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience. MIT Press.

“The experience means to know facts just as they are, know in accordance with facts by completely relinquishing one’s own fabrication. What we usually refer to as experience is adulterated with some sort of thought, so by *pure* I am referring to the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination.” (p.3)

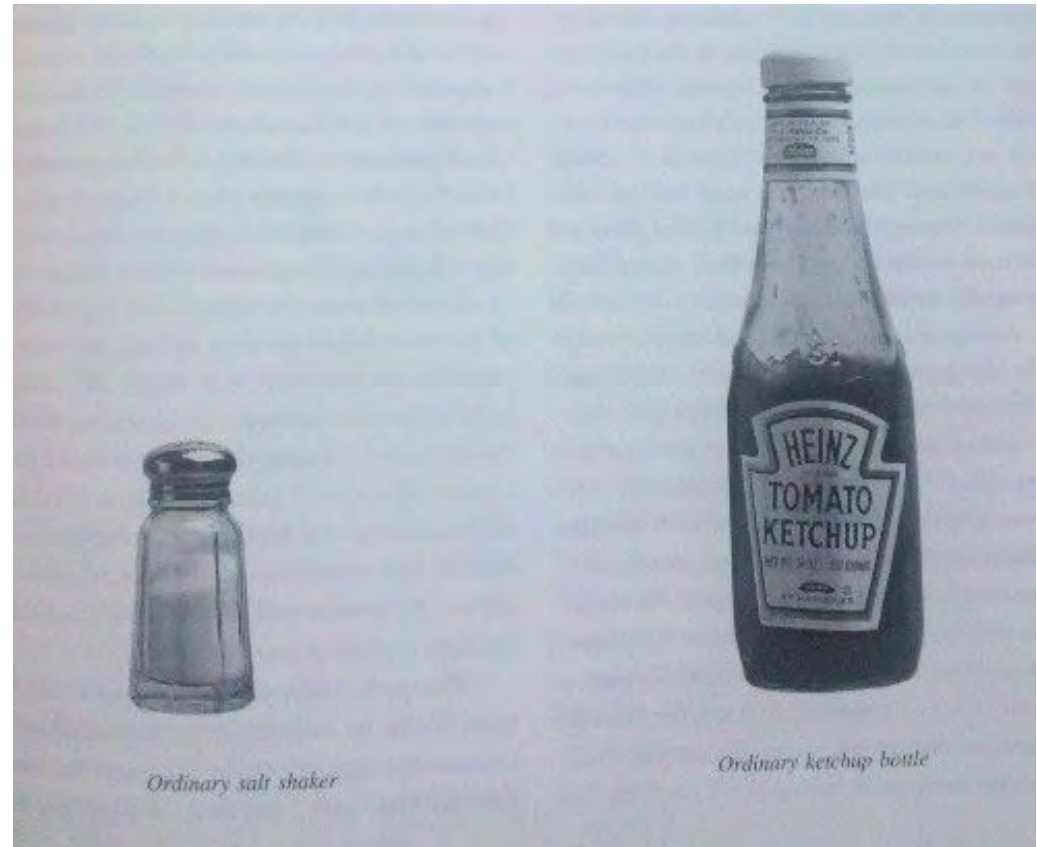
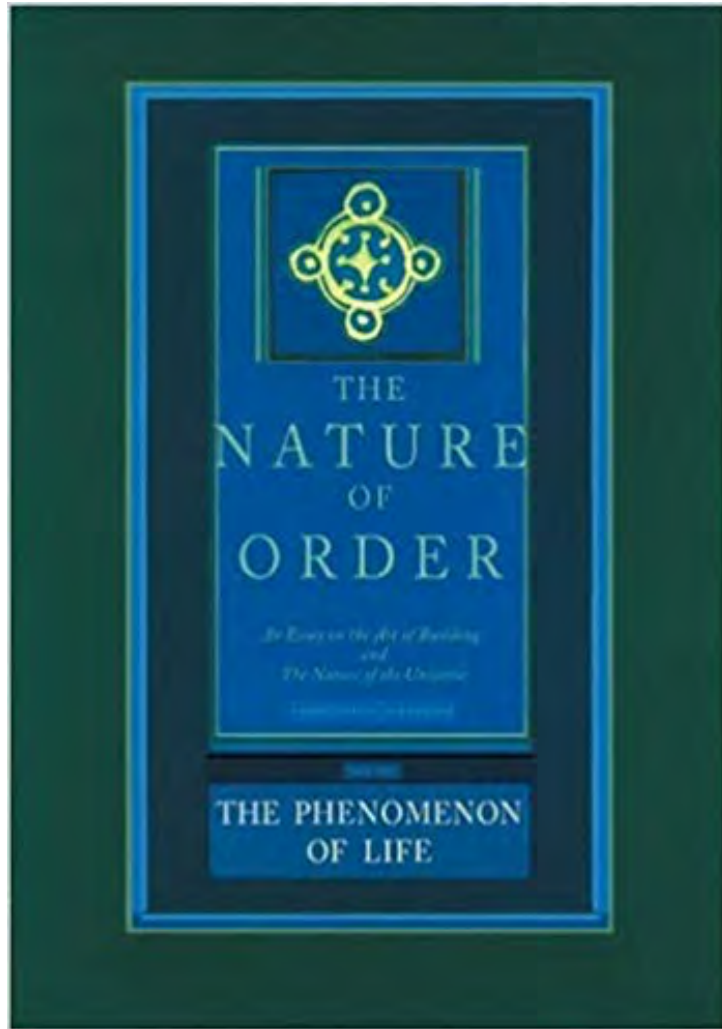
“When one directly experience one’s own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified.” (p.3-4)



Kitaro Nishida  
(1870 – 1945)

Kitaro Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, 1921, English edition, Yale University Press, 1990.

# Mirror Test by Christopher Alexander



Alexander, C., *The Nature of Order: An Essay of the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe, Book 1: The Phenomenon of Life*, Center for Environmental Structure, 2002

**A *pattern* language can be considered as a set of rules that realize *pure experiences* of designing or doing, enabling a design and action to be generated, without explicitly identifying *who* did it.**

# Blue Sky metaphor of Mindfulness

Ven. Ryodo Yamashita,  
Ipposan (One Dharma Hermitage)

Issho Fujita, Ryodo Yamashita, *Appudeto Suru Bukkyo*  
[*Buddhism Updating Itself*], in Japanese, Gentosha, 2013

Ryodo Yamashita, *Aozora to Shiteno Wabashi* [*Clear As  
the Sky*], in Japanese, 2014.





*thinking  
mind*

*thinking  
mind*

*thinking  
mind*

*thinking  
mind*



“The clouds are not myself. The blue sky, which may be covered by the clouds, is me. I see myself, as a blue sky.”

“To become egoless, we just have to leave the world of ‘thinking mind.’ When coming into the world of the ‘blue sky,’ we will see that ego is already gone. Without leaving ego, we will never achieve to come to the world of the ‘blue sky.’ Only thing we need is to manage ourselves to do so.”

# Get rid of the ideas and pictures

“Get rid of the ideas which come into your mind. Get rid of pictures you have seen in magazines, friends’ houses ... Insist on the pattern, and nothing else. The pattern, and the real situation, together, will create the proper form, within your mind, without your trying to do it, if you will allow it to happen. This is the power of the language, and the reason why the language is creative” (p.397)

Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*,  
Oxford University Press, 1979





*thinking  
mind*

*thinking  
mind*

*thinking  
mind*

*thinking  
mind*

# Leaving controls and becoming Blue Sky

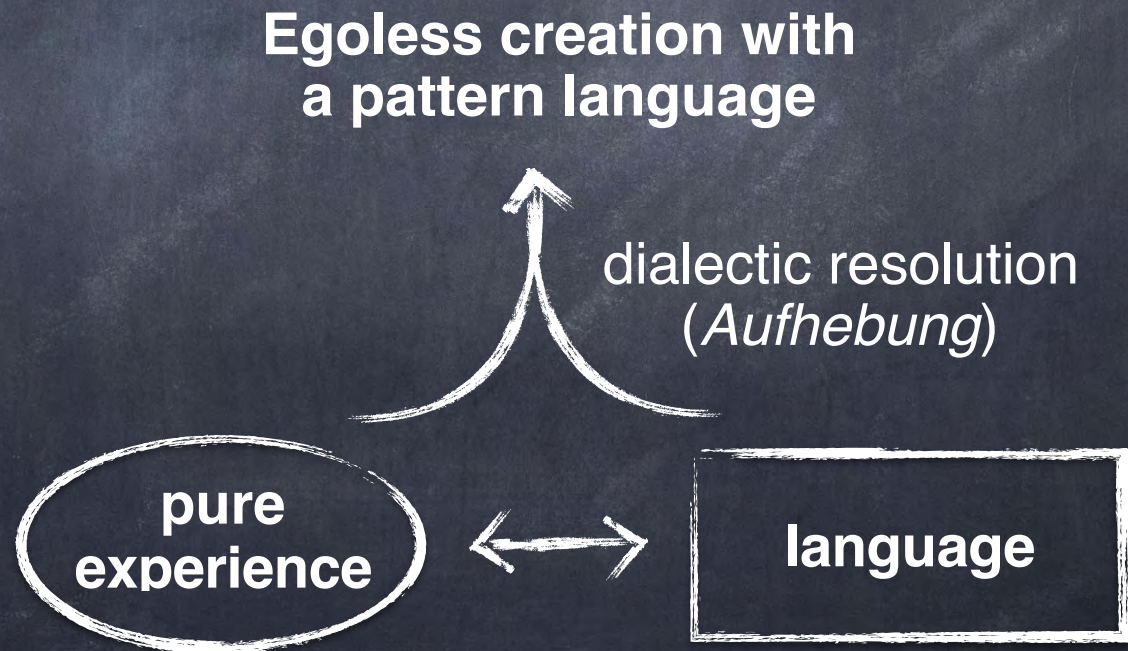
“To do it, you must let go of your control and let the pattern do the work. You cannot do this, normally, because you are trying to make decisions without having confidence in the basis for them. But if the patterns you are using are familiar to you, if they make sense to you, if you are confident that they make sense, and that they are profound, then there is no reason to be afraid of giving up your control over the design. If the pattern makes sense, you do not need to control the design” (p.399)

Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*,  
Oxford University Press, 1979



Egoless Creation with a pattern language is a dialectic resolution (*Aufhebung*) of 'pure experience' and 'language'.

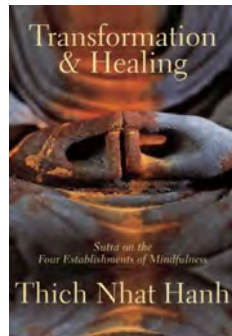
Without recognizing this subtle feature, pattern language would be understood just as an operational tool, and would lose its nature and the profound meaning in it.



# Meditation explained by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh

“To practice meditation is to look deeply in order to see into the essence of things. With insight and understanding we can realize liberation, peace, and joy.” (p.9)

“The first step is awareness of the object, and the second step is looking deeply at the object to shed light on it. Therefore, mindfulness means awareness and it also means looking deeply.” (p.10)



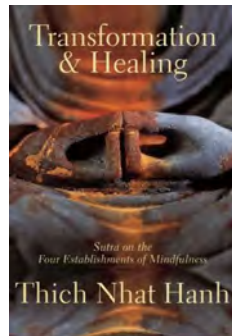
Thich Nhat Hanh  
(1926 – )

Thich Nhat Hanh, “Transformation and Healing: Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness”, Parallax Press, 2006

# “Be One With the Object of Observation”

“While we are fully aware of and observing deeply an object, the boundary between the subject who observes and the object being observed gradually dissolves, and the subject and object become one. This is the essence of meditation.” (p.10)

“Only when we penetrate an object and become one with it can we understand. It is not enough to stand outside and observe an object.” (p.10)



Thich Nhat Hanh  
(1926 – )

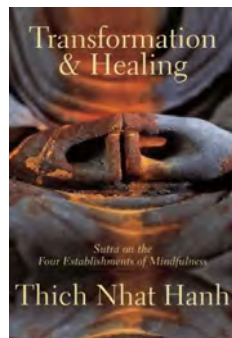
Thich Nhat Hanh, “Transformation and Healing: Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness”, Parallax Press, 2006

# “Be One With the Object of Observation”

“If you want to see and understand, we have to penetrate and become one with the object. If we stand outside of it in order to observe it, we cannot really see and understand it. The work of observation is the work of penetrating and transforming.” (p.121)

“If we continue in our mindful observation, there will no longer be a duality between observer and observed.” (p.121)

“The subject and the object of cognition are not separate.” (p.122)



Thich Nhat Hanh  
(1926 – )

Thich Nhat Hanh, “Transformation and Healing: Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness”, Parallax Press, 2006

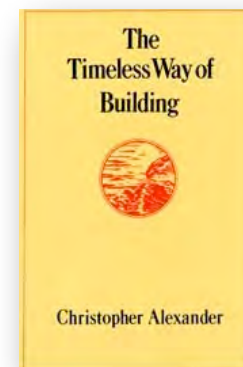


# Pattern Language and Egoless

“the language is the instrument which brings about the state of mind, which I call egoless.”

“it is just your pattern language which helps you become egoless.”

Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*,  
Oxford University Press, 1979

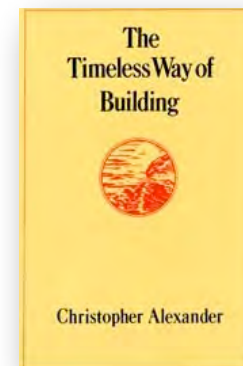


## Christopher Alexander said

“Once you learn that the pattern language and the site together will genuinely generate from inside your mind, from nothing, you can trust yourself to let go of your images entirely” (p.538)

“For a person who is unfree, the language seems like mere information because he feels that he must be in control, that he must inject the creative impulse, that he must supply the image which controls the design” (p.538-539)

Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*,  
Oxford University Press, 1979



## Christopher Alexander said

“once a person can relax, and let the forces in the situation act through him as if he were a medium, then he sees that the language, with very little help, is able to do almost all the work, and that the building shapes itself. This is the importance of the void. A person who is free and egoless starts with a void and lets the language generate the necessary forms out of this void. He overcomes the need to hold onto an image, the need to control the design, and he is comfortable with the void, and confident that the laws of nature, formulated as patterns, acting in his mind, will together create all that is required” (p.539)

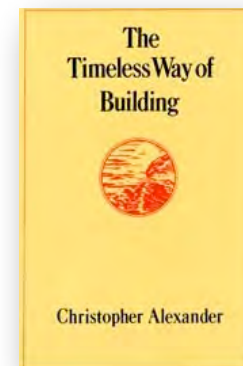
Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*,  
Oxford University Press, 1979



## Christopher Alexander said

“Gradually, by following the language, you feel free to escape from the artificial images society has imposed upon you. And, as you escape from these images, and the need to manufacture things according to these images, you are able to come more into touch with the simple reality of things, and thereby become egoless and free” (p.544)

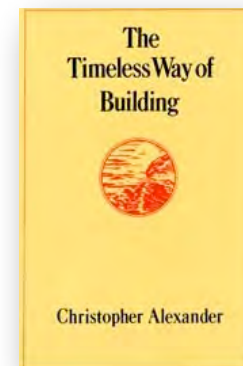
Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*,  
Oxford University Press, 1979



## Christopher Alexander said

“... at that moment he no longer needs the language. Once a person has freed himself to such an extent that he can see the forces as they really are and make a building which is shaped by them alone and not affected or distorted by his images ——— he is then free enough to make the building without patterns at all ——— because the knowledge which the patterns contain, the knowledge of the way the forces really act is his” (p.543)

Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*,  
Oxford University Press, 1979

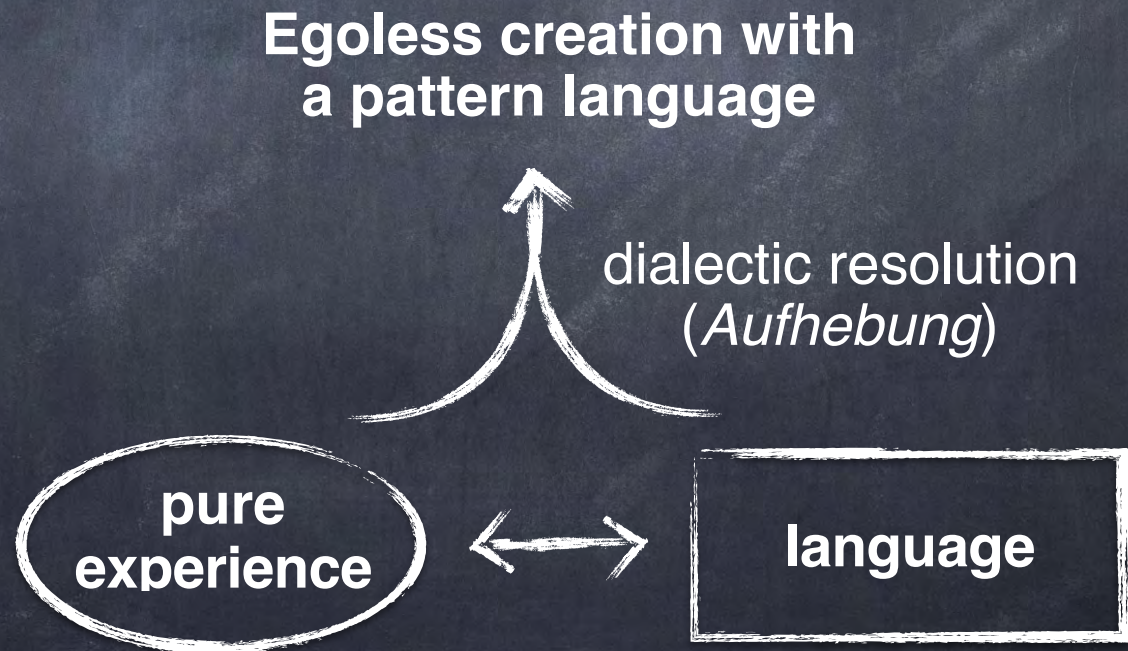


In order to realize “the process of creation of its own accord” put forward by Christopher Alexander, participation as ‘*pure experience*’ without thinking and analysis is necessary.

This is a paradoxical but unique viewpoint; Alexander propose to create a ‘*language*’ (which is a tool for thinking) to share and follow spontaneous rules for generative process.

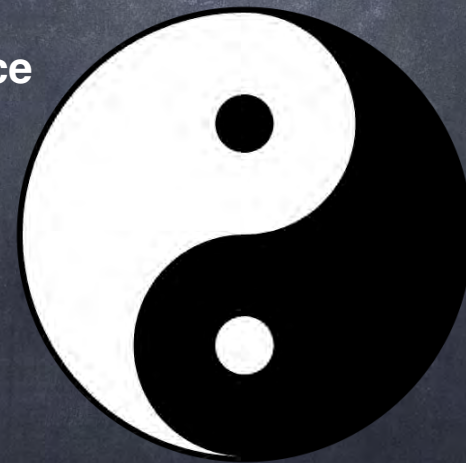
Egoless Creation with a pattern language is a dialectic resolution (*Aufhebung*) of 'pure experience' and 'language'.

Without recognizing this subtle feature, pattern language would be understood just as an operational tool, and would lose its nature and the profound meaning in it.



What Alexander tried to achieve with the Egoless Creation with a pattern language is to consider '*Pure Experience*' and '*Language*' as something inextricably linked together, like "yin and yang" in Chinese philosophy.

pure  
experience



language



▶ **Christopher Alexander**

▶ **Kitaro Nishida**

▶ **Ryodo Yamashita**

▶ **Thich Nhat Hanh**

▶ **Dialectic**

▶ **Yin and Yang**

## **Call for Information**

**Our journey of exploring the relationship between the philosophy behind the pattern language and Eastern Philosophy is just getting started. If you know anything about what Christopher Alexander has referred to for constructing his own theory, please let us know.**

PUARL2018 Conference

**Christopher Alexander's Thought  
and Eastern Philosophy  
Zen, Mindfulness and Egoless Creation with a  
Pattern Language**

**Takashi Iba**

Professor at Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University  
Ph.D in Media and Governance

**Konomi Munakata**

Faculty of Environment and Information Studies, Keio University