

Our Life Out of Balance

The Rise of Literacy and the Demise of Pattern Languages

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Literary-based conceptual language has supplanted and devalued pattern language, thus devaluing people and cultures that operate within it.

The ideas in this essay co-arose while living amongst the people and landscapes of the Eastern Arctic, as well as from specific conversations with Dayle Rasmussen, a descendent of the Espinosa dance family, George Rasmussen, a self-taught builder, architect Keith Irving, artist Bob Steele, and teachers Chet Bowers, Kieran Egan, and Geoff Madoc-Jones. Thanks to Ann Damude for thoroughly reviewing and suggesting improvements to this paper. I also wish to thank the Ven. Namgyal Rinpoche for warning his students that "writing is sometimes a defense against learning."

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I was in downtown Toronto a while back; I went to find a restaurant that was supposedly on the ground floor of one of those big glass skyscrapers. I walked around and around looking for the entrance, but for the life of me I couldn't find it among all the similar rectangular glass panels. Next door was an almost identical building, but it had a small granite lintel protruding from the glass which drew my eye to the doorway underneath. (Frustrated, I went in there and ate lunch instead.) In their book, *Pattern Language* (1977), Alexander and his associates say that the lintel on the second building was sending a message from the architect to the visitor, in effect saying, "Yoo-hoo. Over here." Alexander would probably say that the first building had a message too: "Get lost."

Culture, says Goody, is a compilation of these communicative acts: Something is expressed, something is comprehended, over and over again in ways that people come to expect (Goody 1977, 37, 26). Communicative acts like these make up what Egan calls our "languaged understanding"; however, Egan (1997) limits his use of this term primarily to denote individual understanding facilitated by oral and written language. But by combining his insights with those of Alexander, Goody, Bowers, and Steele, we can develop a broader explanation of what languaged understanding is for *cultures*, and how different types of languaged understanding form and influence different cultures.

For the purposes of this paper, I will redefine *languaged understanding* as the methods (conceptual and physical) whereby people-in-relation come to understand, communicate, and negotiate meaning together. Languaged understanding is shared, col-