

Decision-Procedure for Quality in the Built Environment

by [Greg Bryant](#)

Christopher Alexander spent decades exploring the human ability to perceive when something had been created with a living process. He was always able to elicit consistent judgments from people, accessing their life-detecting faculty, by asking them, for example, to choose the element in a pair that was a reflection of their true selves. This is often referred to as the “Mirror of the Self” test, but a shorthand is simply to ask people which is more “alive”. The general explanatory theory is that since we exist because of such living processes, we have an innate ability to detect what resonates with life.

But to nail down this process further, he did a [great deal of work with people](#) on creating places with this quality of “life”, and found that using feeling as a meter produced work which exhibited 15 properties, as described in his book series “The Nature of Order”. In an earlier attempt, his book “A Timeless Way of Building” makes use of [unfolding sequences](#), and the 253 patterns uncovered for the book “A Pattern Language”: a large sample of high-quality patterns that good places tend to have.

He was always interested in the use of, and disappointed in the abuse of, computers in architecture. He felt it was very important that technology be the least consideration or factor in a project for human beings. But, still, he actively researched the possibility of constructing a decision-procedure for evaluating the “life” in a place.

Today, it is fairly easy to make these judgments with an LLM (in this case ChatGPT 5.2, on February 18, 2026). We have a decision-procedure that, frankly, has the capacity to make much more human distinctions than most professional planners, builders, and architects.

What follows is a transcript of this decision procedure in action.





Compare the quality of the two places in these two photos, using Christopher Alexander's notion that we should use human feeling, as a meter, to measure the quality of life in a place. Then, please further analyze the differences using his 15 properties, and the creation of strong centers, from "The Nature of Order", and then the use of the 253 patterns in "A Pattern Language", pieced together with the process described in "A Timeless Way of Building".

Here's what my "felt sense" says, looking at the two photos as wholes, in Alexander's terms—then I'll unpack why using (1) feeling as the instrument, (2) the 15 properties / strong centers, and (3) relevant Pattern Language patterns + the Timeless Way process.

1) Feeling as the meter: which place has more "life"?

Photo 1 (canal-side street with cafés and people)

Stronger life / higher "quality without a name."

My body reads it as: social, sheltered, richly textured, interesting, walkable, continuously unfolding, full of invitations. Even if it's crowded, it feels inhabited and purposeful.

What drives the feeling:

People are doing real things (sitting, passing, pausing, talking).

The edge between “inside” and “outside” is thick (awnings, café furniture, doorways, windows, bridge, canal).

Many small, coherent “places within the place.”

Photo 2 (modern courtyard between large buildings)

Weaker life / lower “quality without a name.”

My body reads it as: exposed, over-scaled, thinly inhabited, “leftover space,” orderly but emotionally flat. It’s not awful—there are chairs and sun—but the whole is dominated by blankness and weak invitation.

What drives the feeling:

The open plane is very large compared to the human figure.

The space doesn’t “grab” you with a clear center you want to approach. Edges are hard and thin (glass wall, brick wall) with few micro-places to inhabit.

So in Alexander’s terms: Photo 1 has more living structure; Photo 2 has more abstract order.

2) The 15 properties and strong centers: what’s structurally different?

Below I’ll name each property and point to what we can actually see.

1) Levels of Scale

Photo 1: Many scales: canal + bridge (large), street (medium), café clusters (small), chairs/plates/bags (tiny). This nested scaling makes the place feel thick and human.

Photo 2: Mostly two scales: big building masses + big paved plane. The human scale elements (chairs) are almost “sprinkled on,” not structurally embedded.

2) Strong Centers

Photo 1: Multiple strong centers: each table group; the café zone under umbrellas;

the bridge landing; the canal edge; even the procession line of pedestrians. Photo 2: The strongest “center” is arguably the glass doors—yet they don’t read as a place to gather. The chairs form weak centers because they’re not reinforced by boundary, shelter, or nearby activity.

3) Boundaries

Photo 1: Boundaries are deep and layered: awnings, umbrellas, railings, shop fronts, canal edge. They thicken the centers.

Photo 2: Boundaries are mostly planar and hard (glass/brick). The seating zone has little boundary—no canopy, arcade, low walls, hedges, or “room-like” edges.

4) Alternating Repetition

Photo 1: Repetition with variation: windows/shutters/balconies; posts/awnings; tables/people—creating rhythm without monotony.

Photo 2: Large regular façade grids and pavement joints read as repetition, but it’s mostly at a coarse scale and doesn’t alternate with enough small counter-rhythms.

5) Positive Space

Photo 1: The café zone and walking path feel like intentional shapes—outdoor “rooms” and “lanes.”

Photo 2: The courtyard reads as a big leftover rectangle—space defined by building setbacks more than by shaped outdoor rooms. The “positive” shapes (places you’d choose) are not strongly formed.

6) Good Shape

Photo 1: Many good shapes at human scale: umbrella circles, clustered tables, the street corridor, the bridge as a defined form.

Photo 2: The main shape is a big open slab. It’s “clean,” but not “good” in the sense of being richly articulated into coherent sub-places.

7) Local Symmetries

Photo 1: Small symmetries everywhere (window pairs, balcony rhythms, table settings), giving calm amid complexity.

Photo 2: Symmetry is mostly global/architectural, less local. Local symmetries at the level of where you sit and orient your body are weaker.

8) Deep Interlock and Ambiguity

Photo 1: Inside/outside interlock strongly: cafés spill into street; street brushes canal; bridge cuts through; movement overlaps sitting.

Photo 2: Functions are separated: building = building, courtyard = courtyard, chairs = chairs. Less interpenetration, so less “thickness.”

9) Contrast

Photo 1: Strong contrasts (shade/sun, narrow/wide moments, water/stone, busy/quiet pockets).

Photo 2: Contrast is limited (mostly sun on pavement). A few plantings help, but the dominant field is uniform.

10) Gradients

Photo 1: Gradients of privacy and intensity: public flow → edge pause → café sit → interior.

Photo 2: Abrupt transitions: open slab → glass wall. Not much step-by-step “coming into” a place.

11) Roughness

Photo 1: Irregularities (furniture arrangements, façade variation, street life) create adaptation and authenticity.

Photo 2: Very smooth, controlled surfaces. That can be elegant—but it often reads as unadapted to the small contingencies of life.

12) Echoes

Photo 1: Repeated motifs across scales: arches, verticals, warm tones, awning lines.

Photo 2: Some echoes (rectangles in windows/pavers), but again mostly abstract, not richly reinforced at human-touch scale.

13) The Void

Photo 1: The canal itself functions as a living “void”—a calm counter-center that heightens the edges.

Photo 2: The open courtyard is a void, but it’s not “charged” by strong surrounding centers; it reads more like emptiness than stillness.

14) Simplicity and Inner Calm

Photo 1: Surprisingly calm within complexity because the centers are coherent and nested.

Photo 2: Calm through emptiness—can feel sterile because it isn’t supported by living substructure.

15) Not-Separateness

Photo 1: Feels continuous with its world: building life, street life, water life, small commerce—everything interdependent.

Photo 2: Feels like an object-ensemble: architecture as composition, courtyard as amenity. More separation between “design idea” and lived fabric.

Net of the 15: Photo 1 has many reinforced centers, thick boundaries, and nested scales, producing “life.” Photo 2 has global order but fewer reinforcing properties at the scales where bodies actually dwell.

3) Pattern Language + Timeless Way: what patterns are present or missing?

Photo 1 aligns with a whole pattern field (examples)

Pedestrian street / lively path (a place where walking is primary, with frequent reasons to pause).

Street café (tables directly on the public way; social permeability).

Activity nodes (bridge landing, café clusters, shopfront pockets).

Arcades / canopies / sheltering edges (awnings + umbrellas create “outdoor rooms”).

Building fronts that contribute (doors, windows, balconies, details that face the

street).

Gradual transitions from public to semi-public to private (edge thickening).

Network of small public spaces rather than one big one.

The key is not one pattern—it's that many patterns reinforce each other to create strong centers.

Photo 2 shows patterns attempted but not yet “locked in”

What's present:

Outdoor seating (good instinct).

Some planting (also good).

Clear access to building.

What's missing (in Pattern Language terms):

Positive outdoor space: shape the courtyard into outdoor “rooms,” not a single big slab.

Edges that hold life: low walls, steps, arcades, trellises, storefront-like thickness—places to lean, perch, gather.

Entrance transition: make the doorway zone a place, not just a plane of glass.

Small public squares: break the scale; create sub-centers with distinct identities.

Something to do: cafés/kiosks/visible interior activity that spills outward, or water/play/market moments—an attractor that isn't just “sit in sun.”

“A Timeless Way of Building”: the process difference you can feel

Photo 1 reads like it emerged through long feedback loops: each small adaptation tested against lived experience, accreting centers over time.

Photo 2 reads like a single-phase composition: a concept of clean space between objects, then furnished afterward. Alexander's claim is that life comes when you:

1. Start with what is there,
2. Make one small center more intense,
3. Let that force the next step,

4. Repeat—always checking feeling.

If you wanted Photo 2 to gain “life” (Alexander-style), what would you do?

Not “add decoration,” but create and thicken centers:

Make a real central thing: a fountain, tree grove, small pavilion, café cart—something that forms a center with boundary.

Carve the slab into rooms: low walls/planters/steps/trellises that make several smaller courts with different characters (sun/shade, quiet/social).

Thicken the building edge: arcades, canopies, benches built into walls, window seats, doors that open frequently—so the edge becomes inhabited. Create gradients: from main path → pocket → perch → table → doorway. Increase roughness (adaptive variety): not randomness—localized adjustments so every 10–20 feet offers a slightly different invitation.

That’s the Alexander test: after each small move, ask, does the whole feel more alive? If yes, keep going; if no, undo and try a different move.