

# Building Beauty: Interview with Nikos Salingaros

by [Christopher Miller](#) (July 2024)



Eishin Campus, Tokyo

In June, I had the privilege to interview architectural theorist and mathematician, Nikos Salingaros. Mr. Salingaros is a harsh critic of the current architectural establishment, claiming that it has naively adopted design methods that make us anxious and, as a consequence, is in need of serious repair. According to him, today's architects are deliberately trained to build inhumane environments, and the existing forces within institutions and media keep this machine alive. In short, the system is broken.

This is considered a radical perspective by many; however, Mr. Salingaros is, first and foremost, a scientist. He and his colleagues have arrived at their conclusions based on their findings within the field of *biophilia*. In *Design for a Living Planet*, Mr. Salingaros and co-author Michael Mehaffy describe

biophilia as “the apparent instinctive preferences we have for certain natural geometries, forms, and characteristics within our environments,” a hypothesis first popularized by biologist Edward O. Wilson. This is not surprising: if one accepts our vast biological lineage—the human evolving gradually and intimately alongside nature—certain preferences in our natural environment ought to surface, aiding the survival of our species.

If the mechanism of biophilia explains certain inborn inclinations, then what can be said of architecture? Interestingly, Mr. Salingaros has shown, through his many published books and scientific articles, that traditional architecture across the world is embedded with biophilic qualities. Studies have shown these features to be reliable sources of psychological nourishment that are instrumental to our overall well-being. But the dawn of Modernist architecture in the early 20th century, which still serves as a model of what makes “good” architecture, fails to capture these invaluable facets of architecture. Instead, these later interpretations have flipped our understanding of great architecture upside down.

Mr. Salingaros is internationally recognized and has published many books, such as *A Theory of Architecture*, *Principles of Urban Structure*, and *Anti-Architecture and Deconstruction*. He is a professor of Mathematics at the University of Texas at San Antonio, a visiting faculty member of the *Building Beauty* program in Sorrento, Italy, and has held numerous guest professorships.

**Christopher Miller:** In *A Theory of Architecture*, which I read shortly after its publication—I think it was in 2006 that you published that book—I was surprised and excited that you could analyze architecture through a scientific lens and put into words the constituents of beauty through a scientific

framework. When you first published that work, what was the reaction that you got from peers and colleagues?

**Nikos Salingaros:** Well, there was a general denial by the architectural establishment. A small minority of people on the architectural fringes really liked it, and many of those people have become my friends. They had students who have now joined the small community. But overall, the people who appreciated this work are still forced to be on the periphery of architectural culture, whereas in mainstream architectural culture, they have either ignored this work or have spent effort in order to bury it and prevent it from entering the mainstream. What has happened, though—we are talking about 20 years ago—is that other like-minded people have discovered my work and that of Christopher Alexander's. But we are still on the periphery. We are kept out of the mainstream; we are harassed, attacked, and ignored. But there are many of us now. So now, in the periphery, we have conferences and we publish. Those of us who are practicing architects and urbanists are getting commissions to build regions of new cities around the world. We are really moving forward while the mainstream has continued to blind itself—I do not know if that answered your question?

**CM:** It certainly did. Why do you think there is a delay—almost a Copernican-like delay—in the dissemination of truth?

**NS:** Because what is known as the architectural mainstream is a power system, and the truth has no benefit to this power system; indeed, the truth is a threat to this power system. The only mode of reaction is ignoring the truth or suppressing the truth by political means. If a power system is responsible for making money by building horrible, inhumane buildings,

architects are still being employed.

Global architectural academia, teachers, and students want to learn how to build sadistic, inhumane buildings, but the students want that, so they go and pay for their classes. It is a system that is working very nicely. The product is anti-human and atrocious. But the system is working very nicely. So what we are doing threatens the system.

Occasionally, something that we do sparks the interest of the system. Somebody more intelligent than the norm who is part of the system says, "Aha! These people on the periphery have this nice result. Let us steal this result and boost our own inhumane buildings." And they try, but then it doesn't work, because if you take a technique developed by us for creating humane architecture and apply it to an inhumane building, it just creates a mess. But this happens every year or so.

**CM:** Your more recent work seems to focus on *biophilia*. Do you fear that biophilia, just like fractals, will be misunderstood and misapplied, or has it already?

**NS:**It has already. Fractals are misapplied, and biophilia is misapplied. You are describing very nicely what I introduced just a minute ago. Architects who are used to, and driven to, create inhumane architecture find these buzzwords and say, "OK, so I am going to design a new building that is atrocious and sadistic, and I will say it is *biophilic*, and fool the client, because the client is reading the word *biophilic design* in the press here and there. So I can fool the client in order to sponsor this building." And, you know, a client is easily fooled by having a glass steel tower with a few trees in the front. Okay, so that's biophilic.

Or, as you know, the other thing is a *fractal*. That occurred a

few years ago. You have a horrible, disgusting building, and you just make a wall design like a mural—some abstract fractal—and the architect sells it to the client and says, “This is a fractal building, because look: this is a fractal design, and it is the latest thing. There are all these papers saying that it is good for you.”

**CM:** So in your eyes, is this more or less a marketing scheme than a genuine attempt?

**NS:**It is a total marketing scheme because, for the last century, architects have been trained to be dishonest. Very nice young people—male and female—are going to architecture school, and they are trained to be totally dishonest. From day one, they are taught to deny their own feelings about geometry, color, form, detail, or ornament. They are trained to deny the truth about what their own bodies are telling them. After five years of education, they deny everything. They lie as well as professional politicians lie.

Whenever I hear an architect describe a desire to create more healing and beautiful architecture, I am still a sucker, and I still have hope. But then, when I hear somebody describe such a project, I look at the project and say, it is horrible. It is sadistic. But they speak very convincingly.

**CM:** You actually touched on a subject that I want you to speak about, which is hope. We see a world in which beauty is dwindled: parking lots cover acres upon acres of land with no consideration for the implications of building such inhumane environments. How does one stay hopeful?

**NS:** I wish I could tell you, Christopher. I am getting old, and I have lost all hope. I keep from bleak despair by communicating daily with my friends who have been in the same fight for decades. You know, we are all getting older, and we try to bring in some young people, but most young people are not interested. There is a glimmer of hope, but it is not very much. The majority of young people are attracted to the worst aspects of the architectural establishment, which is the desire to exert power.

An architecture school attracts students by offering a profession that can exert power on hapless human robots. The students are told, "If you come and you get an architecture degree, you can then design a building that can house 500 working people, and you can make their lives miserable." And that is an exertion of power. You know, it is better than being in the military. In the military, only if you rise to a higher rank do you have control over so many people's lives; whereas as an architect, you can be just a mediocre architect and work on a building that you know for the next 30 years people's lives will be ruined by working in this building every day or by passing in front of this building.

Now, what I am saying sounds crazy. This is not the language that is used, but this is my interpretation.

**CM:** I would say your friend and collaborator, the late [Christopher Alexander](#), was very optimistic. He gave a compelling account while building the *Eishin Campus* in Japan. He took personal risks that placed his life in danger for the sake of beauty. He was hopeful, no matter the scenario.

Sadly, he is gone now, but we do have the [Building Beauty](#) program. Have you seen any sparks or any possible embers in there? Or is this the whole point of the *Building Beauty* program?

**NS:** The *Building Beauty* program is a big spark, and it is full of hope. The problem is the numbers. The *Building Beauty* program, in my estimation, should be attracting 10,000 students each year. But it is attracting ten, twenty, or thirty students a year. This is not commensurate with the magnitude of the problem. The whole world is going to hell very, very quickly. Beauty has been deliberately destroyed all over the world. The *Building Beauty* program has the ember of Christopher's thought and his teaching. A yearly course, a post-graduate in building beauty, teaching directly from *The Nature of Order*. But if we have thirty students, it is great, and there is a little bit of hope, but the world has billions of people and hundreds of thousands of architecture students all over the world. My estimation is that the *Building Beauty* program should attract 30,000 students each year, which it could do remotely, because *Building Beauty* learned to teach remotely when the pandemic hit and was very successful. It started as a face-to-face seminar in Italy. Then, during the pandemic, they converted it to remote learning, and it was very successful.

**CM:** I would like to visit the subjects of Modernism and Deconstructivism. You spoke earlier about power as well as the authoritarian order that exists within those fields. Was Deconstructivism inevitable given the social setting established earlier by the Bauhaus?

**NS:** It was not inevitable. But if you have an architecture that makes money, which Modernism is and still is, yet it ideologically forbids itself to go in the direction of creating humane form in the sense of Christopher Alexander, the only way to change is to break up the forms into more

anxiety-inducing geometries, and that is Deconstructivism. It is an aggression against nature; it is an aggression against human senses; it is an aggression against our biology; it is all money and propaganda. The clients accepted it. The media accepted it. Academia accepted it. Therefore, it worked! If there had been a rejection by society, it would not have worked. If society rejects something that is toxic, then hopefully you get rid of it. If society accepts something that is toxic, then society itself becomes polluted and poisoned. Society is propagating this. I hate to go back to historical examples, but the late Führer was elected Chancellor of Germany. He was elected. It was chosen by society. He went into the war, and people loved him. He had public approval. Up until the Soviets rolled into Berlin, he had public approval. So our public here—you are in Canada, right?

**CM:** Yes.

**NS:** The collective West: The United States, Canada, and Western Europe have accepted Deconstructivism. Major Deconstructivist architects compete and are awarded. Important commissions: a new bank or museum, government headquarters, private houses by wealthy individuals. If society accepts something toxic, what can we do? We say, "You know, this is terrible for everybody, but nobody listens to us." There is a machine that consists of the architect, the construction companies making money, and the client paying for it. It is the client who decides. An architect does not build the building. An architect is chosen by a client. And then the client pays the architect to design something, and then the construction company builds it.

Now, the construction companies are amoral. There are construction companies, and then there are engineering



companies for something bigger than just a small house. You have to have engineering. They are all complicit in this poisoning of society, but a construction company will build what you give it blueprints to build. OK, that is its job. It is not the job to judge and to say, "This is horrible; I am not going to build it." The engineering company will do the calculations and compute the stresses on the beams so that the thing stands up, does not collapse, or kill anybody. They are amoral. They do the job that they are asked to do. The guilty parties are the architect, the client, and the propaganda machine that is the architectural press and the general press that boosts this toxicity in architecture. You do not seem to be very happy with my answer (laughs).

**CM:** (Laughs). In volume four of *The Nature of Order*, which you helped edit over a 20-year period—

**NS:** —Yes, all four volumes. I am the one who split it into four volumes.

**CM:** You mentioned earlier about the poisoning of society; is this the reason why Christopher Alexander eventually gets to his spiritual volume? It is a mystical volume, even though it has a backbone in science and is empirically rooted. This territory seems absolutely necessary given the undercurrent of society now. We are perpetuating a system that makes us sick. We have to redeem ourselves, it would seem.

**NS:** Yes.

**CM:** As a scientist, when you were editing volume four, was there anything that you contested?

**NS:** Oh yes! I told him, "Listen, Christopher, you are going to lose all of your audience because people will think you have gone totally out of it talking about God! And you are a scientist like me." So I told him, "You and I are working together because we are both scientists; we have a degree in physics and mathematics. We understand each other. That is why we are working together. But I am telling you, as political advice, that if you write about this religious aspect, people are going to attack you."

So he said, "People are going to attack me anyway, so it does not matter." And he said, "Look, Nikos. I have come to this religious aspect reluctantly; I am not a religious person." It seemed an inevitable consequence of the scientific discoveries in *The Nature of Order*, and he convinced me of that. After my initial attempts to save him from criticism, which was not going to work anyway, I did my best to help him express his perception of the relationship between architecture, science, and religion. My role in all four volumes was to help him express ideas that he was struggling with and fighting with because there were internal contradictions ... what is written in *The Nature of Order* is clearer than it was when I began to work with him. It was not my *approval* of what he was doing. I saw that he has come to this and needs to express it, and it actually made sense. So I helped him state it in the best way possible, and we let the reader make the judgment.

**CM:** In fact, I found it to be a different interpretation of *The Timeless Way of Building*, only more expansive.

**NS:** It is a repeat of *The Timeless Way of Building* with infinite more details and depth.

**CM:** *The Goal of Tears* [a chapter featured in volume four] is quite moving, as is *The Blazing One*. I have not encountered this content in any other architectural or scientific literature. I would say this may be one of the reasons why we are not seeing the reception among the public, because we are not entrenched in this psyche anymore; we are too mechanically entrenched, if you know what I mean?

**NS:** I know exactly what you mean. But it is not volume four that is responsible for Christopher's work not being embraced. Already with *The Timeless Way of Building*, which was published in 1979, he was made an outcast. Peter Eisenman said it very nicely. He said in the 1980s, "poor Chris fell out of the radar screen." And, you know, Peter Eisenman was not a vindictive guy! He just stated the truth.

When Christopher was younger, he would go to these conferences, and he was part of "the group" as a very young man. Louis Kahn loved Christopher. Christopher told me that he would go to international conferences. Louis Kahn had read his early papers and would go straight for Christopher, grab him, and talk to him. He really liked Christopher. Christopher told me, "I like the Kimbell Art Museum, but Kahn's other buildings, I think, are horrible. I did not dare tell him!"

**CM:** So, a bit of awkwardness!

**NS:** This was the young Christopher Alexander. Around the time he published his works, like *A Pattern Language* and *The Timeless Way of Building*, he dropped off the radar screen. He

was shunned by the community.

*\*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

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**Christopher Miller** works as a construction professional near Halifax, Nova Scotia, and is interested in discussing the perils which currently face architecture today.

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