



6 / DISCOVERING NEW PATTERN-LANGUAGES: HOW TO DRAW A VISION OF THE FUTURE FROM THE STUDY OF THE PRESENT

There was always one great difficulty with the theory of pattern languages, and with the languages my colleagues and I, and others, published. *Where did the patterns come from?*

Much of our early work implicitly made use of the idea that good patterns were to be derived, somehow, from existing culture, thus ensuring a relation to the subtleties of culture variation, and preserving things that were good and important, which had been swept aside in the onrush of techno-civilization. But there was always hanging over this process, a sword of Damocles. If — as a procedure — one takes the patterns from existing culture, then one merely reiterates what is being built. That is not *necessarily* good.

Who is to say which bits of culture are to be preserved, and which bits laid aside? In many cases the reason for studying patterns in the first place was to define better patterns, deeper and better generic centers, in the hope of making a more sustaining, more life-giving environment. But these patterns which we discovered were obtained partly by judgment.

I have said earlier (Book 1, Preface, pages 17–18), that the patterns in A PATTERN LANGUAGE were judged by many to be *true* in some sense. But this truth was of a new type, which recognized the life of a situation, or of a building, as a real thing. The truth of a pattern had to do with the question, “Does injection of this pattern into contexts of the stated type, in fact make these envi-

ronments more alive?” This required making *judgments* about generic centers and the degree to which they sustain life, and judging which generic centers do the most to create, or contribute to, the life of the environment!

So how was one to find good patterns? Was this a process of observing existing culture — hence very conservative? Was it an arbitrary process — without a solid basis that one could determine? Or might it be a process where one could somehow make legitimate judgments about culture and society as they are, yet then use these observations to move forward to a new state, in a non-arbitrary way? In this latter case, which was perhaps our hope, one seemed to face the most profound and disturbing moral problems, since it was not clear how one could ever reach “the truth” about such matters.

Was there, indeed, any way in which one might, by observation of culture *as it is*, decide in what direction that culture *ought* to go, in the future? Could one, then, draw the future from the present, by any kind of objective process?

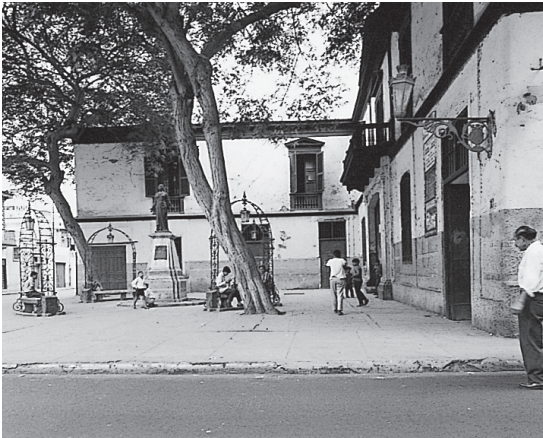
This is of course, exactly what the unfolding process seeks to do. But at that time, twenty years ago, the idea that there might be an unfolding process which would allow one to derive the patterns (which were to generate the structure of present and future environments) from the wholeness of *existing* culture, and so solve this problem, was never explicitly addressed.



7 / A NEW LANGUAGE FOR HOUSES IN PERU

For the sake of an example of how this process goes, let me describe what my colleagues and I did when we visited Peru in 1969. We were in an

international competition, organized by the United Nations, to design low-cost houses for Peruvian families. There were 30 competitors,



Activity nodes



Car-pedestrian symbiosis



Car-pedestrian symbiosis



Shops on the corners

one from each of 15 countries outside Peru, and 15 Peruvian architects. We were the American team. To do the preliminary work, our team of four Americans went to live in Lima for a month. Each of us found a family to live with, and we met every night in a room we rented in Lima to compare notes, and write down what we knew.¹¹

Before going to Lima, we read various anthropologists' reports about Peruvian society. It all seemed very exotic, but none of it seemed even remotely useful when we were living in our Peruvian families. For instance, ethnographic reports claimed that Peruvians kept the windows closed at night, even in hot weather, because they

didn't want ghosts to come through the windows with the night air. I never heard anyone say anything like this while I was living in the district of Victoria in Lima.

I found that I could imagine the Peruvians' feelings best just by being one of them. For instance it was a dangerous place, and it wasn't safe to leave windows open at night. That was really all the explanation one needed for why the windows had to be closed, even when it was sweltering hot. I found that if I looked at life from the point of view of being one of them, my *own* feelings, and my *own* knowledge of what had to be, was more reliable than anything else as an indicator of what was needed for a Peruvian family.



Family in the comedor, the heart of the house



Front door recesses



Watching the street: the activity which defines the mirador



The traditional Peruvian mirador

The *comedor* (dining room) in the middle of the house, where everyone came by, watched TV, or sat and talked on the way in or out, was a wonderful place. Being a member of that family, I knew that I needed and wanted such a room — and I could feel exactly where it needed to be in the house (in the middle of everything). I could feel that it needed to be positioned so that everyone came through it, on their way in, or their way out — I barely needed to ask any questions about this: *I could feel it*, all of it, but I could feel it only by being one of them. I, myself (as Chris Alexander) didn't have a house like that, and I don't want a house like that — because for me, in Berkeley, with my family, it would not have

made sense — it would not have been part of things, or part of the way my life works. But as a member of that Peruvian family, in the Peruvian culture, in the context of that family which I was a part of, it *did* make sense. It was natural, necessary, and I could feel its necessity, as part of *me*.

There were four of us making these observations. When we four team members, each making this kind of observation in the family where we were staying, compared notes, if anything didn't check out with all four of us, we rejected it. So, any mistake, caused by the idiosyncrasy of one family, or caused by our own idiosyncrasies as observers, got pushed out. What was left was only that stuff which corresponded to common

feelings, felt by four different people, in four different families.

When we published the pattern language for the Peruvian houses, people in Peru said that our pattern language and our houses we designed from the pattern language were a more accurate reflection of Peruvian reality than even the Peruvian architects had managed.¹²

People wondered how we did it. But it was really very simple, and we did nothing more than I have just described. We identified the centers by getting so deeply into the situation that we could feel, *in our own bodies*, just which ones needed to be there.

The essential technique in the observation of centers, in any social situation, and in any culture, is to allow the feelings to generate themselves, inside *you*. You have to say, "What would I do if I were one of the people living here, what would it be like for me?" thus inserting yourself into the situation, and then using your own common sense and feelings as a measuring instrument.

Of course you must always check with people, explicitly. You cannot assume you are right. You have to check. On the other hand, checking doesn't mean just do what people say; their own sense of what is involved can also be in error. One must always go to the root, asking what is likely to create the most life, and maintaining a cautious skepticism, even while pursuing these difficult and soul-searching questions.

For concreteness, I reproduce the following list of patterns my colleagues and I identified in 1969 for Peruvian communities and houses:¹³

SUBCULTURE CELLS
 DEGREES OF PUBLICNESS
 LOOPED LOCAL ROADS
 T-JUNCTIONS
 DIRECT VISIBLE PARKING
 TINY PARKING LOTS
 PASEO
 ACTIVITY NUCLEI
 CAR-PEDESTRIAN SYMBIOSIS
 PEDESTRIAN 50 CM ABOVE THE CAR

KNUCKLE AT ROAD CROSSING
 CENTRAL MARKET
 EVENING CENTERS
 WALK-THROUGH SCHOOLS
 VISIBLE KINDERGARTENS
 WALLED SOCIAL GARDENS
 CELL GATEWAY
 MULTI-PURPOSE OUTDOOR ROOM
 SHOPS ON CORNERS
 CENTRIPETAL PEDESTRIAN PATHS
 STREET FOOTBALL
 FLOWERS ON THE STREET
 LONG THIN HOUSE
 PERIMETER WALL
 CROSS-VENTILATED HOUSE
 LIGHT ON TWO SIDES OF EVERY ROOM
 PATIOS WHICH LIVE
 TAPESTRY OF LIGHT AND DARK
 THE SALA: INTIMACY GRADIENT
 BATHROOM POSITION
 PUERTA FALSA
 FIESTA
 STAIRCASE STAGE
 THICK WALLS
 FAMILY ROOM CIRCULATION
 FAMILY ROOM ALCOVES
 KITCHEN COMEDOR RELATIONSHIP
 HOME WORKSHOP
 TWO SERVICE PATIOS
 ELBOW-ROOM KITCHEN
 INDIVIDUAL BED ALCOVES
 BED CLUSTERS
 MASTER BED LOCATION
 MASTER BEDROOM DRESSING SPACE
 OLD PEOPLE DOWNSTAIRS
 SERVANT SLEEPING SPACE
 TWO-COMPARTMENT BATHROOM
 CLOTHES-DRYING CLOSET
 ENTRANCE TRANSITION
 FRONT DOOR RECESSES
 MIRADOR
 FRONT DOOR BENCH
 GALLERY SURROUND
 TRANSLUCENT OPENING PATIO ROOF
 LIGHT FROM TWO-STORY PATIO
 SUNSHINE IN PATIOS

TWO-METER BALCONY
 SHOP FRONT POSSIBILITY
 RENTAL
 CONTINUOUS FLOATING FLAB
 MORTARLESS BLOCK WALL
 COMPOSITE BAMBOO FOAM BEAM
 COMPOSITE BAMBOO FOAM PLANK
 SULPHUR REINFORCING
 PLUMBING ACCUMULATOR
 CONTINUOUS ELECTRIC OUTLET

What is the status of this list of centers? To some degree these centers are based on observation; they reflect Peruvian life as it was in 1969. Some are idealized, they contain our ideas of what might be a better way to arrange pedestrians and cars, or parking lots. Some are almost no more than ideas about how something might be done: the use of sulphur as structural reinforcement, for example. Still others are highly general — so much so that they were later generalized and included in *A PATTERN LANGUAGE* and remain, to this day, as observations of what makes people comfortable, almost all over the world. These, then, are rooted in psychology. Some are specific to climate and place, not exactly to culture.

So, this list of centers describes what we took, at that time, to be the core of the cultural background in Lima, into which houses had to fit, and from which houses might be generated. We tried — in our inexperienced fashion — to identify the centers which really existed in everyday life (*SHOPS ON CORNERS*), and those which

we believed existed in people's consciousness (*THE SALA*), and those which existed, latent, in dreams and traditions but were actually disappearing from modern Peruvian society. Others reflected modern aspects of Peruvian city life. *FOOTBALL IN THE STREET* described the peculiarly Peruvian form of street football, *CAR-PEDESTRIAN SYMBIOSIS* described the way that cars were, then, a focus of activity.

All in all, this list of centers is a partial picture of the wholeness which existed in Peru at the time. Yet, because these centers exist in culture, they have a carrying force, a generative power. They may be used to create copies of themselves, or many specific individual centers, in Peruvian communities and houses, which reflect and embody these generic culture-defined patterns. So a certain person may now build a sala in his house, and this sala then exists in his new house as a new center which has unfolded from the wholeness of the culture, and has, in its specific details, also unfolded from the particular geometry of the house and its setting in the street. Thus the fact that *THE SALA* is on the list of centers, gives birth to real centers in the world, *generates* them.

The culture-borne centers play a genetic role, not unlike the role played by genes in an organism. They describe what *is* — in a deep, inner sense. And they also describe how the world can be generated, to become congruent with people's inner feelings, aspirations, habits, and society.



8 / THE TYPE OF OBSERVATION WHICH LEADS TO
 DISCOVERY OF LIVING CENTERS:
 SEEKING TRADITION AND SEEKING THE NEW

What exactly is the relation between fact and fiction, cold observation and inspired vision, in these patterns? And to what extent is the traditional nature of some of these patterns necessary, or typical? To what extent is the appearance of a

hypermodern pattern like *CAR-PEDESTRIAN SYMBIOSIS* also typical of what must happen when true unfolding takes place? Let us concentrate on the extent to which the process of finding, discovering, these generic centers, is a true