

which appears. Here, for instance, is a place in Oakland, California, an ordinary street on Lake Merritt, which has some life. Somewhere between the trashbasket, the view of the lake, the styrofoam coffee cups, the people sitting at a busstop, the trees, and the markings on the road, there is some life. The joggers along the lake enjoy the glistening buildings in the dawn light.

Where does this life come from? It comes from the fact that many of these places are, though very weakly, self-like centers. The busstop bench is not much to look at. But here, across from the lake, people sit, talk, joke, shout. I sit drawing. A little girl watches me, and talks to me about the figures I am drawing. The bus comes — massive, but still a necessity, again a being at a low level which animates the street — and takes people home.

The buildings across the lake — at this distance I do feel related to them as beings even though, as buildings, they are really not so good. At five in the morning, the time when I took this photograph, they shine in the dawn light, each has its own distinctive character. Close up, they are ugly and impractical in many respects. But at this distance, seeing them across the lake, I feel them being-like, too. I feel related to them. And in part the people jogging also feel themselves related to the distant, gleaming buildings. So there is something of the being-world in the most ordinary scene. And I see it because I cannot help loving the beauty of the world, even the imperfect fragmented world.

Could these beings, visible or half visible in the banal reality, be transformed to become be-

ings in a truer sense, as they are in this painting I made on that same day?

Sometimes I am mesmerized by the beauty of our joyous, ugly world. The Bay Bridge, for instance, I love it on that bridge, I love driving over to San Francisco in all its modern exuberance, and ugliness. There I seem to see a thousand beings in the world, when I am driving, and I feel the world is wonderful, nowhere is it so wonderful, it is only good, and glorious to be alive. The sheer beauty of that experience is shaking. I see the grey shining towers of the bridge, arcing above, the great X-braces of the steel; the cars, in their hundreds, crossing the bridge in front of me; tail lights, light of the city, light of the fog, sometimes the green light over the Bay, and the shining yellow light coming off the Bay water like phosphorescence. Then, every bolt-head on the bridge seems wonderful, the cars and lights seem like beings; the light in the sky, the edges of the clouds are beings, the rainwater on the asphalt is a being, the small lights of a plane in the distance, the dark edges of the roadway — all beings, all wonderful.

Is there, then, something as profound as Chartres in this modern world of ours?

Again, what I experience when I drive over the bridge, when I gulp in like beer the beauty of my existence — the lights on the road, the cars, the trees, the sky. The inner thing, the beauty of that freeway, the beautiful world which surrounds the freeway, which makes us realize how marvelous it is to be alive, for one second only, one day, to experience all this.



15 / A NEW VISION OF BUILDING: MAKING LIVING STRUCTURE IN OUR BRUTAL WORLD

So what does it mean to make beings in our world? We live in a world of freeways, bridges, Coca-Cola machines, advertisements, cars, office buildings; there are homeless people sleeping on

the streets; a drug addict may be lying in a dark alley. High-priced, ugly condominiums line the beach. Trash cans. Hamburger stands. Used cars. Ugly as it is, it is also wonderful because it speaks,

THE TEN THOUSAND BEINGS



The shore of Lake Merritt, Oakland, California. Here there are fewer beings, the centers are barely living.



Lake Merritt at Dawn, 5.30 a.m., Oil and digital painting, Christopher Alexander, 1995



The work of finding beings always starts at the very simplest level, as we see in our efforts to make rosettes in concrete, during a construction experiment from one of our building sites.

in some degree, of freedom, our freedom — driving a truck across the bridge, making something in the back yard, the struggling homeless person selling old shirts to eke out a living, the styrofoam cup which, ugly as it may be, allows me to have my cup of coffee as I drive along, singing, in the truck.

We cannot make the world over. We must accept our world, and within it, make our beings, in a fashion consistent with this world, and its demands, and its harsh realities.

So, I see the beings throughout the fabric of the world, I experience them. I can be aware of them in the beauty of the world — even the harsh, broken world. And I can paint the beings I see behind the scenes, bring them into existence, create a vision of reality, which shows the beings in the lake, or in the freeway.

But this is not the same as Chartres. In Chartres, the beings were not only seen and felt — they were made actual in the stones of the church, in the interval of silence in the footfalls

within the church, in the glass, in the rooftiles, and in the hinges of the doors. That we do not have in our time. And, I believe it is not appropriate, it is nearly impossible for us, in our time, to have this perfection in light of the harsh cruelty of the world, the overpopulation of our planet, the inhumanity we are aware of, the unfairness inherent in money and education.

Strangely, I believe the beauty of the world is almost more touching, more profound, if this harsh, ugly world of ours, is married, mixed, with the more perfect world in which the beings are fully living. I believe that it is possible for us to create a world, less perfect than the world of Chartres, but perhaps even more true, in which both ugliness and beauty are reconciled. A world in which the banal street signs of Oakland are combined with the beauty of stones and cherry blossoms; a world in which the ugliness of poverty is accepted in a downtown city neighborhood, is laid side by side with the beauty of



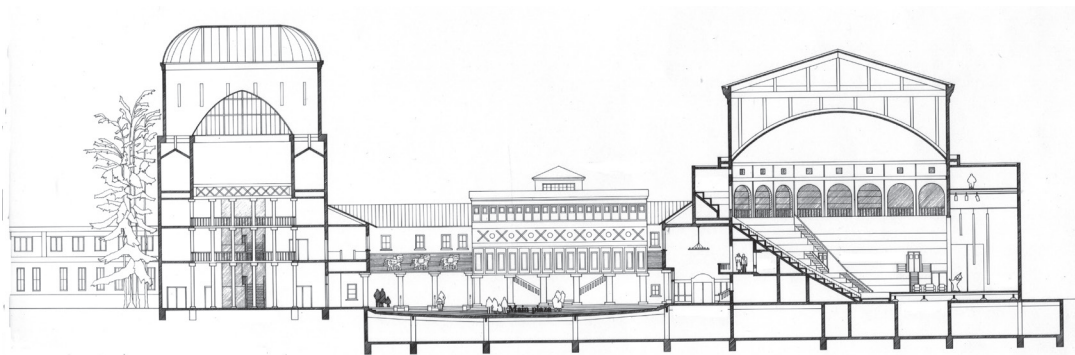
Freeway At Night, Oil painting, Christopher Alexander, 1991

beings in a sidewalk, in a window; a world in which the dirty machineshop of a gas station and its Coca-Cola machine sits comfortable, and happy, side by side, with something inner. A world in which even the banality of the developer's cheap apartment can be illuminated with the beings in the window, or in the furniture, or in the car outside the door, and in the lights around the garden.

But it is necessary for us to *cross* that bridge. The beings we can sense in the freeway, and which can be painted, are not enough to sustain our lives, even in a modern form. I believe they must be welded into a newer structure, which we can so far only glimpse, in which both worlds are visible.

It must not be forgotten just how *hard* this is. At Chartres, the stones, the hair on the statue, the beautifully shaped triangles on the buttress, the foot of the column, the ornament on the belt of the statue, the glass, the individual pieces of glass, the roundels, the carvings in the ornament — each one is worked and worked until it is full of feeling and until, then, the self-like character is very deep. This is hard won. It does not come easy. But when it happens a living thing is made. And this comes, above all, from the impulse we call ornament: to fill living space. *Above all, then, a building is an ornament.*

This statement is difficult to grasp since, in the last two centuries, we have become used to thinking of an ornament as something trivial. I



Each entity is distinct, and works as “something” in this cross-section of a design for the Mountain View Civic Center, Christopher Alexander and Artemis Anninou, 1989

was brought up during the middle years of the 20th century, in a family with (as they were then called) good middle-class values, and with an appreciation of art as defined by Beethoven, Raphael, Cezanne — the romantic meaning of art: art with significance.

I was astonished when, as a university student, I first read Josef Strzygowski, and realized that ornament *itself* is a profound thing.¹⁰ The idea that the ornament on a carpet or the edge of an illuminated manuscript could be something of significance as a work of art — a concept not widely accepted or understood in 1950 — was a revelation to me, and something I never forgot in later life. It meant that Bach and Biber were as significant as Schubert and Beethoven — something that was not at all clear even as recently as 1950.¹¹ It meant that a Persian miniature might be as significant as a statue by Michelangelo, or even more significant.

My meaning, when I say that a building, to be living, must be an ornament, goes even deeper. What I mean is that this sense of ornament — a profound, organized object reaching to heaven — applies equally to a functional object: to a freeway, or to a car, or to a flower which is a living thing. There the word “ornament” is a profound comment on the contribution which something makes to the world, through its order and its relation to the world. When I take all that, and summarize it in the statement, “A

building is an ornament,” we get close to the meaning I have in mind. In this sense, the living centers, the structure of living self-like centers, created by the fifteen properties, is the utmost that a building can provide.

Preparing to finish this chapter, I want to hint, too, what the many-being character may look like in the buildings of our time. It will not look like Chartres. It will not look, I think, like the Bay Bridge with its glowing elements and lights. It will not look, directly, like a painting by Bonnard.

Shown here is a cross-section of modern urban civic space, at high density, a design for the civic center of Mountain View, in California. Unlike normal conceptions of urban space in which the car dominates and regular lots divide the space, in this conception every part is positive and being-like: the gardens are regular, shaped in themselves; the pedestrian paths have their own weight and integrity and are protected from the cars; the auditorium has a shape and existence as a thing in its own right; domes, and columns, and arcades exist as beings; even the car streets and parking places have weight as pleasant living space, forcing the car to move more awkwardly than is usual, to reduce its speed and pace, leaving each part with its life.¹²

In the preface of Book 3, I show a painting and other details of this project, to bring out its living character.



16 / THE LIFE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

I finish, then, with this conclusion: *The environment is good, or bad, according to the degree that its thousands and thousands of centers are pictures of the self, what we might call "beings."*

On the face of it this proposition appears scientifically outrageous, because the relation of the great environment in the world to our own person would seem irrelevant to its quality. Is it not absurdly presumptuous to declare that whether or not a certain street in the city of San Francisco works is in any sense dependent upon its relation with the personal self of you, the reader, who may be sitting in a chair in London or Baghdad? And is it not absurd to declare that the life of apartment buildings in East Oakland is independent of fire codes, cultural heritage, climate, cost, window area — but that it is dependent on the way these buildings are composed, or not, of beings?¹³

Yet that is just what I have come to believe. The practical matters of fire, cost, family structure, wall construction, structural efficiency, ecology, solar energy, wind, water, pedestrian traffic — all these have their place. Function must be at the core of everything.¹⁴ But what governs the life of the buildings is not to be found in these matters, alone, but in a single question, always built on the foundation of these matters, but elevating them to a different level of understanding: *To what extent is every building, and the whole building, and every garden, and the whole street, all made of beings?* Asking this question is the right criterion to apply, because your self, and my self, and each person's self, are all somehow linked — either by similarity, caused by genetic and biological homology, or by some deeper connection — to one another.

The thought expressed by my conclusion, though it seems at first frivolous, is precisely the watershed between the alienated world of mechanism and the non-alienated world of life. I well know that it may take time for you to appreciate the fact behind the thought. You need to test it, experimentally, as I have done, for years. You

need to examine each piece of the environment you come across from this point of view. And you need time to weigh its unlikely character against the fact that, nevertheless, it seems to be true.

To do this, you need to become clear in your own mind about the distinction between centers which are more like beings — more genuinely related to your self — and those which are less so. That in itself takes practice, and discussion, and honesty about your inner feeling. If you try to develop that ability, slowly, by observation and experiment, you will then be in a position to conduct the larger experiment of trying to judge the difference between places which have more life and places which have less life. You will then gradually become persuaded, I believe, as I have been persuaded in the last fifteen years, that this one criterion, absurdly simple though it seems to be, does correlate accurately with the presence of life in the environment. It is that empirical fact, once you encounter it for yourself, which may then persuade you of the truth of what I am recording here.

It should perhaps be said that the word "being," though I believe it is a true and helpful description, has such a heavy character that it cannot be used every day. In discussion with my colleagues, I find that we rarely speak about this "being" nature of the centers in a building that is being made: it is just too much to keep on talking about it. In ordinary discourse one says, perhaps, that a given bit of garden, or a given bit of ceiling, should be "something," more of a "thing," more solid, more of an entity. That kind of language conveys the same essential meaning, and is easier for everyday professional discussion. But those of us who speak like that, and think like that, know that it is the *being* we are referring to; and in our hearts, as we work, it is this I-like nature which we try to reach, in every particle.

In thirty years of work, struggling to understand what makes the difference between buildings which have life and those which do not have life, I have found no other formula of this simplicity, nor of this accuracy.