

room, it was the place where they would “live.” That meant it was lockable, it really was like a room. For Linda it was an outdoor courtyard, not necessarily secure, and therefore could not truly be felt as their main living room. Did it, for example, have a ceiling of vines? As the house went from initial sketch to finished building, the question of how secure this room or courtyard was to be — how lockable, how private? — came repeatedly into focus. The chapel, which was a tiny building in the trees reached from the court-

yard, took on different qualities; the path to the lake had different attributes.

Even in this slightly tortured discussion, though, the essence of the house always remained what it had been from the first day: a house built around a courtyard, which was to be their main living space. Even the fireplace, for example, is in the *outdoor* space. It is visible on page 370, seen through the glass door of the dining room, which leads out to the porch that closes the courtyard and overlooks the lake.



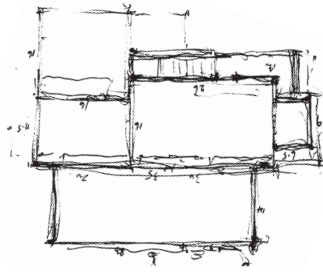
#### 4 / A HOUSE FOR JIM AND SYLVIA HEISEY

With Jim and Silvia Heisey the process began quite differently! The most important thing in the area the Heiseys had chosen for their house, was a stand of small, beautiful, old oak trees, just

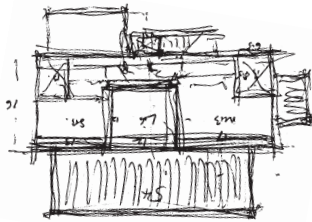
towards the lake from the place where they wanted to put the house. This was in their minds from the beginning. The very first thing they said to me, when I asked:



*The Heisey house*



*Heisey house plan after one-hour telephone discussion and visualization by Jim and Silvia Heisey. The massive porch is the rectangle visible in the lower part of the drawing: the entrance is to the right. Christopher Alexander, 1994.*



*Heisey house, upstairs plan after one-hour telephone discussion and visualization.*

*Q. What is the most important thing in your house?*

was:

*A. The most important thing is the massive porch — a porch which looks towards the lake, mingles with the trees, looks out into those oak trees. We want to spend a lot of time on the porch, looking at the lake and the trees.*

*Q. And is there a living room connected to the porch?*

*A. Yes, it looks at the trees and the lake, through the porch. It is a long room, the room you first come into when you come into the house. It has a long window seat all along the porch side; and the fireplace, on the uphill side, is dark and warm.*

*Q. So, how should I understand the way everything fits together?*

*A. You come off the commons and the entrance is right in front of you. After passing through the entrance, you come to this living room, the long window seat is on the left, the fireplace is*

*on the right. In the far back corner of the living room is the stair, going up to our bedrooms.*

*Q. And where is the kitchen?*

*A. The kitchen is all the way to the back — with a dining seat looking out onto a patch of grass and flowers that lies on that side, towards the light green pine trees.*

*Q. And where is the porch, then, in relation to the living room and the kitchen?*

*A. Well, the kitchen and the living room both look out into the porch. The porch is really massive. It is so hot here in the summer months, we want to spend most of our time on the porch, and living there.*

The sketch drawings on this page, made right after I got off the phone with the Heiseys, show disposition of entrance, living room, kitchen, and the massive porch at the bottom of the drawing. The position I had for the main stair was abandoned soon after. The position of the house entrance was changed, too, long after the beginning of construction.

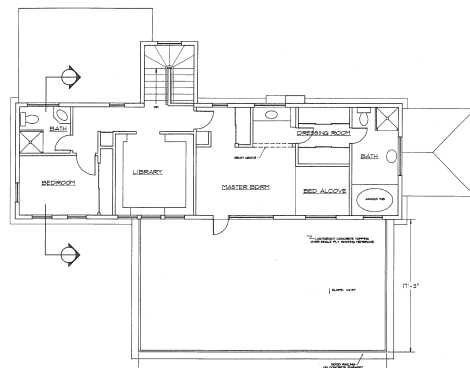
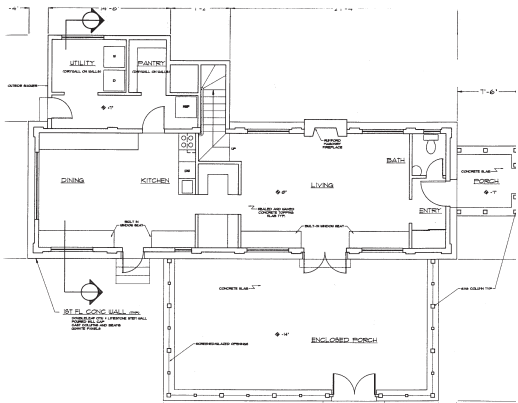
The most extraordinary thing about the Heisey house story was what happened when I went to Texas after the foundations, stone stem walls, and slabs had all been built.

I arrived on site to start the fine-scale tweaking of the house plan. As I came towards the house, from the common land, I saw, instantly, that the place I had put the entrance, in the drawing, was not a good thing at all for the real house. It was not the best way to go into the living room, it made the living room too much like a passage — in short, it was a big problem. What to do? The slabs were in. The lower walls were in. I hardly dared mention it to the Heiseys; I thought there might really be a serious problem, sparks flying, and so on. But I could not leave it alone. The house would have been ruined if I did not mention it. And what if I did mention it and they did not agree? Just as bad, the house would suffer terrible consequences.

I got my courage up; they had arranged to meet me at the site about an hour after I got there. Very delicately I started to broach the subject . . . “I am a little concerned about the entrance . . . have



Living room of the Heisey house, *Back of the Moon*, Austin. Christopher Alexander, Saul Pichardo, Randy Schmidt, 1996.



Heisey house, *Back of the Moon*, Austin, Texas. Christopher Alexander, Saul Pichardo, Randy Schmidt, 1996.



A VISION OF A LIVING WORLD



*Interior of the great porch of the Heisey house*



*Looking from the kitchen through the living room, to the windows of the library at the far end of the house.*



*The upstairs landing between bedrooms.*





*Heisey house, Back of the Moon, Austin, Texas. Christopher Alexander, Saul Pichardo, Randy Schmidt, 1996.*

you noticed any problem. . .” in that tone . . . serious but gentle . . . Almost at once, Sylvia burst in with “Oh yes, we were wondering how you would react when you got here . . . do you think we have the front door in the right place . . .?”

So they had seen the very same problem I had seen, and, as it turned out, we had the same idea about how to solve it, too . . . go in through the great porch . . . but tuck the door into the corner nearest the building, so it would not disturb the beauty and peacefulness of the porch, when people were doing things. It was not a problem.

I mention it in part, because it is SO interesting to realize that when one is looking at these questions from the right perspective, so many questions turn out to have objective answers!

As you see from the house plan that was submitted for the building permit (page 373), the entrance is shown in the old (wrong) position, and was corrected only in the building itself.

And what did we do with the space of the old entrance, which was already there in concrete when we decided to move it? We made it into a library niche. It is a lovely place to sit, looking out at the oak trees in the commons. You can see it in the far distance of the lower left-hand photograph on page 374.



*Back of the Heisey house, showing the copper medallions on the wall and the back of the stone fireplace.*