



1 / WHAT MAKES A GOOD ROOM?



*Position, main centers, fine structure, tranquility: The living room of the Sullivan House.  
Christopher Alexander, David Soffa, 1990–94*

When we are indoors, most of the time we are in a room. The peacefulness, the ordinary comfort you feel, your ability to work, to love, to be well — these are all affected by the calmness and beauty of the room in which you are. You could reasonably say, therefore, that the rooms where we spend our time, the character of these rooms represents the single most important thing about the built environment. The environment affects us, and it is perhaps through our rooms that it does it most.

This can have an astonishing effect on human lives. There are some four thousand million rooms in the world. At present, many of them are ugly. Many are made for money or from ignorance or poverty of spirit. Yet, ideally, each one of these individual rooms could be (and should be) a living center. That

means, there would be a unique relationship of the room to outdoors, to the light, to the doors and movement, and to the smaller spaces inside the room. It would leave each room as a special place, taken seriously, with dignity enough to support a living soul.

Each room has four main stages to its unfolding. The first concerns its position, the second concerns its contents and main centers, the third concerns its fine structure (its smaller centers), the fourth concerns its tranquility. In a room where true unfolding occurs, these four stages will give the room its life.

In this chapter I would ask that the reader first look at the pictures, just browse them and look at them, for the quality they describe. Then come back and read the text after looking at the pictures.





*Position, main centers, fine structure, tranquility: The bay window of the Upham house, Berkeley, California. Christopher Alexander, Randy Schmidt, Gary Black, Carl Lindberg, 1995.*



## 2 / POSITION: HOW LIVING PROCESS MAY BE USED TO SHAPE A ROOM THROUGH ITS POSITION

At an early stage in a building design process, the rooms are first established in *position*: usually, to start with, by name, size, and rough position. At this stage, conceptually, we may say that the rooms

are (usually) rough rectangular volumes of space which have yet to be made “good.”

In theory, one might argue that once position and dimensions have been established,