



*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,





*Outdoor room and terrace of the George house. Christopher Alexander and Randy Schmidt, 1997. The character of this room has been profoundly affected by its position. Arising from the site, a saddle on the hill, and the great trees around,*





*it is a natural point of confluence for movement through the site. The steps, the walls, the kitchen window, the balustrade, the place under the biggest tree, are then derived from the room's position to establish contents and fine structure.*



rooms can be given life later on by choosing the material of walls, windows, door, carpets and furnishing. Then the rooms will be complete. Is that the right approach?

It is not. The centers which bring life to a room are larger features which lie beyond the boundary of the room. Rooms are given their life, first of all, by their position in the flow of people's movement through the building, the light in the room, and their connection with the outer world beyond the windows — those are the three most salient. By the nature of these things, they can only be settled early on, not later — before rooms have their position — before even the building has its overall ground plan fixed.

It is, above all, the light and relation to movement and relation to the whole which give quality and character to a room. So, if the fundamental process is being used, each room must

be chosen to be a strong center in itself — and that will require that it occupies a definite position with respect to movement and a definite kind of light. And that — once applied to all the rooms — has profound effect on the building envelope — its perimeter. These relationships to the world beyond, which extend far from the fabric of the room itself, are settled at the outset and are dominant in determining the success or failure of the room.

Once a room is in position, with its size and location fixed, it is too late to give that room real feeling or true meaning if it does not already have it because of its position in the whole. Thus the life of the important rooms in a building must be decided at the very outset — much earlier than we imagine — very early in the design process when major rooms and building volume and perimeter are being fixed.



### 3 / POSITION: STARTING WITH THE MOST IMPORTANT ROOM

Start with the most important room (often the biggest, but not always). It seems almost silly to state this so naively, but it really is true: Most buildings have a “most important” room. It might be a hall or a living room of a house, or the main room of a museum, or the meeting room of a conference center, the lobby of an office. The ultimate feeling of the building as a whole will depend greatly on the effect and beauty of this main and largest room. It is this which you remember.

In the town hall of Viterbo in Italy, for example, there is a simply magnificent room. All this room has is a beautiful shape, beautiful wall-paintings on all four walls, and a row of wonderfully large windows. But the room is unforgettable. It affects your feeling for the town. Speaking for myself, when I am in that room, I can feel it modifying my sense of the whole town of Viterbo.

In any building, one may say as a general rule that the main room of the building — in size, position, light, volume, character, and structure — *must be unforgettable*. You must not constrain it with other thoughts; you can let everything else go. If you try to make this main room “fit in” or be part of some system, you will almost certainly make it less than it could be. What you have to do is concentrate, concentrate, concentrate on just this *one* room. Make sure that you place it where you want it, that it has the most profound character you can get hold of, and let everything else go to hell — for the moment.

The main room of the Tokyo Forum (page 417) is huge, nearly half the size of a football field. It completely governs the way that building works. Once that room was clear in my mind, like a pinnacle, high on the artificial mountain, the next most important room was the great seven-story high lobby which reaches to it with