

The main hall of the Tokyo International Forum design, an enormous room, whose position defines the organization of entire design. An interior view of the main hall is shown on pages 442–43.

its enormous grand staircase. The sequence of these two rooms defined almost the whole building in its essence.

Something similar can happen equally in the smallest house, even in a tiny apartment. In every building — whether museum or church or cottage — what matters first, and before you

do anything else, is to get one really beautiful room in the place you want it, with beautiful light — a main center which will bring the building to life.

It all hinges on being able to make a main room which is really beautiful. Everything else should come as secondary.



4 / POSITION: THE LIVING ROOM OF THE MEDLOCK HOUSE

Next, perhaps most crucial in trying to understand what is to become of a given building volume — as it has manifested on the site — is to form a vision of the inside of the building, a vision of moving through it — where the open places are, where the stopped, quiet, places are, where it is light, where it is dark, where you stay in, where you go out.

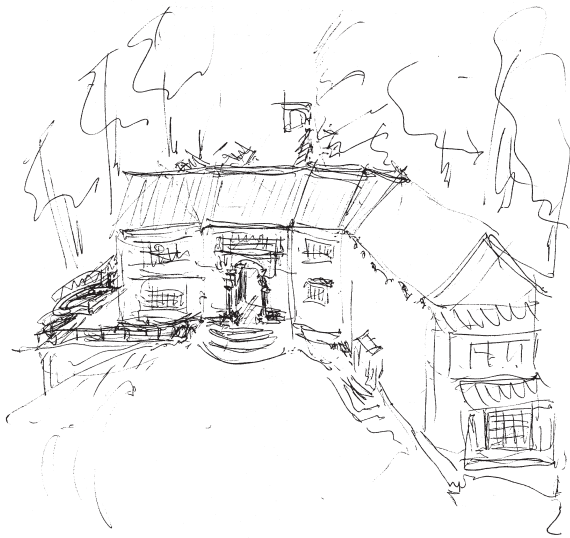
This vision can be had, usually, only by closing your eyes, allowing yourself to walk, in your mind's eye, through the building. To do it effectively, I recommend something like this: Go into your mind's eye pretending to walk through the

building, as if it existed already, but you are seeing it for the first time and are stunned by its beauty. You are genuinely surprised. You find yourself stunned by the beauty of the rooms. And you ask yourself, then, Which features of what I am seeing, are making it so beautiful?

That is what you are trying to find out. Usually, in my experience, when you do it like this, you do see things you had not thought of, or were not aware of. Thus you find out, for the first time, by examining what has autonomously presented itself to your own mind's eye, what it takes to make the rooms as beautiful as you want them to be.



Evening light in the living room of the Medlock-Graham house on Whidbey Island.



My first sketch of the early building volume for the Medlock house. What was later to become the "magnificent room," is at the end—in this sketch, nearest to us. The Medlock house, Whidbey Island, 1986.

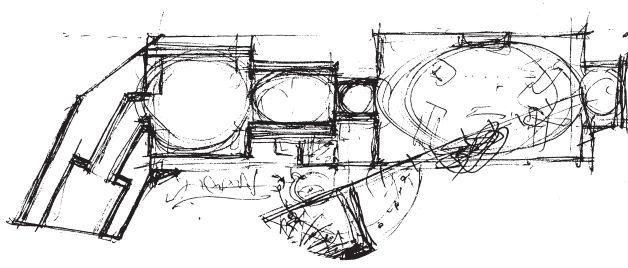
But you must ask yourself these questions as if you had come to the building for the first time: Where do I go? What do I come to? What

do I see next? If you start by making your mind a blank, and then ask yourself these questions, with your eyes closed, you can see what is needed, what is going to happen. It comes to you directly, without effort, as if you know it already.

I give as an example a process of this kind which I used with Ann Medlock and John Graham when we were building a house for them, on Whidbey Island, in Puget Sound, near Seattle. The site is a knoll, looking towards the Olympic Peninsula and its snowy mountains. On the knoll there is a grove in thick deep forest.

At one stage in the process, we were trying to find out what the house was going to be like inside. We had the volume of the house clear by then, its position on the site, the views, the direction from which one approached the building. My first vision of the house was of its position. In order to maintain the feeling of the grove, the house was to be placed slightly *off* the knoll, so that it leaves the knoll itself intact. Thus, it intensifies an existing center instead of destroying it (the existing grove). In addition,

THE CHARACTER OF ROOMS



The sequence of beads — rooms — which John and Ann and I imagined with our eyes shut. Medlock house, Whidbey Island, 1986.

the plan creates a system of centers approaching the house — leading from the car, 100 feet away, along a roofed fence, to the main gate.

Inside the house, the essence of the plan was created by a system of centers, too. I sat one evening drinking wine with Ann and John, and with Gary Black, who was working for me on the project. I asked Ann and John to close their eyes, walk through the building, and find out what they saw. They described a feeling of a long chain of rooms where one saw through the whole

house, from the kitchen, to the dining table, and through to the living room beyond.

As we listened I began to see what they were describing as a sequence of beads, almost like beads on a necklace — each bead a clear and beautiful center, half open to the next.

Then an interesting thing happened. I asked them how many beads were in the chain. They said three: kitchen, dining, and living room, in that order. But when I tried to visualize the chain, looking from one end to the other with



A different time of day in the living room of the Medlock-Graham house.

the end at the beautiful view into the forest, I saw four spaces, not three — four beads, one after the other. As I closed my eyes, and focused on the experience of looking down the chain, it seemed more profound to me when there were four rather than three; it seemed a more serious “chain” leading to a more profound climax at the end. But when I asked them, they said, no, there are really only three rooms.

I did not let go of my contribution to the evolving communal vision. In order to make this sequence valuable *as a structure*, I insisted that a sequence of four beads was more profound than three. They asked me what is the function of the third one — the small one. I told them I did not know and that we might have to *find* a function for it — but that I believed its existence was essential to the wholeness of the structure. That is what we did.

Finally, when we started to work out the plan (this was some days after the evening session when the vision first materialized), it turned out that the third “bead” became the natural place for the stair to come down and for the entrance to the garden porch. In fact, as it turned out, the plan would have been impossible without it, since this small anteroom (with an inlaid compass rose in the floor) finally became absolutely necessary as the meeting point of staircase, porch entrance, dining room and living room. But it was very curious that this space, so essential to the final design, arose for reasons that came from the field of centers itself, not from so-called functional reasoning.



5 / THE MAIN CENTERS OF A ROOM: INTERNAL ELEMENTS WHICH CREATE THE ROOM'S LIFE

Now we come to the internal organization of the room, and the creation of the interior centers which define the room. This is the most subtle aspect of room design. It is extremely hard because, in many cases, the centers which have to be created, and which define the room, are almost invisible.

The key, then, was the vision of the magnificent room which was to form the end of the sequence. The whole house is oriented towards it, the last bead on the necklace (illustrated on page 419, as we later built). The room was finished and painted by the owners. It has the intensity which comes from its minor centers. Ann Medlock and John Graham did it; they were brave enough to put into it what they wanted and what they had always dreamed about, not what would work on the market, or what they could get back from the bank if the mortgage foreclosed.

The design of the room started with its position at the end of a string of beads, at the end of a long path through the house, the tranquil spot, looking into the forest, with windows on three sides. Then a focal point at the end, an alcove, which made a place to sit.

Then the main fireplace, in the middle of the eastern wall, forming the focus of the middle of the room. Then beautifully proportioned windows on the west, wide to make the center in front of the fire its substance, and a seat under these windows, strengthening this center even further. Then lesser windows on the east, which do not interfere with the fire.

Then bookcases at the end where one comes in: you walk through a hole in the bookcases, and the bookcases seal the room.

Finally, the ceiling, a regular grid, with a small flower in the middle of each panel. Not trivial. A system of centers which complete the largest center, calm it, and make it whole.

Here we encounter a special version of the fundamental process. The vast majority of rooms are roughly rectangular. Each one has a door, windows, a floor. Where, then, should it get its life? *The vital centers which govern the life of the room are nearly invisible pieces of space* which exist as centers, yet — usually — have no clear boundaries,