



6 / THE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF MAKING



Laying out houses in Mexicali. It is “making” from the very start; design and construction are integrated. Mexicali, 1976.

It is possible that architects or other professionals could object to what I am saying on the grounds that crafts, and the lowly construction trades, are not on the same “level” as the professional standing architects have. Indeed, a person concerned with such distinctions might misjudge the intellectual necessity of what I am saying about making only because he could not tolerate the social consequences for the profession of architecture. It is therefore necessary to speak briefly about the intellectual weight of craft and about the artificial blue-collar white-collar rift which was maintained by 19th- and 20th-century society.

In Book 1, I have shown many examples of truly great works, buildings, carvings, glass, tile-work. They were made — conceived by their

makers, who then made them with their hands. It is my belief that these works reached levels of significance equal — intellectually — to the intellectual works of artists and philosophers and scientists. In my eyes, the Persian craftsmen who made the great Safavid tiles of the 16th century were doing something at a level of intellectual difficulty and attainment at least as great as the intellectual and spiritual attainment of the work done by scientists or the highest ranking manager-architects of our era.

Yet today, this is rarely acknowledged. In our era, a work of carpentry is not considered to be on the same level as a work of physics. The thing made by the carpenter is, in relative value, considered lower than a minor paper written by a physicist and deposited in a minor journal. So long as one



Left: Special blocks for the Mexicali project, as we manufactured them. The design of our cylindrical blocks allowed round columns to be made, both beautiful in design and easy and cheap to make, thus allowing “making” to go on rather easily. Right: Two of my apprentices designing, and making the entrance arch to the Mexicali housing. Design and construction are more or less inseparable.

maintains this split attitude and this negative attitude towards the “blue-collar” art of making, it is unlikely that architects could willingly change course. Yet this is profoundly wrong-headed.

I remember when I was interviewed, many years ago, for the Chair of Architecture at Cambridge. During my interview, held at an enormous round table in the Senate house chamber in Cambridge, I was asked, “Professor Alexander, if you were given this chair, and were then head of the Cambridge School of Architecture, what would be the first new appointment you would make as head of the school?” After a moment’s thought I said: “A carpenter.” There were expressions of disdain and mild shock around the Senate house table when I said this. I had violated an unspoken ethic which stated implicitly that a carpenter could not be a respectable academic. Only Lord Adrian, a biologist, who was then Vice Chancellor, gave me some support. He said

that he could understand my comment because as he put it, “In biology, too, you must have hands-on knowledge of what happens in the test tube to be a good biologist.” After some discussion, which gradually and reluctantly allowed that appointing a carpenter might not be frivolous, my questioners settled in again and said, in effect: “Alright, Alexander, you have had your fun, now let’s get serious. Let us assume,” they said, “that you have appointed your carpenter. Now, whom would you choose for your *second* appointment?” I answered, truthfully: “A mason.” At that, the interview was over. They felt that I was playing with them, or that I was, at best, an idiot.

I tell this story only to illustrate how the arrogant assumptions of the 20th century mistakenly assumed that the carpenter or mason are in the blue-collar class, while the professor, physicist or whatever are in a higher intellectual sphere, much more elevated.



The joy of building as making. One of my crews in Mexicali taking a break.

The social snobbery inherent in this view is not my point here. I simply believe that it is factually wrong, and that the works of creation made by a carpenter, or by a tile-mason, or a tile-maker, or any other maker or craftsman do have a level of difficulty, intellectually, and a level of attainment — which is potentially as great as

the greatest works of theoretical physics, sometimes perhaps far greater. Thus an intellectual view which establishes making as a foundation has the potential for respectability — artistically and intellectually — which is the equal of the most profound and most elevated sciences and is not something of which we ought to be ashamed.



7 / THE NEAREST TENTH OF AN INCH

In most traditional buildings, the building details have a quality of shape, each one being shaped to fit where it belongs. If it is stone, the stone is cut to fit the cornice or the balustrade. If it is brickwork, bricks are cut, placed, to make whatever variety of wall, opening, ornament, and coping that is needed. If logs, the logs are carved to fit. If plaster, it is shaped according to the situation. If it is tile, it is painted, glazed, cut, and installed to order. If it is built-in furniture,

it is made by hand to fit the niche. If windows, the window panes, sash, glass, glazing bars are made to order, usually by hand. The door is cut, carved, painted. The statues on the Eryctheum by the Acropolis were carved as columns to fit their circumstance, again by hand. In the Mycenaean vase shown on page 605, even the vase has hand-painted lilies on it to fit the vase which was itself thrown, very likely, to fit the situation in the building.