



6 / THE HULLS OF PUBLIC SPACE FOR A COMMUNITY
OF FAMILIES IN TEXAS: UNEXPECTED CENTERS
IN A PIECE OF LAND

In this instance the area covered is small: a few acres, designed to serve five houses, with a lot of brush around the edges. However, the formation of public land, and the hull of public space which is formed there, provides, in microcosm, a view of how this works at every scale.

My colleagues and I had just begun work to build five houses on Lake Travis, in Austin, Texas. Almost within minutes of our first seeing the land, a certain structure became visible. This visible structure was the wholeness of the land—as it was then, in 1992. It included a swath of trees running down towards the water, a communal structure, which defined the heart of the land. It had a highly complex shape. My colleagues and I defined it carefully, observed it, marked it with stakes in the land. The next day, we took the families to the land, and showed it to them, explained that it would be best to rein-

force this latent communal system of centers that lay in the land, and make the individual houses have their relation to it.

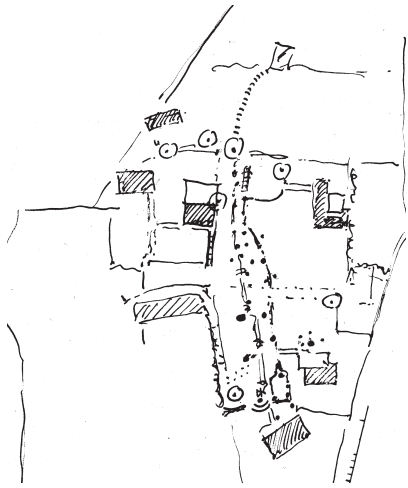
It was a simple idea. Family members were shocked, at first, and described themselves as deeply moved. As we stood under one grove of trees, Linda said that she had seen these trees many times before, but never before noticed that there were these natural centers there: that seeing them completely altered her relation to the land.

Merely defining this structure of land, water and trees, just identifying it and bringing it out into the open, allowed everyone to have a more excited, animated, substantial and feeling-filled relation to the activity of choosing, and placing their houses. Suddenly, instead of merely putting each house in a random arrangement of vegetation on arbitrarily divided pieces of land, the house could be placed in relation to an under-

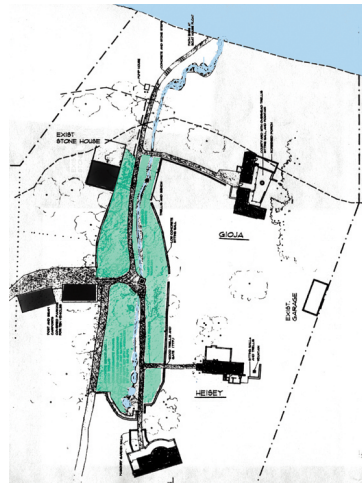


*The site as we first saw it, and the natural landscape which, of itself, defined the structure of the common land.
Back of the Moon, Austin, Texas; Christopher Alexander, Saul Pichardo, Randy Schmidt, 1995.*

THE HULLS OF PUBLIC SPACE



First sketch of the common land, based on the structure as we saw it in the land. Back of the Moon, Austin, Texas; Christopher Alexander, 1992.



The hull of public space, at the core of the Austin community. The lake is at the top. Christopher Alexander, 1995.

stood and meaningful public structure, which made sense, deeply, and which allowed the act of placing each house to make sense, too.

I taught them the basic principle of all architecture: To leave the structure which exists, to help that structure, to reinforce it — and how mak-



The core of public space, as it appeared when finished, with the individual houses all around it. Back of the Moon, Austin, Texas. Christopher Alexander, Saul Picardo, Randy Schmidt, 1995.



View out over Lake Travis. The lower end of the hull of public space in Austin: the fountain, where the lake abuts the common land. Back of the Moon, Austin, Texas; Christopher Alexander, 1996.

ing even tiny changes too casually can be damaging. It was the wholeness of the land, which already existed there, that guided us. The families spoke often about the way that they were moved by their awareness of this whole, that it corresponded to their intuitive knowledge, but that raising it to the level of a conscious principle was an enormous help to them. Apparently they became deeply moved by the desire to protect and extend and enlarge the wholeness of the land, and by the principle that every act must be done to increase the chance of doing this.

The common land we had identified as a coherent shape, of course then became—through our construction—the public hull which, later, allowed these houses to come to life. We shaped it carefully, gave it a BOUNDARY (in the form of a low stone wall running hun-

dreds of feet around this common land); we gave it STRONG CENTERS (in the form of a seat with a fountain at the upper end, and a trellis, fountain, and bench at the lower end overlooking the lake). We gave the heart of it a powerful feeling of THE VOID (by keeping it uncomplicated, uncluttered). We allowed LEVELS OF SCALE to form there, by making the individual old trees, and the entrances to houses, and the top end and lower end, into smaller centers in their own right. We used LOCAL SYMMETRIES in the formation of local areas like the entrance to the hull, and the paths which we formed within it. We allowed ROUGHNESS to dominate, in the way the wall, for instance, follows the ground, not stepping too carefully, but falling naturally with the terrain. The design of this long egg-shaped land was dominated, too, by GRADIENTS in the land.



*Upper end of the hull of public space in Austin. The fountain, where the top house abuts the common land.
Back of the Moon, Austin, Texas; Christopher Alexander, 1996.*