



5 / EMERGENCE OF COMPLEX SPACE AND VOLUME ON A SMALL PIECE OF LAND IN CALIFORNIA

Let us examine another case like this—but smaller—in detail, where we may see the whole pattern and texture of volumes on a site slowly taking shape through a living process. The drawings (on page 160–61) show a house some 80 miles north of San Francisco, the Berryessa house, planned and built about 1986–87.

Here the unfolding, following the fundamental process, went like this: We started by seeing, on the site, the most established latent centers. The main centers, as they existed, were the spaces among the trees. The white oaks, dotted on the slope, made a natural bench, and a natural shelf, where one was inclined most naturally, to sit and gaze at the purple hills in the far distance, across the valley. So, the first step was to establish the main building volume as being

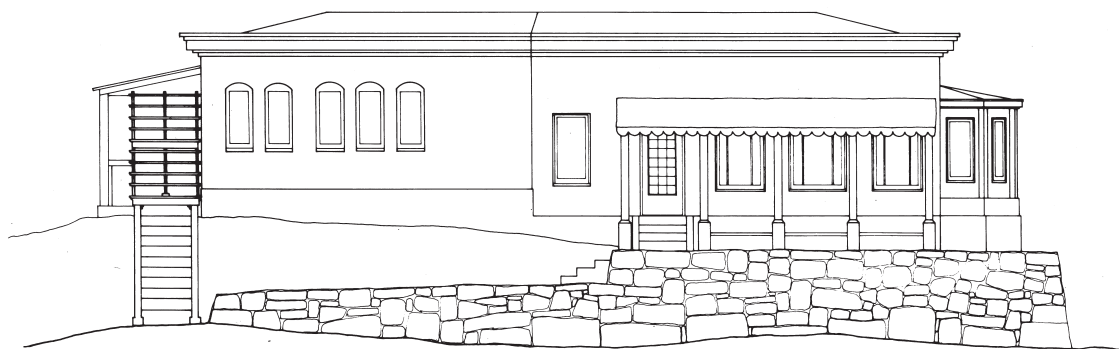
long (stretched across the slope, parallel to contour lines), thin (very narrow down the slope, since the slope was steep), and placed so that it left the wonderful trees intact. We fixed the main volume in this position.

A minor volume, the studio and entrance, came in above it, in another space between oak trees. Two more minor volumes came below it—the master bedroom and the library.

These volumes, connected with exterior and interior stairs running up and down the slope, made the form of the whole. A main terrace with a pergola made still another volume in that part of the open space where the view was most beautiful. The main volume of the house (about 45 feet long, containing living room and kitchen), had a dog-leg in it, because



Berryessa house, 1986–87. The site at Berryessa during construction, when both position and design and slab-forming are going on together. Slabs are being placed, carefully, in such a way as to preserve the structure of the land and of the white oak trees. Christopher Alexander with Artemis Aminou and Gary Black.



West elevation of the Berryessa house, as completed, 1986.



Section through the house as it sits on the slope

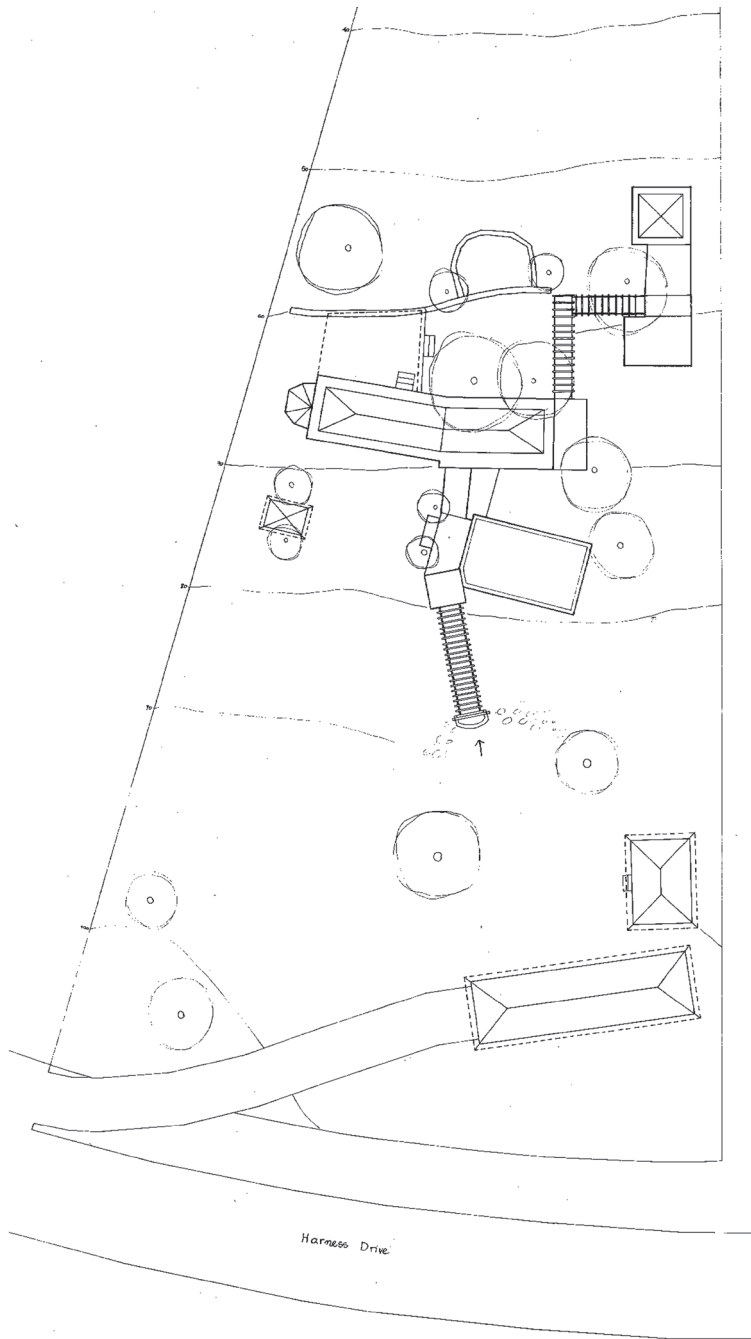
the slope and flat part of the contours made a natural asymmetry and break.

The final system of volumes as built, and the spaces between the volumes defined by the oaks and by the outdoor terraces, together formed the characteristic pattern of volume and space you see in the plan drawing. People called it a small house built like a palace. The result was highly specific to this piece of land, specific to this part of this piece of land, these trees, this view.

The mixture of informality and formality is typical. Projects with living structure will often tend, in some deep fashion, to have an informal-

formal character of volume and space which is morphologically similar to that visible in the plan on page 161.

To establish the final volume positions as accurately as possible, we refined the shape and position of the volumes later, when we excavated the benching, and set the formwork for the foundations. That is visible in the photograph on page 159. The position, volume, space and fine structure induced by the building, add to the character of what was there before, continue it, and strengthen the centers that were there before. The street remains as it was before, but better.



*The plan of the house which followed from the kind of process pictured in the photograph on page 159. This plan was not drawn in detail ahead of time, and became known in its final form only after construction of the slabs and retaining walls had actually been finished. West lies at the top of the drawing. The road (subject of an important argument in the text of Book 2, page 514) lies at the bottom. The land is relatively flat near the road, and then begins to fall off steeply to the west.
Berryessa house, Christopher Alexander and Artemis Anninou, 1987.*



Hand-painted and tiled entrance of the Berryessa house, Christopher Alexander



Entrance of the Berryessa house, looking down on the tiled roof

A VISION OF A LIVING WORLD



Left: stair down to library. Right: the main stair with sunlight shining through diamond-shaped openings in the wall



The small library, lowest point in the lower buildings



The painter's studio, in the upper buildings



The sparse, painter's living room, looking towards south and west