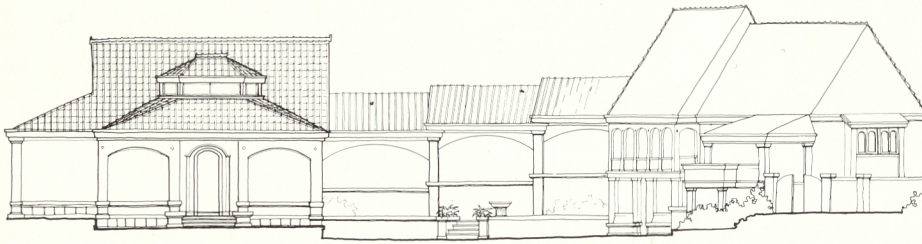


# The Architect Builder

Toward Changing the Conception of What an Architect Is



Barbara Winslow, project from Alexander's 280 Studio, Graduate Architecture

CHRIS ALEXANDER described the purpose of his latest design course at U.C. Berkeley in this way:

- What is the most spiritually powerful building in the world to you?
- Can you duplicate it?
- Why not?

Building on work accomplished by Alexander and his associates at the non-profit Center for Environmental Structure (which includes several building projects and a series of three major books, *The Timeless Way of Building*, *A Pattern Language* and *The Oregon Experiment*), Alexander and his students spent three academic quarters investigating "Color and Ornament in Building: Theory and Design, The Design of a Religious Building."

The projects shown are two results of that investigation. They begin to speak to the questions of what kind of building has the potential for being profound; what kind of design process would generate such a building and its most intricate details; and the special problems of building such a place. One of the answers is spelled out in Alexander's article, "The Architect Builder." Importantly, the projects seem even more impressive in color.

By Christopher Alexander, Professor of Architecture, UC Berkeley

THE core issue, at the heart of architecture, and at the heart of the process of architectural education, is our conception of the architect. Although we often take this conception for granted, like the fish who is the last one to discover water, still, it is our unconscious, accepted, half-formed, certainty about the nature of the architect, which ultimately forms our attitude to making building, and our attitude to training architects.

In our time . . . in this crisis, which is now completely clear; in this period when the buildings that architects have built for the last fifty years, have ravaged the earth, have made it an almost horrible place; when lay people have finally given up the pretense that they "like" modern architecture; when instead, almost everyone knows that these awful crystalline, solid, lumplike boxes, these giant packing crates that cover our cities, are no good for us, are inhuman, sterile, ugly, and devastating for our social and emotional lives . . . most architects have still not fully understood the fact that it is ultimately our conception of the architect which is responsible for this.

It is true that many people are asking themselves what to do; that new methods, new theories, new kinds of building form, are being tried. Schools of architecture have almost all tried sociology, "urban design," communication theory, systems theory, system building, computer analysis, psychology, super graphics, Marxism, user participation . . . and all of these techniques are being taught, and tried at Berkeley. But, when you get right down to it, they just do not make much difference. The preamble to the building process changes. But the building process itself remains the same.

Noticing that these many techniques have seemed to fail, another group have ex-

pressed their concern by going back to the most conservative form of professionalism. Assuming that these techniques which seek to modify the architects' work do not help, they argue that we must abandon them, and go back to the most solid form of professionalism which we can, revitalize the attitude to architecture which was current perhaps twenty or thirty years ago. So there is a second attitude at Berkeley which seeks to re-entrench the professional architect as the center of all things.

But this fails too. The failure of the first group of techniques does not lie in the fact that they are different from professional architecture. It lies in the fact that they do not change the fundamentals of the profession at all. All of these techniques have always been taught, and understood, as ones which can happily be grafted onto the work of the architect as we have always known him; and this is what makes them fail. Because—so long as we do not fundamentally, radically, alter the way an architect works, his place in society, his conception of himself—it is impossible to change the horror of the landscape, because this horror is a direct outgrowth of the conception of the architect.

What changes need to be made in the conception of the architect to correct these problems?

Since the art of making buildings, and cities, is an art, then, like any art, it must be understood as a process of making things. The most fundamental problem with our present conception of the architect is that he is trained to tell other people to make things. He gives instruction. But he himself does not make anything.

In short, an architect who merely makes a drawing from which another man is going to make a building cannot be an artist, because he cannot put his feeling into the thing he

tells the other person how to make. Only a builder can put feeling into building. And therefore—to be an architect who makes a thing with feeling—it is necessary to be a builder, not an architect.

This requires a radical transformation in the architect, because instead of being the middle man between client and contractor (as he is today), he must become the contractor himself . . . who himself takes the burden and the delight of the decisions which involve the actual art of making the building.

The recent decision to allow architects to be their own developers, though it sounds similar, is not the same at all. The architect developer is merely another middle man between the client and the actual builder, except that he takes profit and not only professional fees.

For the architect to be an artist, builder, contractor, it means that his relation to the material of this art—to the brick, stone, concrete, wood, tile, and plaster, and paint—is the same as that of the cabinet maker to a piece of furniture, or of the painter to his paint. He makes it, he shapes, he is physically the maker of the building.

And this does indeed require a vast change in our conception of the architect.

It requires a change in the legal structure of the profession. It requires a complete change in our daily work. It requires that we get up at a different time of day. It requires that we are on site all the time, not in an office. It brings joy with it, because it is in the actual process of building that the art of architecture develops, not in the fiddling around on bits of paper with a pencil.

Of course, the profession we call architecture cannot be changed overnight to bring about this state. People's professional lives, work, salaries, legal positions, are too tightly defined to make that possible. But it is possible to change it, by changing what we teach. Those who have been taught this new conception will change the profession, as they enter it.

This requires an immense change in what we teach people who are hoping to be architects. At present, our program at the University of California has almost no time devoted to the actual practice of construction. It is all theory and paper. In order to change this, we need to understand the making of a building as a craft. In a school where this craft was taught and practiced, we would see physical columns, capitals, arches, seats, windows, being built, instead of drawings pinned on walls.

I believe that the great changes which have been made in the techniques of the profession—the user design, the kinds of analysis which can be used to understand human needs, the use of pattern languages to design better buildings, the innovation in new materials and new processes of fabrication—all these are wonderful, and essential.

But they will become full-blooded, able to remake our towns and buildings, able to regenerate the life-blood of society—only when the most fundamental conception of the architect, as a glorified draftsman, as a legal mediator between client and builder, is finally renounced, as a mistaken experiment of the last hundred years. It must be replaced by a new version of the most ancient form of architect—the *master builder*. Our schools must accept this fundamental act of *making* as the most fundamental, central item, in our conception of the architect. □