

# Concrete

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## Guatemala II

GUATEMALA II: FIELD WORK AND STUDY OF LOW-COST, SELF-HELP HOUSING IN GUATEMALA CITY SEPTEMBER, 1977- AUGUST, 1978

by José Gutierrez and Pat Pinkston

In the architecture and planning professions, there exists a profound gap between the problems of human settlement and traditional professional training. Architects and planners are being called upon to produce resettlement schemes for populations displaced by natural disaster or economic development. These demands for design and organizational skills have sharpened our realization that skills acquired through traditional architectural education and in the course of typical practical experience in the United States are more appropriate to economically developed and industrially advanced countries. To better deal with settlement problems crucial to developing countries, we need different skills, acquired through alternative methods. We need to learn how to identify the different cultural, social, and technological mechanisms which regulate community development in developing countries, and un-learn some of the traditional approaches that develop solutions for inherently different problems.

Such innovative training is currently lacking in the College of Environmental Design curriculum. However, some people have become aware of the need for a commitment on the part of both students and faculty to the creation of a program devoted to direct student participation within a community, so that students can acquire a body of skills applicable to community development in both developing countries and more advanced countries such as the United States. In the past, courses and workshops have been given to introduce students to such issues as the ordering process of indigenous cultures, the use of adobe in construction, related low-cost and "appropriate" technologies, building organizations, familiarization with the global

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## Chickens Without Heads

by Howard Davis

"Chickens Without Heads" was written in response to Part 1 of a two part review of *A Pattern Language* which appeared in last week's issue. The second part of the review by Jean-Pierre Protzen will be printed in the next issue.

Chris Alexander, co-author of *A Pattern Language*, met last Monday with a group of students to express his desire to deal with the ideas at issue in some form of dialogue that could eventually evolve into a public debate. In addition, he has promised to write an article in the near future for publication in "Concrete."

As the instructor in Arch. 100, dealing with the theory of pattern languages, I would like to respond to Mr. Protzen's review in *Concrete* of *A Pattern Language*. I am inclined to do this not because I think the book can't stand on its own two feet -- it can, as many people in and mostly outside Berkeley are discovering -- but rather because I like *Concrete*, think it fills a real need in the College, and would like to use it to get some discussion of substance underway around here.

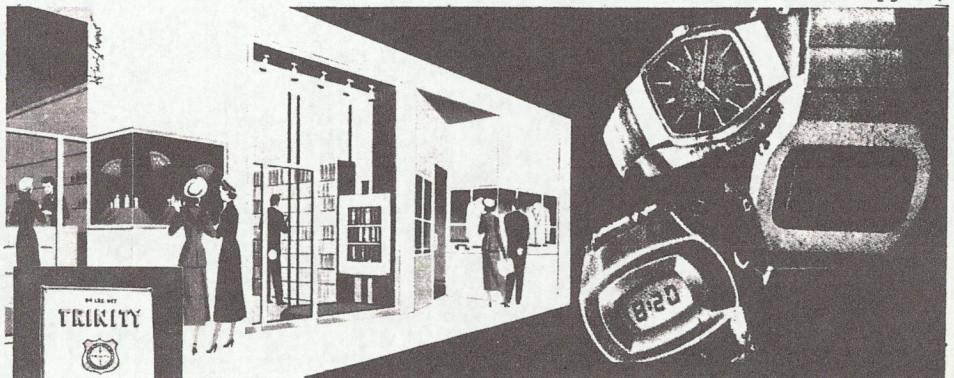
In the first paragraph ("Shocked by what they see as the brutality and fragmentation of our built environment..."), Mr. Protzen does not say, does not offer an opinion, as to whether or not he agrees that our built environment is brutal and fragmented. The sentence is very carefully worded, to imply 1) that the authors are perhaps wrong in that observation, and 2) that Mr. Protzen

does not agree -- but to allow him to make these two implications without taking a stand on either one of them. Does he have an opinion on this important matter? If he does in fact believe that the environment is brutal and fragmented, then he should come out and say so, to provide a better basis for understanding the rest of his review. If he does not believe that the environment is brutal and fragmented, then there is little point in continuing the review at all, since there is no problem, and therefore no purpose to the book.

Mr. Protzen next tries to refute the claim that "patterns allow you to solve problems according to your preferences." His claim is that the patterns, if applied, "do indeed impose very specific and detailed solutions, and they leave no significant choices to the users of the patterns."

But what lesson is to be learned from the empirical evidence he uses to support this claim -- his Genoese friend whose common space defied all the rules? I have a similar favorite example: acquaintances in Bologna (lots of lessons to be learned in Italy) who live in a dark, 250 sq. ft. apartment. With shutters closed 24 hours a day, they work in the bedroom, sleep in the living room, and their kitchen table is a long counter up against the wall, so that when they have 4 guests, there are 6 people seated in a line, facing the wall. They are sane people, who couldn't give a hoot about BED ALCOVES, LIGHT ON TWO SIDES, EATING ATMOSPHERE, any other pattern, or the whole idea of

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Chicken from pg. 1

the pattern language.

What can be learned from this? In fact, there are several errors in the use of examples like those above:

1. The most serious error is not recognizing the difference between widely applicable general rules, and isolated instances which do not follow these rules, but which are successful anyway. There are sometimes newspaper accounts of chickens who have their heads cut off but manage to live for several days nonetheless; these wonderful and mysterious chickens are indeed alive, but do not suggest to me that it's not a good idea for a chicken to have a head.

A similar thing is true for the pattern COMMON AREA AT THE HEART which Mr. Protzen complains about. A large part of the buildings built today suffer precisely because they do not solve the problem which this pattern solves; yet he chooses not to discuss the general, explicable solution, which happens to be the most straightforward and common way of solving the problem, but chooses the exception instead, the live chicken without a head. Of course there are architects who can do wonderful and mysterious things which solve the problems at hand, but which are outside the rules. It might be possible to find one. It is also possible to win a \$300,000 jackpot at Las Vegas.

In logical terms, these isolated instances bring up the question of whether the patterns are necessary and sufficient, or only sufficient, to solve the problems at hand. Of course they are not always necessary. Mr. Protzen's review is called "THE POVERTY OF THE PATTERN LANGUAGE." The Pattern Language, the title of a book which to my knowledge has never been published, implies that there is only one pattern language which is complete and healthy and which people might want to use. A Pattern Language, the book in question, along with The Timeless Way of Building, make it abundantly clear that pattern languages are not fixed in content, not absolute, in the same way that Italian is different from English, or that Moroccan towns are different from Norwegian towns.

If the common space in Genoa is as successful as Mr. Protzen says it is, then there are three possibilities: 1) It actually does contain invariants which underly A Pattern Language 2) It was designed with other rules known to its architect, either explicitly or implicitly. In this case he has the ability to make successful spaces, consistently, and uses a good pattern language of his own. 3) It was a fluke, and not worth discussing, since it can teach us nothing. If another architect followed Mr. Protzen's description exactly, would he be able to reproduce the success of that space?

2. The second error is in the idea

that users of a pattern language use it blindly, without reason, and therefore find it an imposition. The essence of a pattern is not to create an "atmosphere", as Mr. Protzen puts it, which one can choose as among cans of soup at the market. The essence of a pattern is given by Mr. Protzen himself "...each of which describes a recurrent environmental problem and the solution to this problem." If you recognize the need for LIGHT ON TWO SIDES (which, by the way, helps most people to be oriented in a room, and not confused), then you put it in; if you don't recognize the need, then you don't. The fact that houses in a town look alike is not the result of some imposed totalitarian order, but rather that most people recognize the same basic needs in themselves, with respect to their environments. Does Mr. Protzen think that every building should be radically different from every other? Most people would be thoroughly repulsed by the idea. 3. This leads to the third error: Mr. Protzen's interpretation of the phrase "really want." He asks if it "is the catch by which you will be reprimanded for not seriously wanting to solve the problem whenever you propose a solution that is radically different..." Nobody is reprimanding anybody else. I frankly don't care whether or not Mr. Protzen recognizes that people can know themselves, and act on that knowledge alone, instead of being the pawns in a giant environmental chess game, which I'm not interested in playing.

His argument then collapses. In saying that "the pattern language" implies that in a healthy society there is room only for differences that do not matter, but not for dissent," he is wrong on two counts: 1) the differences matter; and 2) there is room for dissent. What do

his phrases "significant choices"; "essentially different"; "radically different" mean? They take on a certain set of images in the mind of someone who imagines that people's natural tendency is to be different for the sake of being different and superficial "dissent". But those images have nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with whether or not people feel more comfortable in a room with windows than one without.

Finally, three minor details of information for Mr. Protzen: 1) Most people who find the pattern language useful do not like gingerbread doll-houses, and have never even eaten one. The image which Mr. Protzen conjures up is purely literary, and not necessarily the result of applying the pattern COMMON AREA AT THE HEART. An example: the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol Building satisfies the pattern well, but is hardly "gingerbread." 2) The pattern language has been equally successful, perhaps more so, in non-white, non "bourgeois" situations, as in "white and bourgeois" ones. Nice try though. 3) And contrary to Mr. Protzen's informed misjudgement, as a "'pattern language' educated person" (as he would classify me) I can and do perceive non-trivial and non-incident differences "between two tract houses by a particular developer." Some of the original Levitt houses, built on Long Island in 1954, have the patterns THE FLOW THROUGH ROOMS, THE FIRE, SMALL PANES OF GLASS, STAIRCASE IS A STAGE, CAR CONNECTION, FARMHOUSE KITCHEN. Later Levitt houses, built on Long Island in 1968, have none of these patterns.

I pose this question to Mr. Protzen -to people trying to shape the environment, which is more constructive and helpful -- A Pattern Language, or your review of it?

## It's a Blitz

Today, Tuesday November 8, Room 112 will be opened at 2:00 pm for cleaning. All interested people please take note of this plea for help. During the summer Bruce Miller, Maddy Oden and other staff members identified and labeled all items belonging to the college. It is time to remove these boxes and paraphernalia from Room 112. Your assistance today can be beneficial to the worthy cause of creating a useful space for students, staff and faculty alike.

On today's agenda:

- Move map and filing cabinets to the Rare Book Room
- Take down the dimensions of the Blue Print Machine for latter use
- Help Marc Treib send the Japanese Exhibits home

- Call the cops and tell them we still have their brochures from the '68 police convention
- Move the wood and miscellaneous parts to the shop
- Discuss the placement and use of the plaster reliefs
- Discard all boxes belonging to IURD
- Distribute all the chairs throughout the building
- Send the spare parts of the environmental simulator to the Richmond storage depot
- Sweep out the space.

Mobilize for a Worthy cause! See you there,  
Richard Worthy

P.S. On Thursday, November 10 at 12:30pm, there will be a meeting to develop further strategies for completing this space for occupancy. Please come with opinions and ideas.