

The Linz Cafe

The things we have come to know as 'Design' represent an absurd and ridiculous – even immoral – preoccupation with a world of pretence and show, which almost no one believes, truly and profoundly – but which continues year after year, as designers, architects, artists, and interior designers go on trying to impress one another and themselves with their new 'conceptions'.

There is a very simple substance to what a building is. For most of human history, people have understood this substance and have made their buildings versions of it. But we ourselves have deliberately chosen to turn our backs on this substance and even have the frightful arrogance to try to justify this attitude with various transparently false arguments which amount to the claim that 'the modern age demands something new' and other ostentatious drivel of this kind.

However, the forms of traditional architecture are not merely a product of their technology, which can now be called obsolete. It is true that they do reflect, to some degree, the forms which previous technologies permitted. But beyond that, the forms of traditional societies – which are so much alike, in spite of radically different technologies, different building materials, and different climates and societies – embody, above all, the deepest substance of what life is, both in functional terms and also in more fundamental terms, which I shall try to explain.

The functional aspects, the patterns which do not vary from society to society, were described several years ago, by my colleagues and me in *A Pattern Language*, and most recently in my other book, *The Timeless Way of Building*. These patterns are the ones which make an ordinary place worth living in. When a place contains these patterns, it is usually comfortable and pleasant, and has simple feeling in it and simple happiness just because it does what space requires. It works. But these traditional forms also come from a much deeper source, which has to do with the geometry of space itself. I am now writing a further book, in which this aspect of space will be clarified, and my exhibition of 'Zeitlose Art der Dinge' also provides examples.

Two essential points are entailed by this idea. First, there is the insight that certain forms of spatial organisation are so closely

allied to our own nature that any object (building, door, window, plate, weaving, tile, carving) which contains this spatial structure seems to be a mirror of the self. That is, we look at it, and it presents itself to us as a picture of all that is in us: the best, the worst, the most ridiculous, the most wonderful, the happiest, the saddest and the most hilarious. Very few things possess this quality. But, I have discovered recently, those which do are the *same* for everyone. They are the same for people with different values; they are even the same for people from entirely different cultures.

So, this mirror of the self somehow presents us with an objective standard of spatial organisation. And, of course, it almost goes without saying that the things of our time, the things which we have pretended to like in the last 50 years (and indeed many of the things in this exhibition) belong to a fantasy world which has absolutely no connection at all with this deepest reality.

But, second, and much more remarkable, it turns out that this unified structure of space which we can recognise as reflections, almost of our own selves, goes still deeper.

It turns out, in fact, that the spatial organisation described here goes to the very kernel of the universe, touching aspects of space which have not been touched, even in fundamental physics, for 300 years, when Descartes, Newton and Leibniz created the first versions of alienated space and brought us to the stage where we readily accept the idea that space and value are separate.

In a nutshell, objectively, some kinds of space are simply more profound, contain more densely packed relationships, than others. These forms are more important in nature; they usually occur in naturally created things (rivers, stars, trees, animals) and they really do have deeper relations inside the fabric of the space than others do.

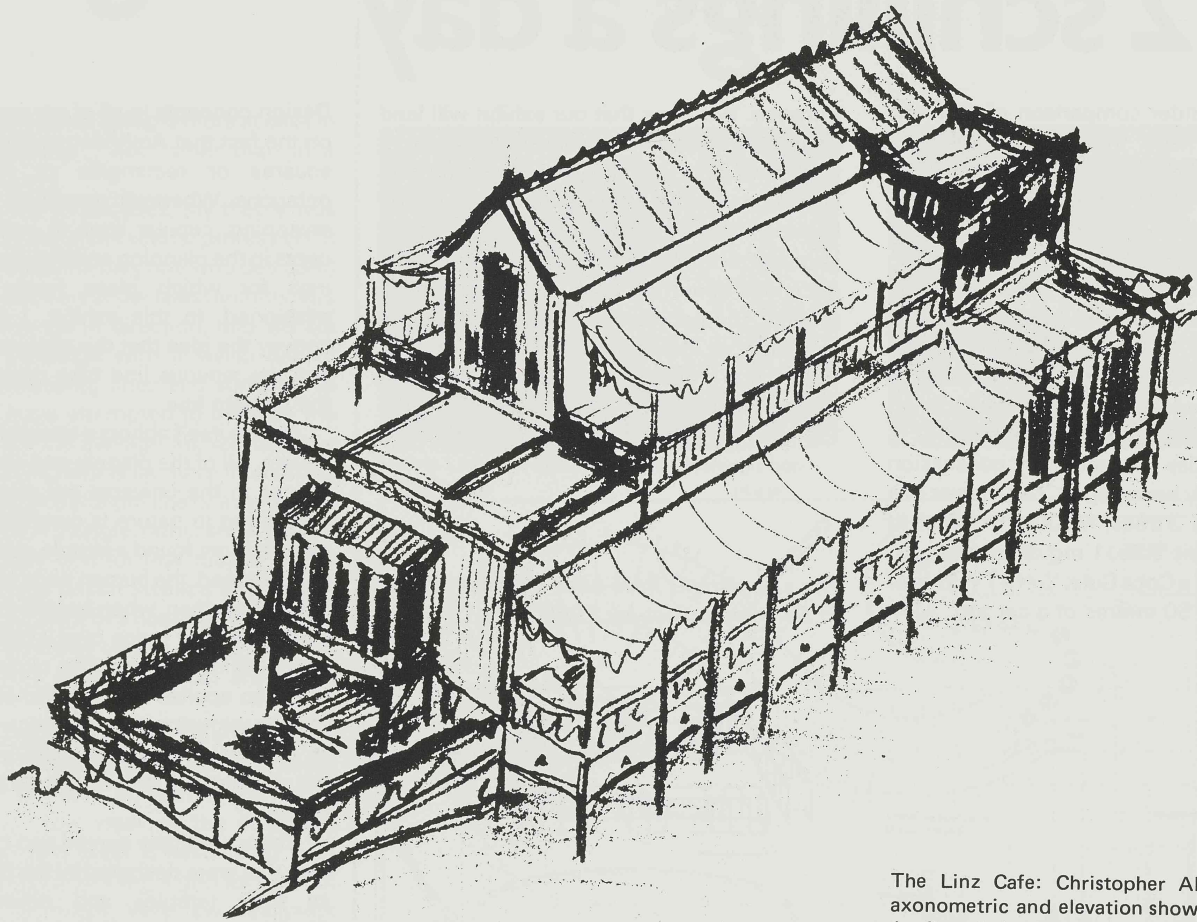
And these are the very same kinds of space which also appeal to the most fundamental part of us, which seem like mirrors of the self, which touch us by making us feel that there is feeling in them. Finally, they seem to connect us with the universe or even with what lies behind the universe, the substance out of which the universe is made or the great Face behind the substance.

Even though my building is only the

slightest step in the direction along this path, at least it does go in *this* direction, and not in some other insane direction. Whether it is successful or not, however good or bad it is, it does at least touch us, go towards the ordinary, everyday deep feelings in us, in which we are most in touch with one another, and in which we are basically ourselves.

In order to make this building, I have been childish, of course. Perhaps, if you want to, you can sneer at my childishness, from the perspective of any one of 50 clever, advanced, far-out theories of design or space. And yet you probably know, deep down, that this simple thing and what it represents – much more what it represents, than what it is – is something heart-felt, which is everlasting: and that the strange contraptions and devices which are being offered today in the name of 'good design' are only conceits and fantasies, like the invisible clothes of the naked Emperor: only seeming to be visible, because of the fear that everyone has of everyone else's opinion. You probably also know that no one, no sane person really likes these ridiculous things, but only pretends to like them, goes on taking part and playing the game, because it is so frightening to think one might be rejected, cast out from the fraternity of 'Art' and 'Design'. But it is time now for the little child to stand up in the crowd, to point his finger and to say to all this cleverness, 'Look, the Emperor has no clothes!', and finally to stop this nonsense.

Christopher Alexander is Professor of Architecture at the University of California, and Director of the Centre for Environmental Structure in Berkeley. He is also a practising architect and builder, and the author of several books including 'Notes on the Synthesis of Form.'



The Linz Cafe: Christopher Alexander's sketch axonometric and elevation showing the pavilion's 1st floor link with the main exhibition building.

