

"Imagine the greatest possible beauty and harmony in the world — the most beautiful place that you have ever seen or dreamt of. You have the power to create it, at this very moment, just as you are."

— Christopher Alexander
The Timeless Way of Building

Zen and the Art of Building Design

By Martin Filler

Architect Christopher Alexander is little-known outside his field, but has achieved a certain fame — notoriety, even — within it. How? By castigating architects for straying from the inherently correct way of building (which we all know instinctively but suppress), and by working to return his profession to the one true way. In the meantime, he's built quite a reputation — and quite a following.

"Make no little plans," the architect Daniel Burnham once told his colleagues. Christopher Alexander, a 48-year-old Berkeley-based architect little known outside his profession but rapidly becoming a cult figure within it, has taken him at his word. According to the philosophy Alexander has been formulating over the past twenty years (and set forth in books that have become counterculture classics), architecture diverged from its true course around the time of Michelangelo, when architects began to replace masons and carpenters as the designers of buildings and, as Alexander sees it, introduced "ego" to architecture. Christopher Alexander sees himself as the person who

will set his profession once again on the straight path. Even more interestingly, there are significant numbers of architects, especially young ones, who believe him.

The essence of Alexander's architectural thinking is this: There is a certain correct way of making buildings that we all know instinctively and carry deep within ourselves as part of our biological makeup; that within recent history we have willfully ignored that native knowledge; and that we must drop the illusory notions of design that lately have prevailed and return to what he calls the first principles of architectural truth as they have been understood through the ages. Furthermore, he believes that we are all capable of doing it; if Huey Long proclaimed "Every Man a King," then Christopher Alexander proposes "Every Man an Architect."

Christopher Alexander is by no means the only architect in recent years who has criticized modern architecture for what some see as its lack of warmth and human appeal. Over two decades ago, Robert Venturi began to call for the use of popular imagery and evocative historical forms and ornament, while Charles Moore began to advocate a more physically and psychically responsive way of making buildings for fulfilling living. (To a certain extent Alexander's designs recall some of Venturi's and Moore's early work, though his are considerably less sophisticated.) Although Alexander sees those architects' efforts as honest attempts to correct the very problems he himself finds with conventional modern architecture, he faults them and their colleagues for not going far enough: He sees their work as merely cosmetic because, in his opinion, it doesn't challenge the underlying structures and strictures of architecture and society as they now exist.

Needless to say, Alexander's castigation of both the architectural establishment and the architectural avant-garde places him in an unusual position on the American architectural scene. His outspoken demand for reform strikes terror into the hearts of many in the architectural establishment: They fear it could mean an end to architectural big business as usual. But he is equally disturbing to many who pursue architecture primarily as an art form: They find implicit in his ideas the end of style and the end of progressive archi-

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Christopher Alexander

tectural thought. And that, in brief, is just what Christopher Alexander has in mind. He wants nothing less than a total return to old ways, the kind of clean sweep of existing conditions that only the great junctures of history — war, natural disaster, or economic upheaval — have caused. And what's more, he wants it now.

Just as Alexander shuns conventional architectural thinking, so does his way of life lack the stylistic trappings — the silver BMWs, the sleek Armani suits, the Movado Museum watches, the hefty Mont Blanc pens — to which many of his fellow architects are addicted. He seems congenitally ruffled, and his nondescript clothes were obviously not selected with the finicky eye for detail that is apparent even among first-year architecture students. He looks more like a slightly out-of-it computer programmer than an internationally known architect and author. He lives in a 1920s stucco house perched in the Berkeley Hills; its cramped basement serves as the offices of the Center for Environmental Structure, the independent combination think tank and architectural/contracting firm he founded in 1967. He shares the living quarters above it with Pamela Patrick, a pretty, Oregon-born concert soprano and voice teacher, with whom he has lived for the past seven years. Two years ago they became the parents of a daughter, Lilly, whom Alexander dotes on with the kind of rapt fervor that seems reserved for middle-aged first-time fathers of little girls.

The interiors of their house are warm and agreeably messy, though the clutter is barely noticeable once one begins to focus on Alexander's spectacular collection of antique Turkish rugs, carpet fragments, and textiles, the finest examples of which date from the seventeenth century and

earlier. According to Dennis R. Dodds, an editor of the scholarly rug journal *Hali*, Alexander is recognized as one of a handful of the world's most knowledgeable collectors in his specialty, the folk carpets and fabrics made away from the predominant court weaving centers of the Ottoman Empire. Alexander's choice is an obvious parallel to his rejection of high-style architecture in favor of vernacular traditions. (One of the few concessions he has made to the technological gimmickry that fascinates most architects is a highly sophisticated electronic burglar alarm system.)

A man of deep cultivation, he has a large library of classical recordings that he frequently listens to, especially the music of J.S. Bach, which likewise seems appropriate because of Alexander's dual interest in mathematics and the spiritual content of art. (He is a lapsed Roman Catholic who stopped attending church "years ago when

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things started becoming too secularized.") There is an even larger library of well-read books on philosophy, psychology, sociology, and especially math and the sciences, the study of which has not only provided Alexander with ideas, but with role models as well.

A central component of the myth of genius is that of the great man persecuted for putting forth ideas that are unpopular or deemed potentially dangerous. Alexander will unblinkingly compare himself in that respect to Galileo and Copernicus. And, while one half-suspects Alexander of actively courting the disdain of his opponents to make himself appear thereby more dangerous to the status quo, there is no doubt that he is a genuinely disliked man, especially among those who have had professional contact with him outside the realm of the Center for Environmental Structure. He is variously described as

abrasive, abusive, aggressive, angry, and arrogant, to cover only some of the a's alone.

At the same time, Alexander is conceded by many who cite those very faults to be, withal, absolutely worth the frequent difficulties they've experienced in dealing with him. In private, he is capable of displaying considerable personal charm, which is as much at odds with his combative public persona as his spontaneous conversation — lucid, incisive, and generously reflective — is different from his sometimes nebulous prose. Alexander's explanation for all the personal animosity he's engendered is his lack of time to suffer fools gladly. Propped up on a bookcase in his living room is a small printed card with this admonition by the founder of the Shakers, Mother Ann Lee: "Do all your work as if you had a thousand years to live, and as you would if you must die tomorrow."

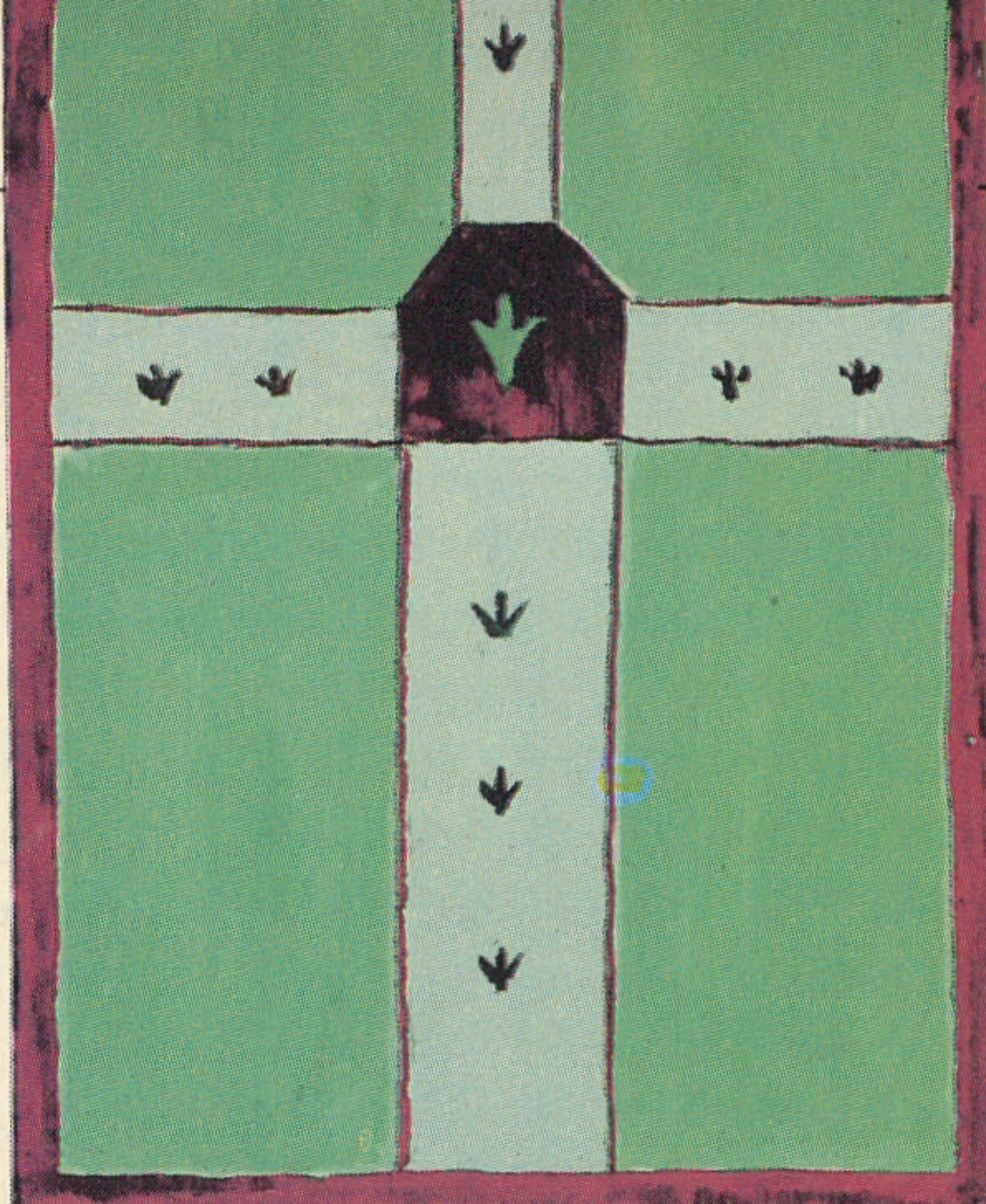
Christopher Alexander was born in Vienna in 1936, the son of classical archaeologists who fled with him to England at the time of Hitler's *Anschluss* two years later. (His mother had been born a Jew but converted to her husband's Roman Catholic faith at the time of their marriage.) With the help of a friend, the eminent classicist Sir Gilbert Murray, they settled in Oxford, where they taught German and French in secondary school. "Both of them, especially my father, had an abiding love of buildings," Alexander recalls. "I grew up visiting every country church we were ever near in England, and the same was true when we went abroad." The Alexanders pinned high hopes on their only child, whom they enrolled in Oundle, the academically prestigious, science-oriented preparatory school. From the age of eight he wanted to become a chemist, an ambition he kept until he was seventeen, when an exhibition of architectural photographs inspired him on the spot to become an architect instead. Alexander read maths at Trinity College, Cambridge, and entered the architecture school at the university afterward. It was a tremendous let down. To him, the Cambridge architecture program was "crazy . . . incredible and absurd," and he raced through the three-year sequence in two. He did graduate work in mathematics at Harvard, where he also developed an interest in linguistics that stimulated his desire to develop a new architectural "language." (As he wrote years later in his book *The Timeless Way of Building*, "In our time the languages have broken down . . . and it is therefore virtually impossible for anybody, in our time, to make a building live.")

After Harvard, Alexander undertook an experiment in applied social architecture that prefigured his later interest in housing

for the poor. He worked for a year in India, where he went to study firsthand the interrelation between people in a pre-industrial society and their indigenous architecture. There he constructed his first building — a small school — but declined a subsequent offer to design an entire village because he felt inadequate, in the face of unfamiliar traditions and unknown cultural biases, to create a place that could work as well as one the people might build for themselves. Alexander's sobering Indian experience made him more determined than ever to devise a method by which people whose post-industrial cultures no longer had a living vernacular tradition could establish one again.

While in India, Alexander was offered a teaching position at the architecture school at the University of California at Berkeley, which he accepted in 1963. Riding on the critical success of his first book, *Community and Privacy* (written with the architect Serge Chermayeff and published in 1963), and *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*, which came out the following year, Alexander became the rising star of Berkeley. But the school did not give him the chance he wanted to put his emerging theories into practice, so, in 1967, armed with several grants, he founded the Center for Environmental Structure, his real base of operations ever since, although he retains his faculty position at Berkeley. He gathered a small but exceptionally committed band of young architects who, like himself, found the profession as it was largely constituted to be both intellectually and spiritually bankrupt and were seeking a better new way. Alexander's obvious dedication and restless brilliance made him a natural, charismatic leader.

His message has been a very heady one indeed for the large (perhaps too large) contingent of young architects recently churned out by architecture schools without very promising prospects for finding fulfilling employment. Alexander's approach is given particular immediacy now not only because of the current uncertain state of architectural direction, but also because of the emergence of a new generation of architects educated in the late Sixties and early Seventies who are providing the fertile ground in which Alexander's teachings can take root. Although "making a good living" has once again become the prime ambition for many young Americans, most young architects are still concerned above all with doing meaningful work. Indeed, architects have often been attracted to their profession precisely because of its heroic scope and its real promise (ever diminished in modern life) of one's being able to change the



Hand-painted tiles designed by Christopher Alexander.

world for the better through one's career.

So many architects have had to settle for emotional half-loaves, as it were, for a variety of economic, social, and political reasons, that Alexander's philosophy strikes the suggestible as the stuff of which legends are made. It offers hope that in an increasingly complex world and an equally specialized profession, one can still be intimately involved with something more deeply satisfying than detailing fire stairs for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Clearly, the idea is catching on, although slowly and on a modest scale. Today, in addition to the Center for Environmental Structure, there are groups in Eugene, Oregon; Hannover, West Germany; Bern, Switzerland; Japan; and Brazil who deem themselves disciples of Alexander, though typically none are part of an establishment institution.

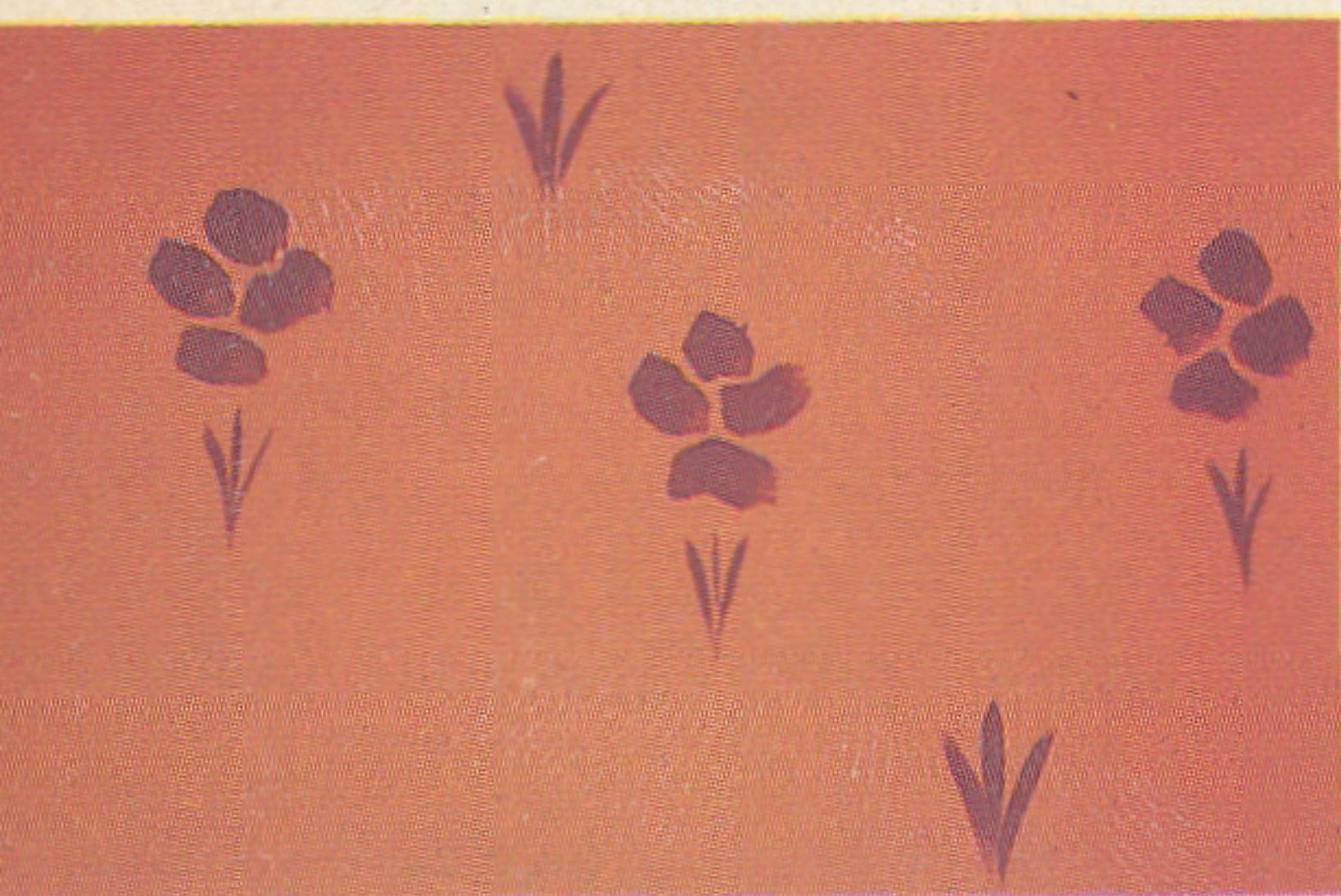
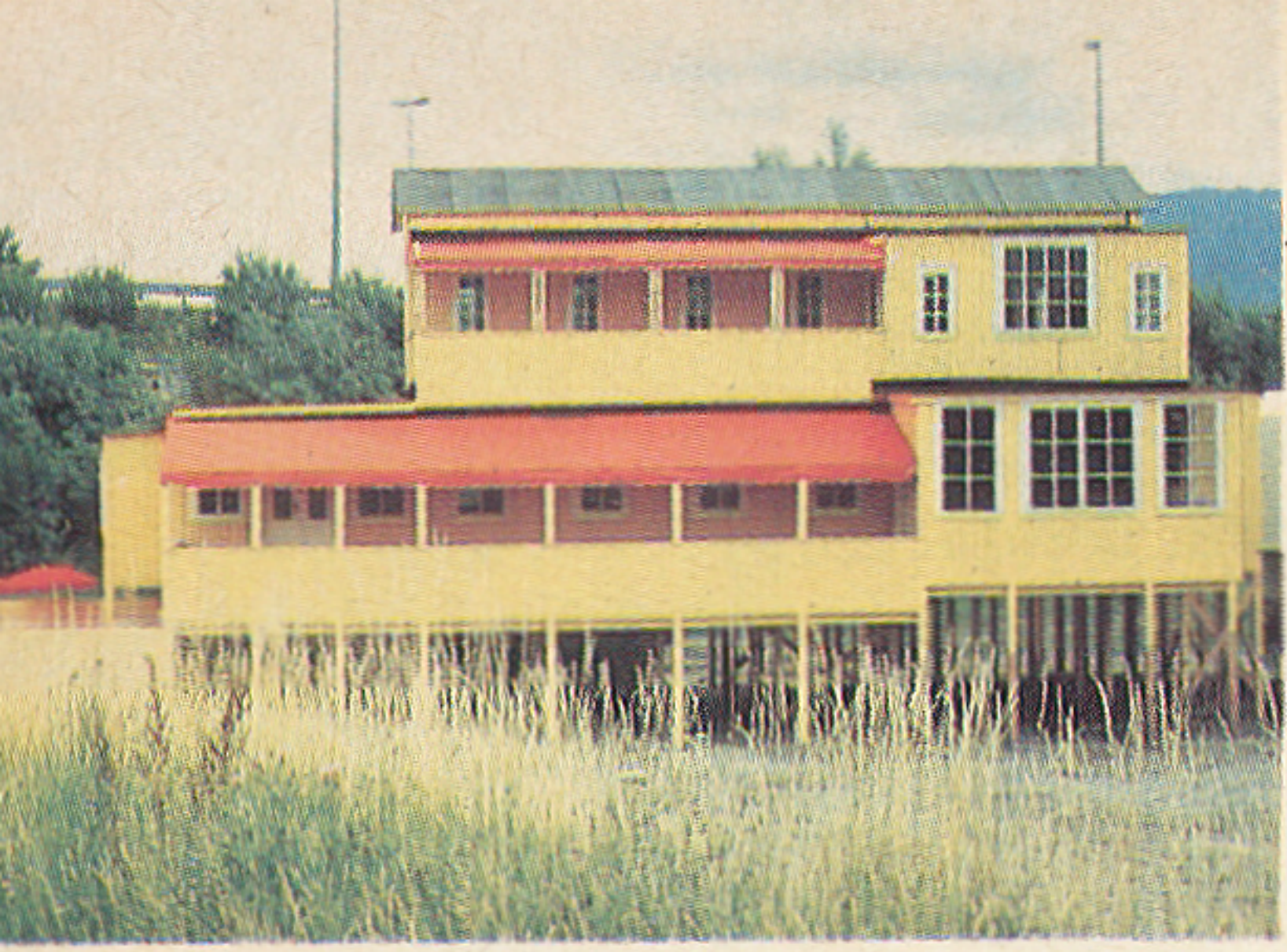
Not surprisingly, Alexander's architectural tastes are no less antiestablishment. But if there is little modern — or even post-Renaissance — architecture that he likes, there is little vernacular building that he does not greatly admire. That "architecture without architects" has provided most of the stylistic models for his own designs: The medieval colleges of English

universities, the hill towns of Italy, the mud huts of Central Africa, the farm buildings and rural temples of Japan, and the colonial towns of New England are for him the truest expressions of how man should build — simply, unselfconsciously, and lastingly.

But is it possible for our architecture to become vernacular again solely through an act of will? And how does one account for the fact that many vernacular styles were actually imitations of high-style conventions? The early modern Viennese architect Adolf Loos once described how vernacular architecture is built. "The peasant makes the roof. What kind of roof? A beautiful one or an ugly one? He doesn't know. It's just *the roof*." Alexander refuses to accept that idea. "That's the old 'Noble Savage' thing," he says. "I personally believed it for many years, but I'm becoming more and more doubtful about it. I'm beginning to think that even the most primitive man, let alone an Austrian peasant farmer, is actually quite conscious when he builds. Insofar as there is unself-consciousness involved, reaching that state after having passed through a dull, highly conscious, verbal state is exactly what Zen is about. The fact that it's difficult for an intelligent, thinking person to reach back into that state has been recognized for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. And though it is difficult, I think it clearly can be done."

Then there are others who maintain that the vernacular still exists, in the form of tract houses dolled up by do-it-yourself, or customized mobile homes, or by the idiosyncratic expressions of "the wood-butcher's art." Theorists of vernacular design, such as J.B. Jackson, maintain that the vernacular has never been an immutable, timeless entity, but rather has always been constantly changing, not just from generation to generation, but virtually from person to person. This Alexander also rejects, holding that tract houses or trailers are not emanations of a true populism, but rather the consumable products supplied by a cynical commercial system that tells people what they "want."

The core of Alexander's philosophy is contained in a continuing series of books that have been published by Oxford University Press since the mid-1970s. The fifth and most recent installment is *The Production of Houses*, to be issued next year. The others include *A Pattern Language* (1977), a comprehensive handbook dealing with the basic components of the architectural design vocabulary and construction process; *The Oregon Experiment* (1975) and *The Linz Café* (1981), which, like *The Production of Houses*, are essentially case studies of Alexander's theories



Top: Exterior of the Linz Café, Linz, Austria. Bottom: Hand-painted wall pattern for the Linz Café.

put into practice; and his major polemical statement, *The Timeless Way of Building* (1979). Of additional topical interest is the publication last spring by Oriel Press of the first full-length study of his life and work, *Christopher Alexander: The Search for a New Paradigm in Architecture*, an authorized account written with Alexander's cooperation by Stephen Grabow of the University of Kansas School of Architecture and Urban Design.

Alexander's central philosophical text, *A Timeless Way of Building*, is written in a self-consciously spiritual tone that makes the reader feel he has stumbled across a kind of architectural scripture, except that the Bible or Bhagavad-Gita are a great deal easier to understand. For example, Alexander writes of "the quality without a name" as being the basic principle that every building ought to embody, explaining, "There is a central quality which is the root criterion of life and spirit in a man, a town, a building, or a wilderness. This quality is objective and precise, but it cannot be named." Though this strikes some readers as profound, others find it too reminiscent of the "You-know-what-I-mean, you-know?" rap sessions of the late Sixties. Alexander himself is aware of the aura of vagueness and portentousness that surrounds *A Timeless Way*, and wryly admits, "I've been called the Kahlil Gibran of architecture."

A considerably more lucid and practical book is *A Pattern Language*. The basic unit of Christopher Alexander's architectural vocabulary is the "pattern," which he defines as "at the same time a thing, which happens in the world, and the rule that tells us how to create that thing, and when we must create it. It is both a process and a thing; both a description of a thing which is

alive, and a description of the process which will generate the thing." Among the 253 patterns enumerated in *A Pattern Language* are the use of natural, native materials; windows with small panes; access to natural light on two sides of every room; cascading roofs; a four-story height limit; building on the least, rather than on the most, attractive part of a site to preserve the best land; a maximum of nine percent of all land devoted to parking space; private ownership of housing and the elimination of all forms of rental; and sleeping toward the east, which Alexander recommends as a means of being awakened naturally by the sun in harmony with natural body rhythms.

Although the very specific prescriptions in *A Pattern Language* might seem to induce buildings that look monotonously similar, there hasn't yet emerged a readily identifiable style of architecture asso-

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ciated with the Center for Environmental Structure. The Linz Café, for example, which the group built as part of an international architecture exhibition in that Austrian city in 1980, has the air of the old American West. It is rough-hewn, but is totally without the Disneyesque nostalgia of a building purposely designed to look like a saloon in Dodge City. Quite different in feeling is the Lighty house in Lake Berryessa, California, which is vaguely reminiscent of some turn-of-the-century architecture in the Bay Area, but might also be convincingly passed off as the home of a prosperous farmer in Nepal. The façade of a small apartment building planned for Sapporo, Japan, brings to mind both the traditional Japanese modular panel system and the multiple-small-pane window walls of Elizabethan architecture. And an Israeli *moshav* settlement is being built in the Galilee in a style that could be at

home in virtually any other Mediterranean country.

Alexander's definition of "timeless" design is not synonymous with the meaning it has come to have during the modern period — the pristine, unadorned simplicity common to classical Japanese architecture and laboratory glassware, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona chair, and a Sung Dynasty vase. Alexander's "timelessness" has a pronounced element of "old-timey" to it, and because of that it will appeal to a wide audience, even those who heretofore have been quite satisfied with the sentimental products of the ersatz-nostalgia industry that is flourishing with particular vigor around San Francisco Bay. What Alexander cannot admit is that there are still many people — even in a period when modern architecture is being widely denounced as inhuman and sterile — who actually *like* it, people for whom the image of order, efficiency, and even cleanliness that it projects is preferable to the homely, country-and-western look of many of Alexander's designs. Furthermore, Alexander does not view his philosophy of design as one option out of many — "you build your way and I'll build mine" — but as the only way, and, while he regards the diversity of today's architectural milieu as chaos, there are others who see it as a natural and healthy expression of a society in which differing and often conflicting values can coexist.

But, lest one suppose that Alexander supports a free, "do-your-own-thing" attitude, it should be remembered that some of the most innovative minds in architecture have also been among the most dogmatic and controlling. Frank Lloyd Wright was a prime example, and Alexander is no exception. Thus it comes as no surprise to learn that he repudiates the presently fashionable belief in a pluralistic interpretation of architecture, which tolerates any number of diverse design philosophies with the judgmental neutrality of Freudian analysis. He insists on the rightness of his way with the moral certitude of a Martin Luther, the lack of sentiment of a Jean-Paul Marat, the colossal ego of a Richard Wagner, and the guilelessness of a Sidhartha.

Alexander, for his part, sees nothing strange in his single-minded view. "In most periods of history before the twentieth century, the idea of what was good was something that was shared," he claims. "Even now, in science, there's a worldwide fraternity of people who are all approximately seeing things in the same way, with truths that can be shared and checked. I think that pluralism is just a rationalization for the chaotic state of affairs today, and since nobody knows

what to do, one creates a fantasy that whatever you do is fine. But the value that I'm interested in deciphering is something that every person can confirm for himself when he comes in contact with it, which is why I've got the awful gall to think I'm actually right and there is really only one way."

Although Alexander can sound quite reasonable in making that assertion, there is at the heart of his philosophy the dark conviction that modern architecture is a great fraud that has been perpetrated by society as a whole. Alexander is certain that, deep down, people don't really like it, and those who claim they do are either lying or have been culturally brainwashed. He reports with an almost inquisitorial seriousness those epiphanal moments when people have confessed to him that they had been led to heresy, but have recanted their errors and are now saved by admitting that his way is the true one. "Merely for proposing the things I have, I've been the object of an amazing amount of hostility," he says. "It's very obvious that what I'm doing threatens to pull down the whole edifice, and people will try to put me down or claim that I'm an idiot because of it. But I also get letters from people all the time who say, 'Thank you for writing these things. I always knew this was true, but I've never dared to say it, because people might think I'm funny.'"

Actually, invocation of the emperor's-new-clothes analogy has been part of the standard repertoire of antimodernism for some time now, and, although he is a much more elegant thinker than Tom Wolfe, there is in the end little difference between Alexander's draconian view of twentieth-century culture and Wolfe's know-nothing conspiracy theories of modern art as expressed in *The Painted Word* and *From Bauhaus to Our House*. In any case, it is amusing to see the splendid kitchen of the early modern Villa Savoye illustrated (but unidentified) in *A Pattern Language* even though it was designed by that great impostor Le Corbusier.

Now that his architectural philosophy has been set down, Alexander is primarily interested in proving the validity of his thought through building. One of the most convincing demonstrations yet is his low-cost housing in Mexicali, Mexico, the story of which is the basis for *The Production of Houses*. When some architects speak of participatory design, they mean little more than interviewing the prospective occupants of a building about their color preferences for kitchen appliances. But the Mexicali experiment was the real thing, in which future residents not only helped design, but also helped build, their homes. Living and working closely with

the inhabitants of the 30-unit development, Alexander and the members of his center were in charge of the actual construction. Not only does Alexander maintain that an architect must actively participate in the building of his structures in order for them to be truly successful, but he also holds that the design process must take place mainly at the construction site, rather than as an intellectual exercise done at the drawing board and frozen into conceptual form before the first spade of earth is even turned.

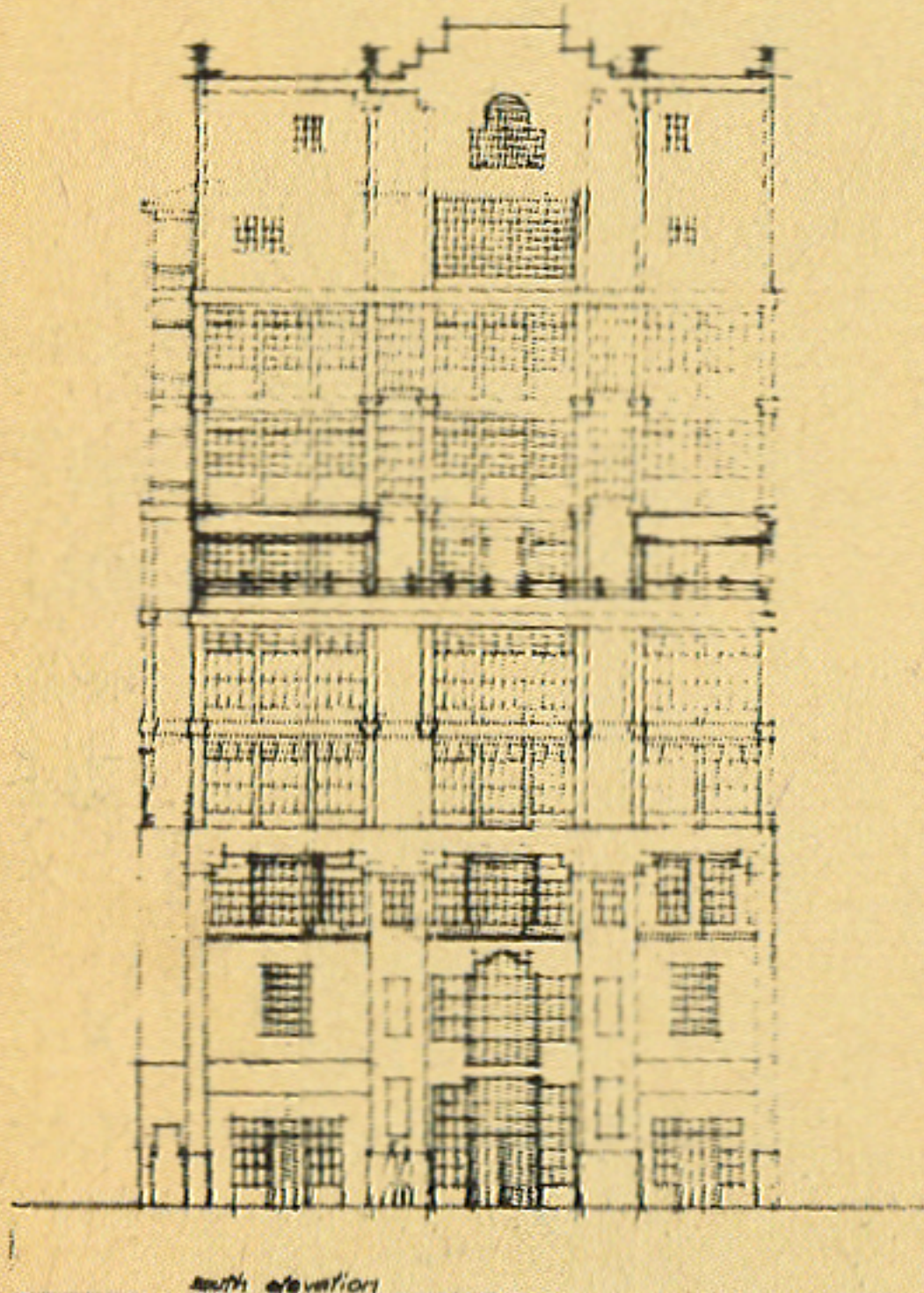
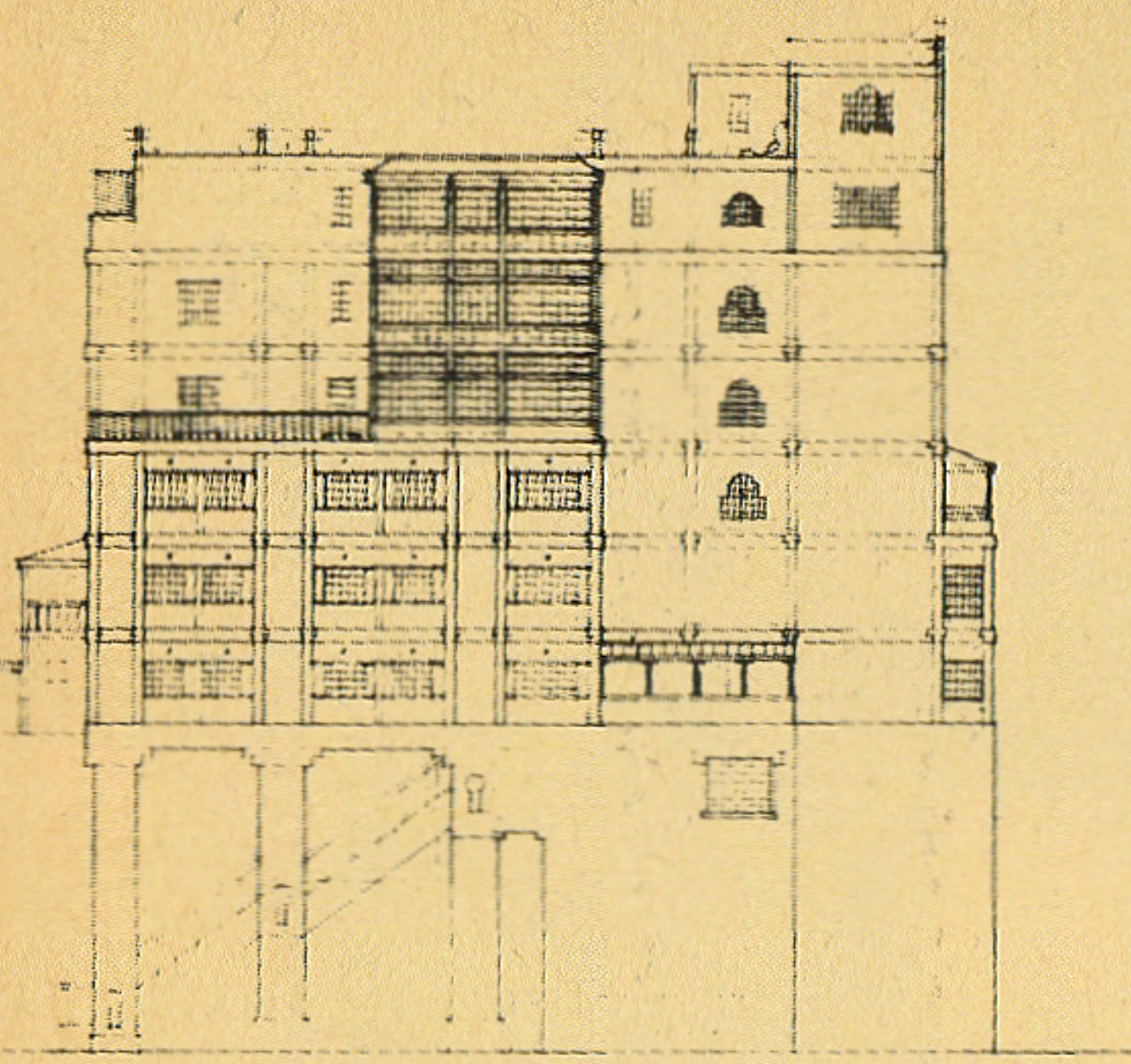
"To make a building right," he insists, "you cannot actually predict how it has to be made at the time you are making the drawings. People tell you that they can visualize buildings, and for a long time architects have made a thing out of how they knew how to do it, though other people didn't. But I don't believe that anyone

can do it. If you're talking about the exact height of a ceiling or the precise placement of a column, those things can't be decided until you're standing there with a three-dimensional thing in your hand, propping it up and looking at it."

Another of Alexander's convictions is that an architect must be his own contractor. "My experience is that only by inventing construction methods can you be able to rearrange priorities and the budget to put the money where it counts." For the Mexicali project (where each house cost only \$3,500), those new strategies included a roof vaulting system made from basketlike arches that were woven by the townspeople, put into place, and then sprayed with Gunite, a shot concrete most often used for swimming pools. Easily poured concrete columns were likewise devised, and virtually the whole commu-



The interior of the Linz Café, Linz, Austria, typifies the "homely, country-and-western look of Alexander's designs."



Drawings (side view and façade) of a small apartment building in Sapporo, Japan.

nity helped make the adobe bricks that were the main cladding material. The results at Mexicali are extremely simple in appearance, but have a special quality rarely present in housing for the poor of the Third World, or even in this country, for that matter. Instead of importing forms from an alien culture, Alexander and his colleagues helped the inhabitants to originate something in concert with their own way of life. Instead of the role of clients, he gave the people of Mexicali the status of creators. These houses have been made with real care, not for finishes or detailing, and certainly not for a profit motive, but rather concern for how good these rooms will be to live in and how they will nurture a sense of individuality, family, and community.

But, since the demand for adequate housing for the world's disadvantaged is so severe, can such small-scale efforts make much of an impact? Though the high-rise urban housing projects of industrialized nations are no answer, either, how can single-story villages fill the need? Alexander and his center are now working on a housing scheme for 3,000 houses (100 times the number at Mexicali) to be built in Venezuela, and his recent design for a ten-story apartment building in Japan is a departure from the four-story limit he has advocated. Alexander feels that this jump in scale "doesn't require any basic change

in attitude, but it does require enormously sophisticated administration and human organization. I want to find out how far the things I've been talking about can be accomplished in that context. I don't have the attitude of just turning away from that problem. It would be too ivory-tower to say, 'Look, that just isn't the right way to do a building.' "

For some architects, Alexander's ideas have a disturbing incompleteness. The architect Michael Graves acknowledges the truth of much of what Alexander proposes, but "more crucial to me is that Alexander's is an *internal* language of architecture, but architecture also has an *external* language of the symbolism that we as a culture have invented, an invented language — what we call 'art' — which I find him leaving out. I wish he reminded us of both."

Replies Alexander, "I quite strongly disagree with the implication that a form-language has to be invented. He is almost equating art with arbitrary art. My attempt has been to find that form-language in reality again, to pull that geometry out of the real substance of things."

The ultimate test that the buildings of Christopher Alexander will have to face is how successfully they fulfill the subtle concerns he has made the central focus of his architecture. It remains to be seen whether his timeless way will pass the test of time. And, while his buildings might well seem more life-giving than his sometimes rigid philosophy, the distinct possibility remains that Alexander might have a more lasting influence as a theorist than as a designer. But, as passionately as he loves the life of the mind, Alexander feels that his ideas must be borne out in practice.

"If I were remembered in the future or understood even now mainly as a theorist, it would be almost a joke. And it would make me immensely sad, because it is so far from the truth and because my heart is so much in the actual task of building. My main reason for working and writing is *to build*. If it were not for these positive results, all the rest would be meaningless.

"My life is oriented entirely towards making these kinds of things. Now I am doing it, and that is the part which makes me feel most alive. That, I believe, is what I may be most remembered for in the end — provided there are now enough years left to show enough examples of the kinds of things which must be built. All the books I've written, and am writing, are perhaps really no more than personal footnotes which I write down to help myself build something worthwhile, in order finally to reach the state where I can make buildings as beautiful, as full of feeling, as they need to be." □

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THE ZEN OF BUILDING ● WHAT'S "LITE"? ● INTRODUCING FANTASY RESTAURANTS

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TWA

Street Scenes



WINDOW SHOPPING IN PARIS

*Along elegant boulevards and narrow side streets,
crowded avenues and nameless alleyways
off the beaten path, the shop windows of Paris
are works of art.*

Georges Carpentier puts the finishing touches on a salmon mousse at Fauchon.