

The Alexander Method

THE PRODUCTION OF HOUSES. *By Christopher Alexander, with Howard Davis, Julio Martinez and Don Corner. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press. £25.*

The officials in the sharp suits were not pleased. A Mexican regional government had commissioned Christopher Alexander to build houses for low-income families. The officials apparently thought the *gringo* professor and his team were 'worldwide experts in the construction of . . . rapidly erected modular buildings'; instead they got an irregular huddle of wobbly hand-built homes based on Alexander's *Pattern Language*. They had been promised 30 houses in a year; they got five. The government withdrew its support, and Alexander wrote this fascinating book to show how the principles followed in the Mexican experiment should be 'the backbone of every housing process in the world'.

Central is the notion, as it is in Alexander's earliest writings and of course Modernist theory generally, that 'unconscious' vernacular design is superior to architect's architecture because the vernacular design process is 'biological', adaptive and non-hierarchical, and its product, the house, is thus 'an organic system, like a living creature'. It follows that architectural decisions should be made democratically, by the users, not imposed by what Alexander calls the 'beautifully dressed' professionals.

'A new kind of person' must arise, combining and replacing the presently distinct roles of architect and builder, each working on no more than 20 houses annually and dispensing with T-squares and working drawings. For every three or four architect-builders is a neighbourhood building yard, a sort of community centre, including 'a small room where people can read the [Pattern Language], study it and discuss it'. The architect-builder is a humble facilitator: future neighbours talk plot lines through on site and register their joint decision with stakes in the ground; each family decides, sometimes as the house goes up, its plan and details; drawings, if made at all, are 'in the dust' or (surprise!) 'on the back of an envelope'. The act of building becomes a joyous ritual, 'a circus, a party, a wonderful time'.

The ingredients of this recipe, derived from many sources from Kelmscott to Woodstock, are familiar. But never have they been mixed into so rich a theoretical pudding, nor the pudding been put so bravely to the practical proof. The pictures show the Alexander team and their five client families laughing on site, embracing, fondling kittens, and swigging Coke together. But it was clearly no party every day: there was many 'a time of pain'. Under that sun the work must have been physically a sweat. And socially the work was even harder. Each family had to be involved in the design, taught to construct, and generally cajoled into the spirit.

Reading between the lines, Nanny was often disappointed by her charges. One client, 'being a policeman . . . didn't want to get his hands dirty'; another family, a mother with 10 children, 'quite helpful' at first, soon skived off the site. As soon as one's back was turned, they got it wrong, failing for instance to design outdoor spaces properly 'because we did not supervise (them) carefully enough while this pattern was being done' and not taking 'the trouble to make (the master bedroom) a "realm" in the beautiful sense which the pattern describes.'

Some clients stubbornly refused to appreciate what was good for them: 'it took some work to make José realize that it made sense to place his entrance where he finally put it.' Indeed, for the porch, a key and meaning-laden word in the *Pattern Language*, the families had so little respect that 'if the choice between a porch and bedroom is left to the family, they will almost all choose a bedroom. To make sure the houses had porches, in spite of the families' misunderstanding on this point, we included the cost of the porch as an overhead so that the family got it anyway, whether they liked it or not'. Democracy, it seems, is more than mere vote-counting.

Aesthetically, as the photographs show, the results were mixed, 'still far from the limpid simplicity of traditional houses, which was our aim.' Of all the buildings it was those comprising the building yard, built not by the families but by the Alexander team, 'with our own deeper understanding of the pattern language, (which) were the most beautiful'; the yard's lavatory cubicle is chosen to illustrate the book's cover. Officials had depressed morale with their venomous lies and the student apprentices, like students everywhere no doubt, got the wrong end of the stick and 'failed to understand the deeper social revisions involved' in the Alexander prescription.

Still, when customer opinion was finally canvassed, satisfaction was high. Excluding labour, the houses, each some 65 m², had cost just \$3500 at 1976 prices. 'José told me in words of almost inexplicable warmth and fervour that this was the most wonderful process he had ever experienced . . . the families themselves are happy—some of them almost deliriously happy—about their houses.' They even got to love their porches. PHILIP TABOR

Holy places here again?

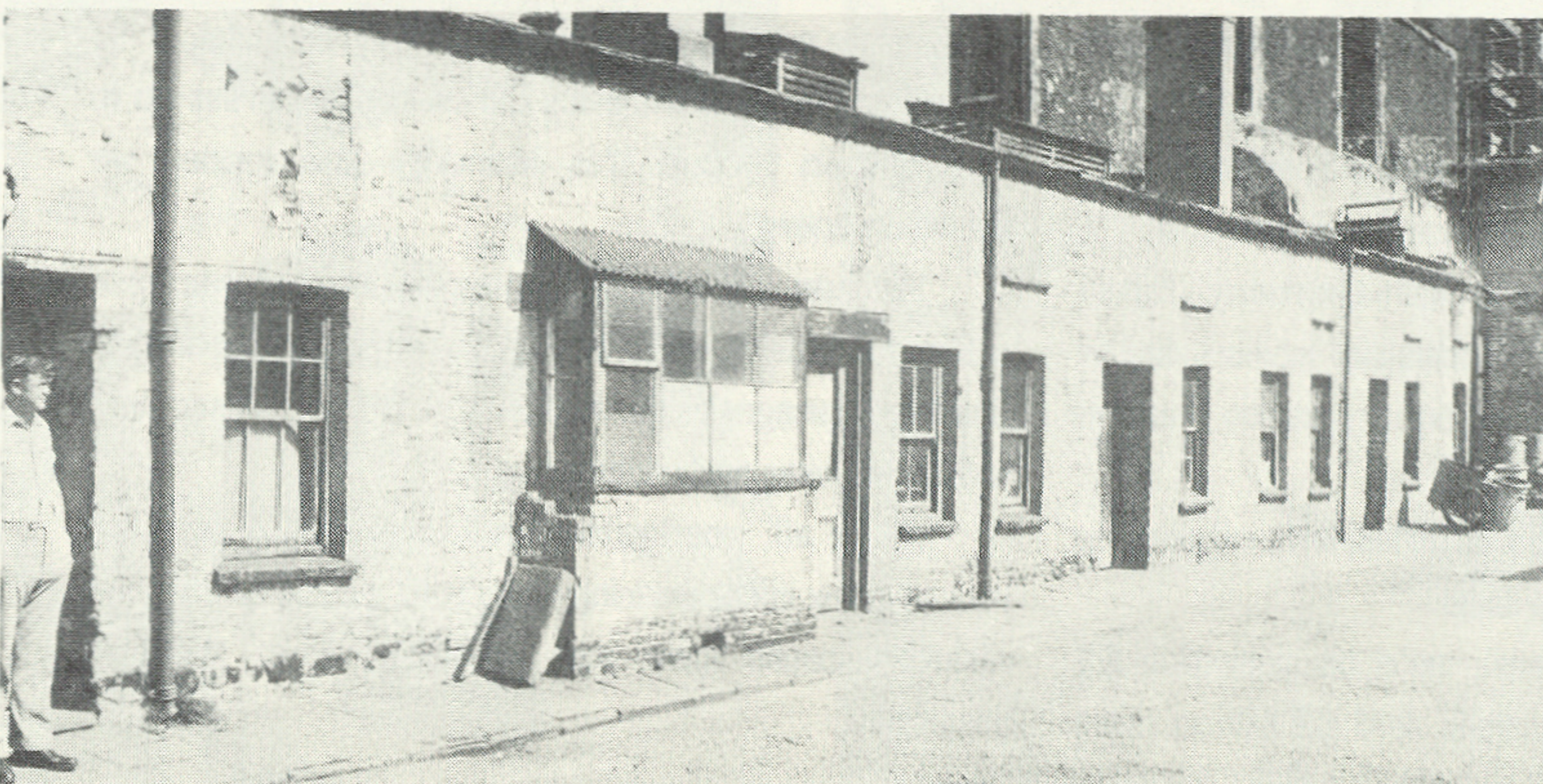
A THEOLOGY OF CHURCH DESIGN. *By Patrick Brock. Ecclesiastical Architects and Surveyors Association. 1985. £2.*

PLANNING FOR LITURGY: LITURGICAL AND PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR THE RE-ORDERING OF CHURCHES. *By Stephen and Cuthbert Johnson. Saint Michael's Abbey Press. 1983. £3.75.*

Church building, its theory and theology, are with us once more. The 1960s were the days of high acti-

vity, producing books, conferences, and seminal buildings. Latterly, there has been a lull: but that may now be ending. Most post-1960 thinking has been secularist (or at least non-sacralist) and anthropocentric: churches are *not* holy places, they are homes of the people. Patrick Brock's *A Theology of Church Design*, however, is not secularist and has a marked theocentricity, frequently insisting on the prime importance of God in religious architectural theory ('the church is God's house, not man's'). Also, in sacralist vein, he argues for a church's 'sense of mystery and awe' which are 'so essential to worship'. But Brock is true to the '60s in his assumed view that a church's internal lay-out conditions the relationships between people—and also, between people and God. Does physical proximity, and the absence of obstructive furniture, unquestionably produce true human communality? Does the direction people face verifiably affect faith and fraternity, in a meaningful way? For Brock, yes, but he produces no supporting evidence for these ideas, just pleas for the removal of 'barriers'. Also unexplained and undefended is his understanding of religious architectural meaning and interpretation: he constantly refers to the building 'saying' things; and this facility is at divine disposal (the building 'must . . . enable God to speak . . . and act'; perhaps it can, but we want to know *how*). Perhaps Brock should have stuck to clearly stating the problems and issues, not pronouncing on major matters that need volumes to unravel—such a document as this might have been a more appropriate production from EASA.

Planning for Liturgy is an excellent Roman Catholic production, which separately discusses the significance (theological, liturgical and architectural) of the constituents of a church: altar, sanctuary, baptistry, etc. Perhaps the writing is characteristically Catholic in its somewhat prescriptive tone: principles are merely stated, not discussed or defended. A useful digest of official church directives follows; Catholicism, of course, lends itself to the use of such statements—other churches might benefit from the existence of similar documents. The book ends with a detailed bibliography of religious architecture, perhaps the only one presently in print. JOHN THOMAS



Above: limekiln workers' houses in Welshpool, c1800. From 'Welsh Country Workers Housing 1775-1875'. Left: Jones Court, two-room houses in Cardiff, c1840. From 'Welsh Industrial Workers Housing 1775-1875'. Both by the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, £1.80 each.

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