Revisiting Mexicali

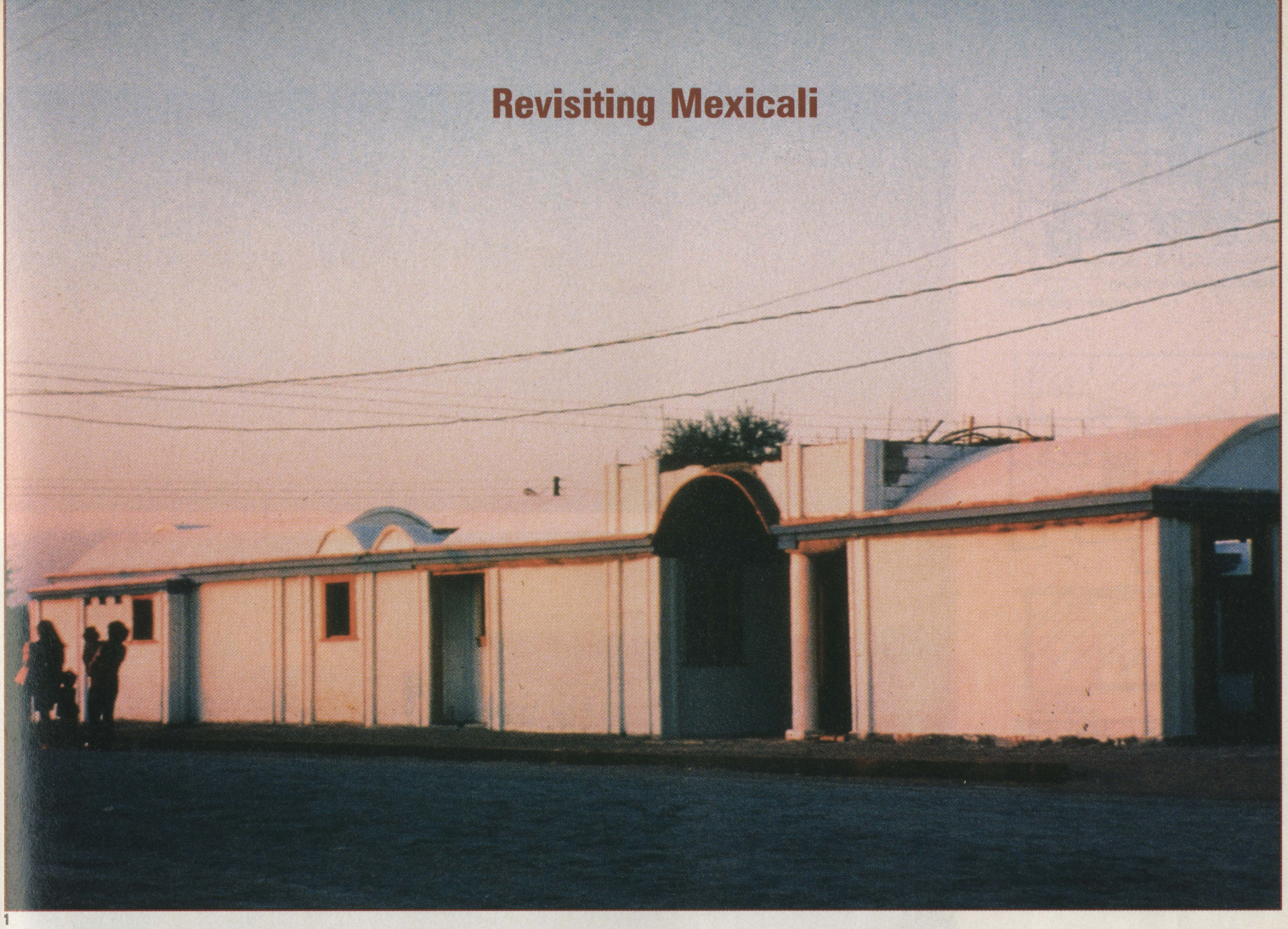

Photo: The Center for Environmental Structure

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In an interview, Christopher Alexander discusses the implications of his 15-year-old Mexicali project to today's environment.

The book, *The Production of Houses,* although published in 1985, reported on an innovative Mexican housing project begun ten years earlier by Christopher Alexander's Center for Environmental Structure. The goal of the project was not just to build low-cost housing and extensive communal buildings for a group of five families in the northern Mexican city of Mexicali, but to show how, by altering the design and construction process, people everywhere can attain shelter that is more attuned to the local climate and to individual needs. To achieve this, the authors – Christopher Alexander, Howard Davis, Julio Martinez, and Don Corner – served as both architects and builders. Renouncing the typical design and building process, they aided the five families in laying out the community and the individual houses on the site, operated a local builder's yard to supply mostly indigenous materials, innovated new construction methods as they went along, and helped the families construct their houses and control their costs. The houses were built for $3500 each. P/A sent a photographer to document the Mexicali project as it appears today and interviewed Christopher Alexander about the changes that have been made to the 15-year-old project and about its relevance to the social and environmental dilemmas we face today.

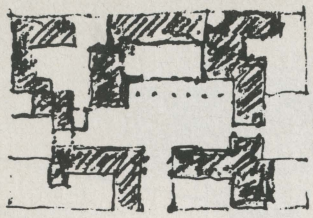
P/A: What are your thoughts about the changes the residents have made at Mexicali, such as painting the houses different colors or adding window grilles?

Alexander: It might make some architects uncomfortable for their work to be changed. For me, the alterations – colors, grilles, added rooms, even the graffiti on the street walls – make the place look more comfortable, more dug-in. When first completed, the housing there didn't have the same quality of fitting in that it has now. Now, it has achieved a level of ordinariness that is integrated better with life and makes me very happy. That is the quality which is my real aim any way. New buildings are usually too raw, too remote and disconnected.

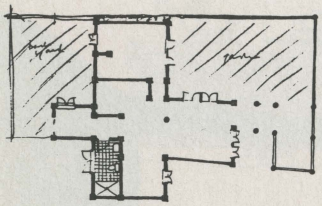
P/A: What relevance does Mexicali have for our situation today?

Alexander: A few years ago, one reviewer of the book said that it was useful to anyone interested in hippie or Third-World housing. He completely

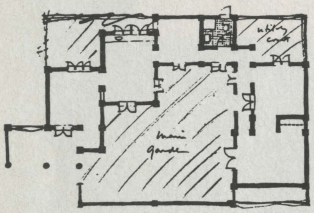
This view of the housing at Mexicali (1) shows the project nearing completion almost 15 years ago. The area around it has become more built up and apparently more impoverished.



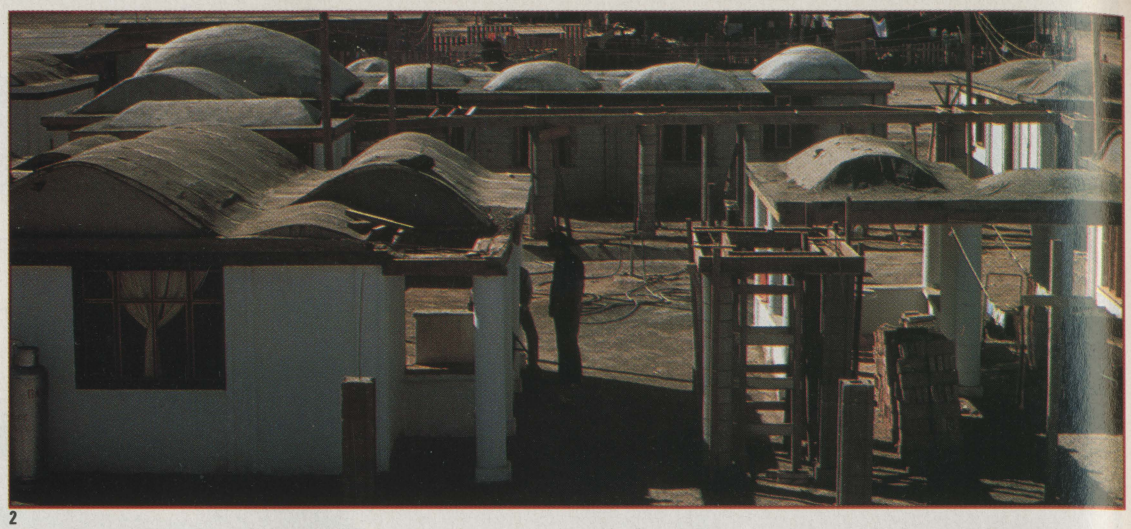
SKETCH OF FINAL SITE PLAN



LILIA DURAN HOUSE



JOSÉ TAPIA HOUSE



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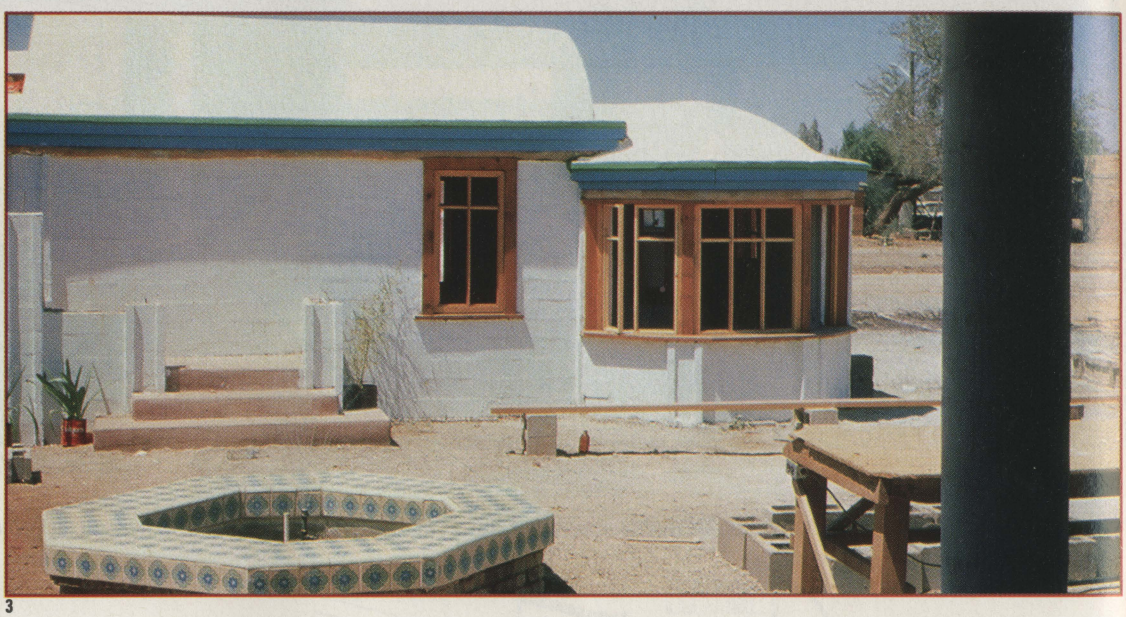

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Photos: The Center for Environmental Structure

The design process at Mexicali involved the participation of the residents. In lieu of finished drawings, rough sketches of the site plan and house plans (above) were made and adjusted as the construction went along. Several technical innovations were made, including the use of locally fabricated soil/cement blocks and the creation of vaulted concrete roofs, with bent wood lath and burlap providing the support, and chicken wire, the reinforcing (2). The completed buildings were mostly painted white, with colored trim (3).

missed the point. The process we invented in Mexicali, and then described in the book, is about the *kind* of process we need in order to create an organic world in the field of housing. This applies to us, as it does to the Third World, and as much to high-cost construction as to so-called hippie construction. Our own environment has been ruined by the current architectural process, with its extreme separation between client, architect, and contractor – the same process that we were criticizing in Mexicali. It is not a matter of aesthetics or technology, but of fundamentally changing the process by which we design and build housing. The project offers hope because it showed one of the first examples of a new kind of process, which, in another form, can help to rebuild an organic world, at our own level of expectation.

P/A: That includes using indigenous or locally made building materials?

Alexander: Yes, technical innovation is essential, but the technical innovations we made at Mexicali were really only a part. What was important were the changes we made to the human process, giving people more control over their housing. And this *requires* certain changes in technology. For example, it is impossible to integrate housing harmoniously into its environment when using large prefabricated panels. In the newly invented technology we introduced in Mexicali, our emphasis was not on using more indigenous materials, but on finding techniques that would lend themselves to an entirely different way of building in which the building can become whole as it evolves, and in which subtle and harmonious adaptations can be made during construction and after.

P/A: How do you break through people's expectations about housing to make this new process possible?

Alexander: It is extremely difficult. I had to tell one client group in Japan to pretend that they were in a dream world, to close their eyes, and to tell me what their most pleasant memories and experiences had been and "what your project would be like if it was wonderful, the most beautiful you can dream of." Then, finally, after pressing this kind of question, people do give realistic answers, which go to the core of their experience. Then I can tell them that we really will build these impossible-seeming, but ordinary dreams, into the buildings we are going to make for them. I think most

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Photos: Mark Darley

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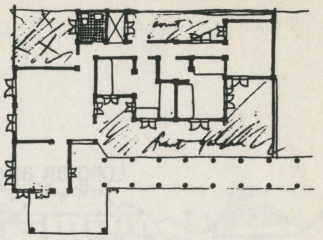
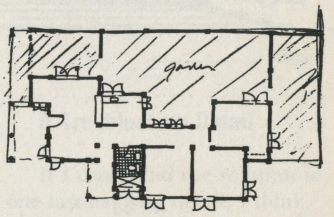
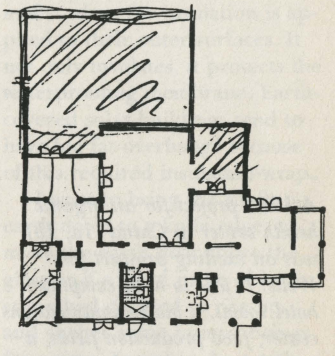


EMMA COSIO HOUSE



JULIO RODRIGUEZ HOUSE



MAKARIA REYES HOUSE

people have given up hope for realizing beauty. They assume it is not available and yet paradoxically find it too painful to admit to this assumption. But it is possible. It is very straightforward and simple and it is sitting inside of all of us.

P/A: Was bringing that out of people easier to do in Mexico than in, say, more developed countries where the expectations might be higher?

Alexander: I think that is true. A bank official came to the Mexicali project as we were building it and said that clearly the people didn't know how to design housing since, in one, the bedrooms were too big and the living room was too small. I asked the woman whose house it was to come over and explain, and she told him that it was very simple. The bedrooms were big to give each of her children a place to study, since education was so vital to their betterment and to their lives. The living room was small because "our family all sit together on the same sofa anyway. We love each other. Why do we need more space?" Poor people, because of their distressed circumstances, tend to be more direct.

P/A: What are your thoughts on the solar housing built in the 1970s?

Alexander: Most high-tech solar housing simply exchanged one asinine technology for another. It didn't fundamentally alter anything, and might have made things worse by justifying the construction of ugly architecture for the sake of solar energy. What is needed is a process that allows people to put up beautiful buildings.

P/A: What affect will the war and the rising price of oil have on this?

Alexander: The war is a tragedy. We should not have gone to war. It would be far better to say, "Look, Hussein may be doing us a favor. If he wants to grab the world's oil supply, let him go ahead. The world's supply of oil is going to dry up in the next century anyway. Let's use this opportunity to escape our enslavement to this vanishing resource. I know it is idealistic, but if we were to take the billions of dollars we're spending on the war and use it to perfect batteries and other technologies, we would be free from this enslavement and ahead of other nations . . . a far better way to spend the hundreds of billions, and one that would not involve killing. It would greatly reduce our reliance upon oil; we would truly be leading the way in the world. ■

Today, the houses at Mexicali have been painted various colors and have had window grilles and other security-related items added (4). The courtyards also have become more shady and inviting. There is a certain monumentality to the complex despite its small scale (5). The interiors of the houses, too, have been painted and appear to be well maintained.

ARCHITECTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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