

A BUILDING CULTURE IS NOT A TREE

Impressions of Experience

by Howard Davis

I'd like to talk about how the work I did with Chris Alexander affected my subsequent work and views on architecture—and about how that subsequent work affects my view of the work I did with Chris. I worked with Chris beginning as a student, when we did a planning project for Berkeley neighborhoods, and then continuing for several years afterwards when the major projects were a housing project in Mexico, a book about that project, a planning project in Omaha, a housing project in Israel, and various smaller projects in California. It was also during this period that I began to teach, beginning with a year when I took over Chris's courses when he was on sabbatical, continuing with a remarkable year-long project for San Francisco—that several people in this room including Ingrid King, Hajo, Ramzi Kavar and Hubert Froyen were involved with—and then teaching with Ray Lifchez before I finally left Berkeley and moved to Texas...of all places.

Those were formative years for me. They helped to solidify a number of ideas including, perhaps most significantly, the power of reality in shared decision-making about buildings, and the importance of process in the production of the built environment. When I left Berkeley I brought along a way of thinking and working that was coherent and useful. But I was bringing it into an academic world and a professional world that also demanded respect.

My own stance has evolved to one in which the work I did with Chris remains central—but within a viewpoint from which I don't see the world in black and white terms, but much more in shades of gray. This is a viewpoint from which I see value in many buildings and many aspects of the profession to which I once had serious objections. This may sound contradictory, but I think that progress will be made by working within and through those contradictions. The fundamental goal that Chris set—to figure out how to develop a way of building that results in an architecture and urbanism of deep humanity—remains central, along with many of his conclusions. But many people with the same goals are working in ways that need to be seen as compatible, within a shared building culture.

One of the reasons I studied architecture in the first

place came out of a fascination with New York City. My view of the city was one that came from the bottom up, whether it was exploring the basement of the three story apartment house in Brooklyn that I grew up in, or accompanying my father on his visits to jobs rewiring restaurant kitchens or factory lofts or apartment-house basements. My view of the city was not only a view of its vernacular buildings, but also one in which I developed a down-home respect for the people who built it. It was only much later that I started looking at monumental buildings with the same interest that I was looking at the ordinary everyday building.

This was the history that I brought to Berkeley when I finally decided to study architecture, and that along with my physics background made me an ideal candidate to be attracted to an empiricist like Chris Alexander, who was also deeply affected by his own childhood environment in Oxford and Chichester. My first course on the pattern language was from Max Jacobson—this was about four years before the book was published—and in that course I began to see the possibility of two ideas:

- First, the idea that architectural knowledge might be commonly shared and improved;
- And second, the idea that shared architectural knowledge might be applied toward the support of everyday life, considered most simply and most straightforwardly.

That sounds easy enough.

The project in Mexicali, in which Jenny Young, Don Corner and I participated along with Chris and other colleagues and students, was something of a turning point for me. Even in school I was interested in what later became my book on building cultures, and I took a seminar from Spiro Kostof on the history of the architectural profession in which I wrote something about the idea that the architect is only one of many influences in the production of the built environment. Kostof had a series of visiting lecturers in that seminar, and turned those lectures into a book that I later referred to in my own research on building cultures.

In Mexicali, we were working to develop a new system of housing production, that would include new ways of design, of construction, of financing, of zoning, of participation. But of course, our innovations were happening within the existing building culture of Mexicali, in which there were already ways of design, of construction, of financing, of zoning and of participation. The only way we could do what we were doing, which was in opposition to most established standards and procedures, was through the direct authority of the governor of the state of Baja California, who himself saw a political advantage in supporting the work of a notable architect from abroad, and who forced various agencies that were under his control to suspend their rules for our project.

So our project was surrounded by but in direct opposition to the existing building culture. The project itself has been analyzed by Peter Bosselman and others. There were two small ripples beyond the project, into the local building culture. A few concrete vaults were built in the immediate neighborhood, and a local block manufacturer began to manufacture a simplified version of our interlocking blocks, using a standard concrete mix instead of our soil-cement concoction.

So Mexicali was not only about the production of low-cost houses. One of the things I've often said about that project is that if we had more understanding and respect for the local building culture, and introduced innovations much more gradually in the context of it, we might still be building houses there, or an outgrowth of the project would still be in place.

The Culture of Building is a book that I began thinking about soon after Mexicali. My original title was The Culture of Buildings, and Chris suggested changing it to The Culture of Building (properly so) and helping to ensure that the work would reflect our common interest in the importance of process. It did take another twenty years, however, to write the book.

The book is strongly connected to the pattern language work in a number of ways.

One is the emphasis on process itself, and the idea that we ultimately can't make wholesale improvement in the shape of the built environment without changing the underlying processes in the way things get done. Where I differ somewhat from Chris about this, is in identifying the sources of these changes. In my concluding chapter, "Cracks in the concrete pavement," I argue that architects, planners, clients, and builders all over the place – even people who never heard the name of Chris Alexander or the words "pattern

language" – are doing innovative things that may have a positive long-term effect, and their initiatives and efforts need to be nurtured and watered, like flowers growing through those cracks.

Another is a recognition that historical processes involved a very different relationship between the architect and builder from what often exist today.

The Metropolitan Club's building was designed by one of the most important Beaux-Arts architecture firms. The Beaux-Arts was of course the antithesis of Arts and Crafts, and in it one might not expect that much of a dynamic relationship existed between the different players in the building process. Yet in combing through about 6000 documents regarding the construction of this building, I found a different story. When the building was first being set out on the ground, for example, a temporary platform was erected on the site so the clients could adjust the height of the ground floor, which contained the main public lounge, in relationship to the view of Central Park. Other documents of this building and others of the firm show very rough sketches of details being provided to fabricators, because control of the final form of the detail lay with the craftsmen.

Practice in the late nineteenth century is near the end of the time when design and building were part of one integrated process. In Renaissance Florence, the architect was in the middle of the hierarchy of organization of a construction site, with the *soprintendente*, or site supervisor, at the top. In the book I documented this change more precisely by looking at the evidence of building contracts in London. In the late seventeenth century, legally-binding contracts might have been half a page long and included minimal drawings and specifications; by the late nineteenth century, contracts would have been many pages long and included detailed drawings and specifications. The gradual change over two hundred years, in which implicit understandings were replaced by explicit contract statements, mirrored the emergence of a building culture that was characterized by the emergence of the separate institutions of architecture and general contracting, all supported of course by more and more lawyers. And this was accompanied by new regulatory mechanisms, in which common law doctrine was eventually supplanted by explicit and numerically-based statute.

And third, is the idea of a healthy building culture. With this idea I tried to generalize from Chris's insistence that the architect and the builder necessarily had to be the same person, and postulate some general features of a building culture that produces good results. This all represents

an extension of the pattern-language ideas about process, judgment based on on-the-ground reality, and the proper sequence of things in design and construction. And within these ideas there are a lot of things happening in the contemporary building culture, coming from different places, that are promising. These include so called “integrated practice,” advanced visualization and modeling techniques, and new concerns about urban and social sustainability.

In the course of writing this book I worked on a few projects that were helpful in one way or another. This included work I did with David Week in south India. In this project we developed a pattern language based on local villages, informal settlements and the old part of the city of Vellore, worked with community leaders to lay out the site, and worked with families to lay out their own houses on the ground. They were small, simple houses, in which tiny decisions like the exact position of a door or window had a lot of impact. David brought his Powerbook 160 to India—to local building officials in the early 1990s that was like a flying saucer landing—and this project was probably the first in south Asia to use digital graphics programs in conjunction with on-site layout.

For me, one of the values of the project was the collaboration I had with David, who was writing his PhD dissertation at the time. We wrote several papers that were really about the transfer of expertise and knowledge, and about the idea that foreign aid needs to be a two-way street. An extreme position is that taken by Tom Kerr, one of our other partners in the project, who’s very involved in grassroots efforts, and now working out of Bangkok. The organizations Tom works with are skeptical of ANY kind of outside professional expertise, seeing knowledge as needing to develop from within the community itself.

I’m talking in detail about this because it underscores the very delicate position in which the pattern language work may find itself, and has found itself in a variety of projects. On one hand, the patterns and the techniques that go along with them should be liberating. They are after all resolutions to conflicts in the environment and expressions of what people may think when image and prejudice are stripped away. But on the other side, the processes of identifying a valid pattern, of ensuring agreement among a diverse group, and of going only so far and no more with a process within an established culture, are all critical. At the end of a chapter on architectural education that I wrote for a book about vernacular architecture, I wrote about the importance of separating expertise from power. Communities and their

cultures deserve total respect at the same time new ideas are introduced.

I’ll briefly mention another project that reminded me of the importance of acting with this respect, and of the pleasures of working in this way. Along with John Rowell and Don Corner, I worked on a pattern language for a Benedictine abbey and monastery about forty miles south of here. This place is known among architects as the site of one of the two buildings in this country designed by Alvar Aalto. But it is also an abbey with a hundred and thirty-year history, with a mother house in Switzerland, with ninety monks and two hundred seminarians, on a beautiful hilltop site in the Willamette Valley, and with a community that can trace itself back to St. Benedict and his Rule, in the fifth century. In other words, a place with a deeply-felt culture that is lived and contemplated every day.

We worked closely with the monks, and one of them, Father Jeremy, is also a published poet with wonderful insights about life in the Abbey. I felt privileged to be a frequent guest in their community, and we found that this is not a quick process—our own insights came as much from the time we spent there as from the questions we asked. We read the Rule of St. Benedict, which talks a lot about daily life and the conduct of hospitality, and with the help of the monks we interpreted the Rule in terms of the settings of the Hilltop and the way people live on it. The pattern language contributed to ongoing building projects at the Abbey, but its real value may have been what it taught the monks and what it taught us. The monks became aware of their own place in a way that they had not done before, and I had the pleasure of talking to people about their houses and how they live in them.

Talking to people about their own houses is an activity—whether I’m doing it at Mount Angel or in a shophouse in Bangkok—I always find real, energizing and humbling. And it always brings me back to a central value of the pattern language approach, that many architects often forget, and that is the reality and value of people’s lives and the importance of the buildings in which they live them.

My current book, *Living Over the Store: Architecture and Local Urban Life*, which is now in press, is in one sense the story of a single pattern. It is not an explicit pattern in *APL*, but the idea is mentioned or strongly implied in one or two of the patterns in that book, including *Corner Grocery* and *Individually-Owned Shops*. *Living Over the Store* is not so much about process but more about the structure of the urban environment. It owes a lot to Chris but perhaps even more to Jane Jacobs, and is intended to combine an historical

and cross-cultural understanding with many modern and contemporary initiatives that are themselves reinstalling this idea in practice.

The book has four features:

First, it takes seriously the importance of everyday life, in its economic and social aspects. This everyday life is supported both inside these buildings and on the street, so that buildings in which independent families live and work, are aspects of the same phenomenon as buildings in which the same family lives and works.

Second, it identifies common architectural and urban ways in which everyday life is manifested across different cultures and through history. All these buildings give emphasis to the commercial frontage and maintain strategies for the privacy of domestic life at the same time. All of these urban districts, some irregular and some grid-like, put shop/houses in positions in between all-residential streets and much busier streets, where they funnel pedestrian traffic toward much busier places.

Third, it questions the modern boundaries between functions, in both buildings and cities, and sees those boundaries as dynamic over time. Within shop/houses, there is often a fluid relationship between functions, as there is in these buildings in Bangkok, one a photo studio and one a tailor shop. In both of them domestic life and economic life strongly overlap. That is also seen on this sidewalk in Guangzhou and inside this shophouse in Taiwan.

And fourth, it respects different contemporary projects, ranging from single proprietors to developers to grassroots efforts, to changes to the building culture that might allow these buildings to happen on a large scale again in this country. My examples range from slum replacement projects in Bangkok and Port Elizabeth, South Africa, to building on greenfield sites in the US—here are projects by Michael Tavel and John Rowell, who are both at this conference—to an elegant mixed-use building in Berlin by an architect who is not. I also write about different strategies for financing and for zoning for new mixed use—not only form-based zoning but also straightforward changes to standard Euclidean codes.

So even though the pattern *Living Over The Store* is a simple idea, it suggests a complex web of disciplinary sources ranging from social history to urban geography and an equally complex web of professionals ranging from community groups in Bangkok to architects in Germany. Within a world that is as diverse as ours, these all have to be taken

seriously, and have to be respected for their intentions, within their own orbits, to reinforce the practice of urban diversity.

I'd like to conclude by saying that the diversity of my interests is supported by my connection to five academic and professional communities. These have influenced my views and combined with the school of thought that came out of my work with Chris and the Center. I see all of these communities as strongly connected with the pattern language work, and have helped me take that work out of its academic and professional marginalization.

First is the community of scholars who study vernacular architecture. This community has helped advance some critical connections, such as the social forces in their influence on architectural history, the strong relationship between vernacular buildings and those designed by architects, and the idea that buildings cannot be separated from their cultural contexts. Scholars in vernacular architecture understand that as a collective phenomenon, the vernacular is made up of buildings with repeating characteristics—these characteristics are usually described as types rather than patterns—and that they are shared within a culture, like patterns are.

Second is the community of people who study urban history and urban form. These scholars deal with the morphology and spatial structure of cities, and relate urban form not only to cultural ideas but also to the economics of production and exchange.

They have mapped towns and cities on a parcel-by-parcel basis and have found confirmation not only of the intuitive idea that the complexity of cities is made up of a relatively few repeating configurational ideas, but also of variations in urban form that point to a structure of centers, and to the idea that the piecemeal growth of cities is connected strongly to economic and social conditions.

Third, is the community of people who are working on housing and urban issues in the third world. I've already talked about this a little. I would just reiterate that there is a lot to learn about the ideals of participation, about coherent piecemeal growth, and about the sensitivity of community needs from both good and bad experiences in world cities that are experiencing very rapid urbanization.

Fourth is the architectural profession, and particularly those architects in the last eighty years or so who have resisted the homogenizing and abstracting tendencies of modernism. The architectural profession is not necessarily at odds with an architecture that is humane and that can elevate the human spirit in a profound way. The worst

examples—and there are many of them—are not the only examples. The sensitive and humane work moves me into a position in which I believe there must be an accommodation between theoretical precision and the messy realities of our contemporary cultures of architecture and building. And that accommodation is not an unfortunate compromise, but may itself serve to modify the theory.

And finally is the Department of Architecture at the University of Oregon. The department has a reputation for being hospitable to the pattern language approach, and indeed it is. But by the time I came to teach here in 1986, it was no longer central. At the same time however, many of the people on the faculty who I respected a lot—even though they might not have embraced the idea of the pattern language with wholehearted enthusiasm (and that is an understatement)—were teaching principles that were absolutely consistent with it, and having their students design buildings that were beautiful and contextual. As a faculty we tend to agree more about buildings than about the curriculum. Oregon has been another force in my career that has caused me to look outward, from my roots in Etna Street and Mexicali and the eighth floor of Wurster Hall in Berkeley.

Within my worldview the pattern language work has a critical and central role. The idea that the built world is important, the idea that buildings can move us deeply, the idea of generative processes in the formation of the built environment, the idea that we may share not only knowledge but value—all of those things continue to shape my thinking and my teaching.

At the same time, I am part of a world in which people have their own realities that I did not form, but which I need to deeply respect. The contemporary built environment needs a lot of help, but at the same time the answers are and have to be all around us. What I'm interested in is a building culture that is resilient and that welcomes good ideas no matter what their provenance.

A long time ago, Chris Alexander wrote a highly influential article on city planning, "A city is not a tree," in which he argued that a healthy modern city, instead of being organized in a way that has an overall hierarchical order, like a tree, is organized instead in the form of a semi-lattice. This allows for fluidity of associations, for resilience, and for overlaps between social groups and physical places to have a meaning that corresponds to the realities of modern life. It also means that the health of the city is not measured by the health of any one person, or place, but by how all of it is working together, within a framework of mutual respect.

And I would paraphrase the title of that article, by saying that "a building culture is not a tree."



*Families of cycle-rickshaw drivers laying out site for their new houses at Abdullapuram, near Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India.
Project by ILLAM: Centre for People's Housing-Tamil Nadu and Centre for Development Madras.
Photograph by Howard Davis.*