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A SHRINE TO COLOR AND LIGHT  
THE CARPET MUSEUM

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THE CARPET  
MUSEUM

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COLOR AND LIGHT

## THE PURPOSE OF THE MUSEUM

I propose the creation of a single work of art: a museum, which contains some 80 Turkish carpets, chosen for unbelievable beauty of color and light. These carpets date from a range of periods from 12th century to 17th century.

The purpose of the museum is to create an experience of color and light, perhaps similar in depth of feeling, to the Sainte Chapelle in Paris.

The purpose is not academic, and it is not meant, primarily, for carpet specialists: It is meant to be, for everyone, a supreme experience in the realm of color: a shrine to color: a place where a person can go, again and again, to spend a few quiet hours, bathed in an extraordinary light.

But to do this, I intend to use the 80 carpets of my collection, which are among the most extraordinary remaining Turkish carpets — and to use them, to weld them to a single whole, as they might have been once, perhaps, in a Konya mosque.

So the purpose is simply to take, one of the most glorious works in the field of color, enshrine them together in a housing, which allow the visitor to be filled, inspired, refreshed, and enlightened, simply by their effect in the realm of color.

## LOCATION OF THE MUSEUM

I have taken twenty years to collect these carpets, and I want to make sure that they take their place in some part of the world, where the unique achievement of color that they represent is available to all, not buried. I want them to be in some cosmopolitan center, which plays a key role in the modern world. My preference would be for it to be in San Francisco itself, where I live, simply so that I could contribute in some concrete fashion, to the place that has meant so much to me during my years here. San Francisco embodies the passage of the 20th century, towards the 21st, and has been the birthplace of many new visions of reality, that have emerged in the 20th century. For that reason it would be highly appropriate.

Of course, many other places are possible, and might play a similar role, in encouraging a stream of international visitors, year after year. London, New York, Rome, Florence, Milan, Tokyo, Chicago, Brussels, Dallas, Rio de Janeiro, Los Angeles, Vienna, might all be possible.

Wherever it is, I hope it will be in a place which is visited often, by thousands, as a kind of pilgrimage, so that it is a place where peace and rest and quiet can be attained. If, it were in San Francisco, I would hope it might be on the rocks of the Pacific, overlooking the ocean. If it were in Switzerland, in a quiet valley; if in London, perhaps on the edge of one of the great parks.

The location is important. It is not only a question of what happens when you go inside and are inside: but also the approach, the slow change of atmosphere as you approach, the vision of the outside of the museum, the arrival: and the possibility of staying there, for many hours, then leaving, and again the leaving may be important in itself.

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## RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF THE MUSEUM

I do not believe that the quality of these carpets, or the feeling which is created by their color, can be separated from a religious feeling. The carpets were made in the crucible of sufism: the best ones are devotional objects, which come from the illumination of the spirit. My intent is that this religious spirit is clearly visible, and felt, in the museum: and my hope is that the building too, will embody this religious feeling too, as far as I can manage it.

In some respects, the building and the carpets, as a work, may play their role in the evolution of a new religion, which carries the spirituality of the early centuries into a new form, consistent with our ultra-modern view of the universe.

It is not a church, because it is not something which belongs to any one religion. But it is a shrine, which embodies and glorifies God, as far as my very slight ability can make it happen, in the inner experience of each person who visits it.

## A MUSEUM OF THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

I see the museum and its carpets together as one work. It is not to be thought of as a collection of carpets, housed in a building, but as a single work of art, which embodies the emerging spirit of the 21st century, forming its connection with the early spiritual centuries of the late middle ages and early 14th and 15th century.

The work of art, itself, that is the building, the formation of the building, is itself to be comparable in quality to the carpets: a vision of a new reality, arrived at again, as it was routinely arrived at in earlier ages. So what is under consideration, is this work of art, which is the building, and the color of the carpets, and the carpets and the walls. But it includes, too, the actual making of the museum, its stone, wood, glass, concrete, plaster, light. The colored plaster on the walls, the floors, the comfort of a real sort, spiritual in nature, but also ordinary comfort, to be found in this place, so that one might stay in it for hours and hours at a time.

This museum, then, is, as a work of architecture, a culmination of efforts and achievements which have been growing in my work over the last twenty years. It is a stepping stone, a possibility of something in the world of architecture, which has only very rarely — perhaps never — been accomplished in this century.

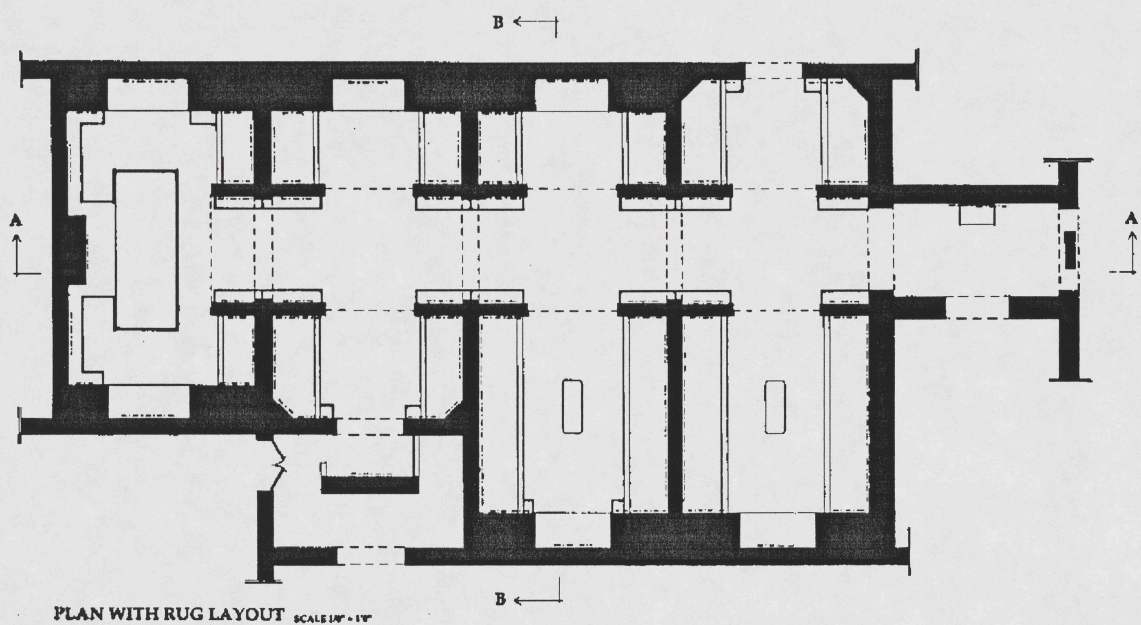
## THE SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM EX- HIBITION OF 1989

The museum which I intend to build, would be based, in spirit, on the exhibition which I designed and built, inside the De Young Museum, San Francisco, November 1989 — February 1990. That

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exhibition was, in my mind, a dry run or testing ground for the form, organization and color of the permanent museum. The following passage describes the exhibition, as I wrote about it in *HALL*.<sup>1</sup>

I designed the De Young exhibition with one thing in mind — to create an atmosphere in which the real nature of the carpets would be visible. I imagined it originally as a rather informal, smoky, even dirty place, where carpets would be addressed not as museum objects but as friendly things which one has around in the ordinary course of daily life. That is the way I have lived with these carpets for many years.



*Plan of the exhibit in the San Francisco museum*

As I started to construct the show, I realized that the formal position of the most important carpets mattered very much. I arranged the central aisle, with its transept-like spaces, so that the truly great carpets were either extremely close to the viewer's body, or clearly visible and distinguished from the lesser carpets by the layout.

As far as color was concerned, what developed truly surprised me. I started with the idea that the walls would be a warm off-white. However, I tried many experiments with color and light before I made the final decision as to how the galleries should look. I painted the walls, lit them, hung them with carpets and lit them again. Each time I modified the work until I felt the carpets' real nature to be shining out. The further I went, the darker the walls became, until I found myself making half the walls a deep somber red and the others grey. And I found myself using tiny spots of light on the carpets, not illuminating the whole carpet, but creating just enough light that the glowing presence of each carpet could be felt. And its life was there before me.

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Alexander, "A New Way of Looking," *HALL*, Issue 56, April 1991, pp. 114-125.

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*Exhibition gallery in the San Francisco museum*

Again this was very different from conventional museum curatorship. The labels were also controversial; when it came to choosing size, type and color, the museum staff, who helped so much, advised me to make the labels lighter and more legible. I refused, because experiment showed that instead of the objects themselves glowing mysteriously, with their spiritual content intact, the atmosphere became more like that of a museum, an academic place where labels, dates, places of origin — all the scientific paraphernalia — suddenly became important, with the inevitable result that the carpets themselves were diminished.

So the exhibition was essentially empirical. It was *that* arrangement of space, light and color, which I was able to find in a limited time, that placed the carpets most clearly in their proper spiritual and emotional attitude. In some ways, the result was, I suppose, like the interior of a mosque. This was not intentional, but in trying to bring the carpets, with

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their dark glowing spirit, into a direct relationship with all of us, I found it necessary to create this kind of place.

I do not think that it would make much sense if one had asked the architects of Gloucester Cathedral or the Sainte Chapelle to make their interiors lighter so that one could read the labels. The glowing presence of color is what matters most and that is what the architecture shows.

One day, I hope it will be possible to build a permanent museum — in San Francisco or somewhere else — where my carpets can be permanently housed, so that members of the public can visit and contemplate the awesome majesty of their color in a proper setting. I suppose that place, when it is built, will also be considered too dark; but there too, the colors will be softly glowing.

## DESIGN OF THE PERMANENT MUSEUM

I imagine the permanent museum as similar to the San Francisco exhibition in its interior feeling and organization. It is a small building, intimate, solid, massive in its construction, intimate in the spaces, dark interiors, vaults and arches probably. As in the San Francisco layout, I imagine a main nave, two or three sets of transepts, perhaps the most important carpets in the main aisle and at the end, with the ends of the transepts too reserved for very wonderful pieces.

I imagine the building as more solid and more comfortable: during the San Francisco show I was impressed by the number of people who told me they had spent hours, two, four, even six hours in the exhibition. The place is very comfortable, made to allow comfort over a long period of time — and reverence.

From the outside, I imagine something solid, unobtrusive, a visible being of some kind, quiet, possibly even holy, with a garden leading to it if possible, and perhaps an interior court, very quiet, with a small stream and an apple tree.<sup>2</sup>

## THE CARPETS OF THE COLLECTION

So here, in the following pages, are some of my beloved carpets. Many of them are unique, not belonging to standard types, but belonging rather to unknown groups. Some of them are among the earliest carpets in the world. They represent something we might almost call the lost heritage of Turkish and Turkic art, preserved now, for the most part only in two Turkish museums, the Turk-ve-Islam and the Vakiflar museums, both in Istanbul, and in ones and twos among the great museum collections of the western world.

These 77 carpets from the 12th to the 17th centuries constitute a kind of “core” of the essential art of Central Anatolia. But this core of Anatolian art did not come into my possession because of any historical or geographical interest on my part. It came directly from my desire, as a builder, to learn from

<sup>2</sup> The reader may be interested in looking at another museum design of mine, also described in a book: Christopher Alexander, *THE MARY ROSE MUSEUM*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

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the carpets. I collected them because I wanted to learn from them, and for years I looked at them every day. Every day I learned something new from them. I still learn something every time I look at them. Many of the carpets in this collection, I must have looked at five hundred or a thousand times, and over the years I must have spent thousands of hours, simply looking, looking, looking.

I was never interested in the classification of carpets. I did not care if the carpets came from a certain area, or from a certain type, or from a certain period.

I was only interested in those pieces which had the most to teach me, in my own work as an artist. Gradually, as a result of this intention, I found myself looking for earlier and earlier carpets. This also did not happen because I had any kind of intellectual idea about early carpets. It happened simply because I discovered, slowly, through experience, that the earlier carpets had a deeper structure, were more beautiful, and had far more of that complex and important structure that was so moving that I wanted to learn from it. So, I tended more and more towards the very early carpets, in my search.

Among the very early carpets, I found myself with a marked tendency to choose Turkish ones. For some reason which I cannot entirely explain, it simply seemed that the Turkish carpets, more than any others, had most of that oneness, or spiritual depth which I was looking for. Even in those cases where I did buy carpets from other parts of the world, they were always those which had a pronounced "Turkic" character. For this reason, even though there are Spanish carpets, Persian carpets, Caucasian carpets, Central Asian and other European pieces in the collection, I have nevertheless always focussed on the Turkish carpets, above all others, because it seemed that the oneness or wholeness I was after, simply occurred more often, and more deeply, in Turkish carpets than in any others.

Finally, among Turkish carpets, I found in myself a marked tendency to look for the great village pieces from the earliest centuries. These early village carpets, unlike the classical Ushaks — are the real core of authentic Turkish carpet production. Pieces of this kind, from the 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th centuries are almost unknown outside the Turk ve Islam and Vakiflar museums in Istanbul. Nevertheless, it is these pieces which, in my opinion, represent the true core of Turkish carpet weaving.

It is my belief, that the beauty, or oneness, which we find in these particular Turkish carpets — and in those other early carpets which I loosely think of as "Turkic" — has never been surpassed in the history of carpet weaving, and represents the pinnacle of what can be done.

What did their makers put into them? What aspects of form, organization, color, and geometry, is it that these carpets have, that lets them reach this pinnacle. What is it about their structure that places them, among all carpets, at the same level that Bach or Mozart occupy in the realm of music.

After years of looking, looking, and making things, I think I finally have a partial answer to this question. To a first approximation, I believe I can describe the structure which makes these carpets work. That is what I have attempted in my book on the carpets — to be clear enough about the structure which they have, so that we, as artists, in the 20th and 21st centuries, may have some hope of making things of equal beauty.

I know that this idea, this hope, may seem fantastic, even absurdly pretentious to some people. That, I fear, is only the mark of our age, where all people — and architects in particular — have almost given up the effort to make things of great beauty, because the knowledge of what it means, and the hope of being able to do it, seem so utterly remote.

But in any case, it is my hope that the opportunity to look at these carpets, enshrined in a single work, together with what can be said about them, and about the extraordinary structure they possess, may not only shed new light on the art of carpet weaving for scholars and collectors, but may inspire other builders and other artists to regain their confidence — so that they can make things of equal spirit and of equal beauty.



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## THE MUSEUM CATALOG

The collection is permanently recorded in the book *A FORESHADOWING OF TWENTY FIRST CENTURY ART: THE COLOR AND GEOMETRY OF VERY EARLY TURKISH CARPETS*, published by Oxford University Press, 1993, in which the carpets are discussed from the point of view of a fundamental theory about carpet design and color, which breaks entirely new ground. The book is magnificently bound in Japanese silk, has 352 pages, 96 color plates, more than 200 hand drawn sketches by the author. This book will be available continuously, to museum visitors, who want to have it as a record of their visit.<sup>3</sup>

3 Christopher Alexander, *A FORESHADOWING OF 21ST CENTURY ART: COLOR AND GEOMETRY OF VERY EARLY TURKISH CARPETS*, Oxford University Press, 1993