

unfolding which can carry a culture from its past state, into the future.

Certainly the majority of these patterns from Lima were rooted in observation. We did not invent them. We *saw* them. We extracted them, as we thought, from the situations we saw around us, and in the people we were with.

Yet we were looking at people with charmed eyes. We asked ourselves, like psychiatrists, what was best in them, what were the things about the people we were with that were most deeply rooted, in which these people felt anchored. What conditions — we asked ourselves — did create for the people of Lima a condition in which they felt most whole, at peace with themselves? Of course, the answer to that question is bound to be both traditional and modern.

A person feels at peace in the special small living room near the front (the *sala*) because it reflects ancient Peruvian ways, the degree a stranger can come into the house, a comfortable, formal place, to “show.” So of course people feel comfortable, deep in themselves, continuing something like this.

Yet at the same time, boys and girls and teenagers also feel comfortable leaning against the battered old cars, talking in the dust and mud of the

unpaved street and glaring sun. And of course, they also feel at ease in a small narrow dark patios, where the glare of the incessant equatorial fog of Lima is cooled by the dark shade. And of course the family in the *comedor*, now gathered around the TV set, is something entirely new, yet also makes people deeply comfortable, because it is so real, so exciting, so everyday.

Which of these patterns, then, does the most to nourish the inner person? It is just those things, those generic centers, which fall out of the ground of their cultural existence, and yet maintain a thread with the past, stand on the past, because it is the most ancient and fundamental relationships and spaces, in which — in the end — people are most anchored — touched, brushed, transformed, by the hypermodern conditions of our age.

What we are looking for, in our attempt to find patterns NOW, for our lives, for our age, for new kinds of centers which will come about by unfolding from the wholeness of the present situation, are these deep patterns, half-existing, and yet carrying forward from the present, the truth about the present wholeness, preserving its structure, yet making themselves consistent with the new age.



9 / THE PROCESS OF FINDING A GOOD CENTER

To show in rather more detail the degree to which the list of centers that are unfolded from what lies deep in people’s hearts — hence in their “culture” — is crucial in the life of a building, I will describe the evolution of a single center for a single project. This example happened in 1982, during the early stages of making a single private house in Berkeley, California, for André and Anna. At the moment when this event took place, we had already determined the size of the house (about 1150 square feet) and its overall volume. It was to be a three-story tower, 20 feet by 20 feet in plan on each floor. This was the only

arrangement that would allow us to get the price down to within their budget, since it reduced both roof and foundation price.

We began to face the question of the spatial organization of the inside of the building. To do this, we had to find the most important major centers in the house. I asked Anna and André, What is the house made of? What are its principal rooms?

In the conventional wisdom of the mid-twentieth century (still active then, in 1982), it used to be normal to assume that every house had a kitchen, a living room, and a dining room,

one for cooking, one for sitting, one for eating. But in the 1980's I began to notice that almost all our clients experienced some kind of extreme discomfort with the separation of these three functions.

The problems were manifold. The living room was often too formal. The dining room was too formal. The person cooking (in those days usually the wife) was too far from the action while cooking in the kitchen. And where were the children supposed to play?

One solution that had been common in mid-century America was to include a fourth room, "a family room" as an extension of the kitchen. However, this often left the formal living and dining rooms as deserted wastelands which no one ever used, which then became even more formal and even more dead.

I found that discussion of these problems often caused genuine anguish in almost every family, because as they discussed it family members began to see that the real forces in their lives were just not consistent with these conventional rooms like the conventional living room and dining room they may have grown up with. And yet emotionally, they were still attached to them. People felt more and more distress as they found out that the reality of their own day-to-day lives was not consistent with their emotional attachments to a given system of centers. The centers in people's *minds* were different from the ones in their *actions*.

In the case I am discussing, André quickly realized that this discussion was not merely a

practical one. It was, as he put it, a discussion about his whole way of life. Anna felt the same. Both of them felt that their future as man and woman, as a couple and as a family, was on the line. The discussion of spaces, and centers, itself harmless, but profoundly disturbing in its implications for family life, for the relation of man to woman, and much more, created tremendous anxiety. We had to stop talking for a while.

After a three-day period of anguish, I took André and Anna to the site one day, and asked them to stand in the middle of the land, and asked them to visualize, to remember, the most wonderful house they had ever known, the place which made them most comfortable, and where — if they were there now — would make them feel most comfortable. I insisted that they keep their eyes closed while we were doing this, and try to abandon all their preconceptions. A smile came to André's face, and he turned to me, and said that he had begun to see, in his mind's eye, his grandfather's house in the south of France, a big room with a fire and a table, and with the south light streaming in from the outside.

There followed, in the discussion, an immense peacefulness and relaxation, when the idea arose of using a farmhouse kitchen like the one André had known in his grandfather's house in France.

At this moment, indeed, an entirely new way of life presented itself: A big table in front of an open fireplace, with the kitchen counter in the background, and food storage in a pantry,

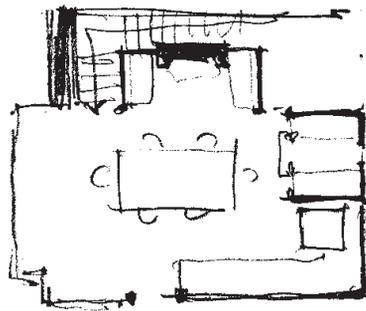


Diagram of the farmhouse kitchen, as first conceived after the pattern was created, 1982



The farmhouse kitchen for André and Anna and their children, as built, 1983

out of the way. Life was to revolve around this room. All the functions were redefined. Suddenly, the turmoil of confusion implicit in the various other versions of living room, dining room, kitchen and so on, fell into place in a comfortable and easy configuration, which was both practical and emotionally satisfying. This simple hard-won insight was completely responsive to the actual behavior and feeling of André's family.

At this moment we had the beginning of the house plan. And, indeed, in the finished house, it is this insight which provides the core of the life of the house.

We must see that what has happened here is something generic, not specific. The discussion was not about this particular house, and its geometry, as much as it was about the generic system of centers which made sense for this family, wherever they might live. Perhaps, by extension, it even touched questions of a general cultural nature, and how men and women in California were to live together. The new center which had

been formed, the farmhouse kitchen, changed the generic system of centers in the culture, and changed — by implication — the houses which would be generated by the culture. At least, anyway, as far as it touched Anna and André.

I must emphasize that this story describes the addition of only *one* new center to the list of centers for this house. The house was not defined by this one center. But the example suggests, by extension, how emergence of a list of items like this would gradually build up an understanding of how a given building is to get its life.

It is essential to realize that what happened in this case was not merely a redefinition of *function* (a phrase often used by architects). The process was powerful because it defined a new *center* — a *center* of function. Having arrived at an understanding of a particular *center* which must be in the house, our physical grasp of the essence of this house then became practical — and we were on the road to being able to make a house that would have a real life.

The example is typical, not just for houses, but for all kinds of building problems. It is the precise definition of building functions through new types of centers — and often the reconfiguration of the essential centers which have to carry the functions — which brings a project to fruition. It is not only a question of defining certain functions and then accommodating them in the geometry. *It is a question of rearranging the functions, redefining the nature and meaning of the way the thing works — which suddenly opens the door to a new comfortable life, which will actually work.*

In this example, we begin to see centers, not merely as nodes or central elements in a physical composition, but as nodes or centers of energy in the configuration of a life. As we see from the ex-

ample, it is not enough to say that a building which comes to life solves its functional problems correctly. Instead the inner functions themselves, no less than the geometrical order, have to be rearranged, created as centers, so that the truth of the real forces in the system can unfold.

I hope it is clear to the reader that the process which created this insight was, in a new guise, once again the fundamental process. It was because we asked ourselves, collectively, “What next thing can we do that will positively affect the life of this household?”, and pursued this difficult question to its end, that we got the result, and were able to define this one new center — even though, at that stage, still abstractly.



10 / ESSENTIAL CENTERS NOT GIMMICKS

A living process works only to the extent that it is based on patterns which go to essentials: patterns which really create centers that support the deeper aspects of human life. A picture of wholeness will be a true picture only to the extent that it describes essentials. It is the *essential* content of the centers in a place which creates its life; their basic *content*, not their outward form. The life comes about when the centers have been chosen for their essential character. They go to the root of the life in a place. It is the essence which is contained in the centers that define the life.

To illustrate this point, on pages 358–59 I show six examples of generic centers from the small town of Ravello in Italy, pairing them with six examples of modern developer-construction in California. In each pair, the example from California is on the left, the example from Ravello is on the right. Italians, traditionally, have a way of doing things which often focusses on *essential* content. As a result, the centers they use are more concentrated, more spare, and go more to the heart of the matter, to the heart of the way a place or a building lives.

At first sight, the examples from Ravello seem crudely made. We may consider them rustic, or old-fashioned. However, most of them, though they look old, were made in the 20th century. No matter how crudely made they are, their essence is in their content.

For example, in the first picture, look at the flowerbed along the top of the wall. There is a walkway which goes from the upper street down past the cathedral, to the square. In this wall, there is a flowerbed, actually made as a channel in the top of the wall.

The effect of this flowerbed is incredible. It puts the flowers at eye level, just where you see them most intensely. Their smell is beautiful, just near your face. Walking alongside this wall, you have a center, the flowerbed, at the same height as your eyes, your nose. It is unforgettable. Compared with the powerful impact it makes on you, the exact design, or shape is totally unimportant. It is the choice of a strong center that might be called FLOWERBED AT EYE-LEVEL ALONG THE TOP OF THE WALL, which is the crucial thing.