8 / AT EACH STEP GET RID OF EVERYTHING THAT IS NOT REQUIRED "MAKING LIFE" AND "BEING SIMPLE" ARE THE SAME

Let us try to understand the creation of simplicity still more deeply.

What happens dynamically in a living process is that the wholeness is being constantly differentiated, step by step, by the insertion of new centers into the system of existing centers.

However, there is a further, and powerful effect of the basic rule of the fundamental process. The basic rule says that, at each step, what happens next must be that thing which does the *most* to preserve and intensify the existing wholeness. It is a wholeness-enhancing process which never introduces extraneous structure, but always keeps as close to the previously existing wholeness as it can. When the process is working properly, the new local symmetry which is created will always be the simplest possible. It is the *simplest* elaboration of the existing system that can occur and yet be consistent with the patterns of differentiation present in the wholeness.

The chain of symmetries that is generated, each one the simplest possible at the moment it was created, generates that unusual mixture of complexity and simplicity which is familiar in the works of nature. It is helpful to dwell on this pattern of symmetries explicitly, since its character tells us a great deal about the nature of a successful unfolding process. It also works as a kind

Grassland: simplicity and symmetry among the blades of grass

Atmosphere of the Central building, Eishin campus, caused by simplest symmetries, with no fuss, and with a relaxed mind.

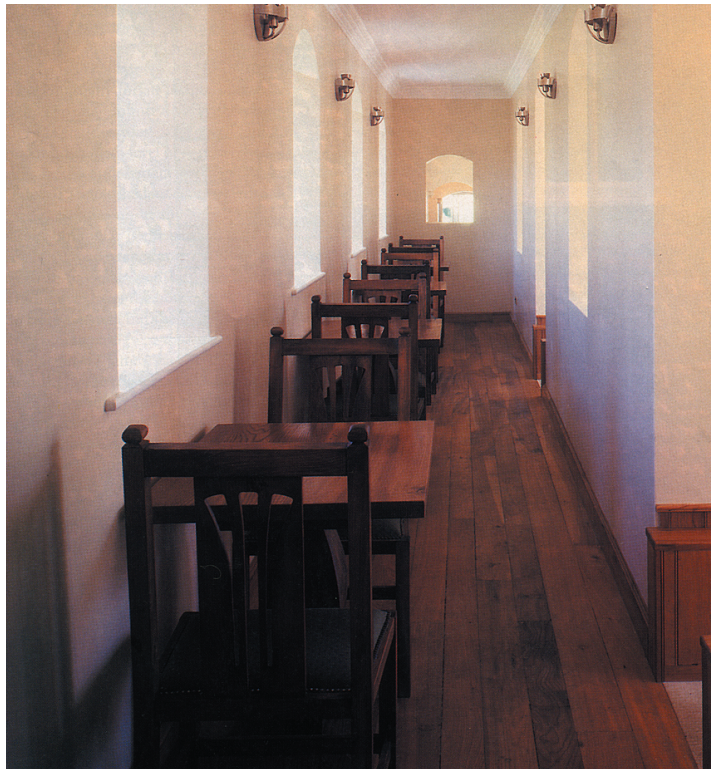
of diagnostic tool, telling us whether a particular process is honest and free, or whether it is distorted and contrived. This is extremely important since the naturalness and simplicity of the finished product (and its spiritual purity) will depend, in the end, on this graceful quality. It is a mark of a living process that it does lead to this result. If there is any deviation from the pure system of symmetries, we may use it as a signal that something image-ridden, hostile, or impure has entered the unfolding process. So we may use the emergence of simplicity as a test to be sure that any given process is working well.

Consider the blades of grass shown on page 480. What we have is a system of local symmetries. We have overall complexity, made of local symmetries, piled upon symmetries piled upon asymmetries. The structure arises because of the process which creates symmetries, asymmetrically, on the back of other symmetries.

What I want to emphasize is that unbalanced, awkward systems of symmetries which depart from the natural are created by deviations of process. They are not only unhealthy in some way, but their ego-deviation is visible in a surfeit of symmetry or in a loss of symmetry.

On the other hand, when a process is pure, and exactly right — and it may be made from any combination of the processes I have described in the last twelve chapters — then we do, gradually, get from the process itself, just the right distribution of symmetries: pure simplicity. This means that as we make something we must continuously purify it, get rid of all the structure which is not absolutely necessary.

The idea of differentiation is strongly interwoven with the existence of symmetries. Within a structure subject to no influences creating differentiations, everything would be symmetrical. Thus, there would be a single homogenous undifferentiated continuum in which no point is distinguished. Structure arises from distinctions. As soon as distinctions arise in the structure, they give rise to other distinctions. As a result, asymmetries arise. The system of asymmetries which occurs in space is, effectively, the history of the differentiations which have been called forth. A structure which has life is one



Interior gallery at the West Dean Visitor's Center, 1996, Christopher Alexander and John Hewitt

in which there were only those differentiations that were called for, and no others. This is a perfectly simple system.

The conception is deeper than it seems. For if we consider the world as a homogeneous space in which all distinctions come about for reasons, then the system of differentiations and the system of living centers are one and the same system.

To restate: To get life we *have* to make things simple. In fact, trying to be simple in the complex organic sense I have described *is the main thing needed to get living structure*. We may even say that living structure *is* simplicity. But what we mean here by simplicity is subtle, far from the naive, contemporary idea of what is simple.

The SIMPLICITY AND INNER CALM transformation keeps everything straight, simple, and direct. It is the practical equivalent of Occam's razor — the medieval philosophical principle which requires that we use only the simplest theory which is required, nothing more elaborate.

If we want to, we can understand every step of the 10,000 steps, as a step adding structure — of adding a center. The center that is added will most often be a local symmetry, since there is rarely any reason to add something which is not a local symmetry. But the local symmetry that is placed, usually creates an asymmetry, too, at a larger level.

Thus, the unfolding process will always create a huge system of local symmetries, syncopated, irregular and asymmetrical in the large, with a hierarchy of axes and main points and minor points.

This particular characteristic balance of symmetry and asymmetry is fundamental to the nature of order. It always occurs in life. It will always occur in any project which has life, because it is a natural, and practical result of the unfolding process.

In the illustration of bamboos from the Mustard Seed Garden manual of painting, we see this characteristic appearance. The same characteristic appearance comes about in the site plan for Samarkand (this book, page 362 and Book 3, page 126). In both, there is a certain syncopated balance of highly symmetrical things, distributed unevenly according to the terrain, with subtle asymmetries appearing here and there, always themselves made again of smaller, locally symmetric things. It is far deeper in the bamboos, than in the drawings of Samarkand.

If we follow the unfolding process faithfully, we shall nearly always get this characteristic appearance. It sounds frivolous. But it is not. It is fundamental, and helps us to understand something fundamental about the nature of the unfolding process. In a thing which has life, there will always be a characteristic balance of symmetries and asymmetries. It will include a lot of local symmetries, an amount which is "just right." But there will always be a lot of asymmetries, too, again an amount which is "just right."

If the balance of symmetries and asymmetries is off, this is the surest and fastest intuitive way of telling that something is wrong — either with the wholeness, or with the process that produced it. The symmetries and asymmetries, and the balance between the two, are therefore invaluable as diagnostic tools to help us see if we are getting to the right stuff while we are making something. They are especially invaluable because we can tell so very fast, intuitively, if they are just right or not. It is therefore one of the fastest ways we have of telling if things are going right in an unfolding building, and of correcting our work as we go along.

9 / JAPANESE ASYMMETRIES

The proper balance of symmetries which occur in a real or natural thing may be made very clear by paying attention to the Japanese love of asymmetry. We can agree, probably, that the art and architecture of traditional Japan is certainly one where the qualities of life that I have spoken about have reached a high point. Yet the Japanese, traditionally and explicitly, reject the idea of symmetry. Their art is full of consciously asymmetrical compositions. I have even heard that according to tradition in Japan, the number 4 is the number of death, because it is so perfect in its symmetry, while 5, which cannot be symmetrically represented, is the number of life.

Thus one of the great cultures of human history, famous for the depth which it has reached in the attainment of life in buildings, seems, explicitly, to reject the importance of symmetry. Yet in the argument put forward in these books, the idea of symmetry has a major role. How may this apparent contradiction be reconciled?

To start with, we can hardly deny the fact just mentioned — that the great Japanese masters did explicitly reject symmetry, and derived the greatness of their works from conscious attention to the importance of asymmetry?

But when we study their attitude, and study these works which rely on the presence of asymmetry for their beauty, we shall learn something essential about their preference for LOCAL SYMMETRIES which will reinforce our understanding of its importance in a living process.

Does this seem strange? Let us consider some examples of asymmetry. On page 483 is a plan of a Japanese temple precinct. As you can see, it is entirely different from a European Renaissance villa, or from a medieval compound. The buildings are placed with much greater irregularity, the whole thing feels more like nature in its roughness and complexity. We can hardly argue that, after all, it is symmetry which is important here?