

learned to play this game — but that none of this had anything to do with pleasing oneself, or liking what one did in the true ordinary sense which is familiar to us in so many areas of everyday life.

My discussion with the students lasted about half an hour. Gradually, by the end, I had led them to admit that, in the sense that I meant it, in the ordinary sense, they really did *not* like what they had done, or what they had been doing — that indeed, the conditions of their work had never emphasized this point at all, had made no provision for it, and that it had never even been suggested to them, while students, that they *should* like, or might like, what they were doing. That was just not part of the professional discipline being taught to them.

And yet, I said to them, “How terrible! This means you can expect to live your life making buildings that you do not really like.” And, even worse, that the others in society, who live with the buildings, made in this loveless spirit, will spend hours, days, years, living with these products of an unliked and unlikable architecture, done only because it was the thing to do, the way to get jobs, the way to impress one’s fellow architects.

I think, by the end of that afternoon, some of the students had begun to wonder very deeply about what they were doing. One or two, perhaps, had resolved that they must find a way of making buildings where they could, afterwards, stand up and say, honestly, “I like what I did. I truly like what I have done. It pleases me.”



8 / A MEXICALI STORY ABOUT THE THOUGHT POLICE

Why is it so difficult to please yourself?

The essence of the problem is to make something which is profoundly personal. But to be true — that is, to be truly personal — it must be at the same time personal in an impersonal, eternal sense.

The following short story suggests how hard this is — and especially how hard it was in the intellectual and emotional climate of the late 20th century.

Around 1979, I was asked by my colleagues in the department of architecture, at the University of California, Berkeley, to give a short talk describing my recent work. I showed slides of buildings I had recently built in Mexico — a small group of houses and communal buildings in Mexicali.<sup>6</sup> These houses were — for that time — rather sweet in feeling, innocent architecturally. Though made by technically advanced methods, and using the techniques of earth-concrete construction and thin-shell, lightweight, concrete vaults which my colleagues and I invented in the 1970s, they have a *feeling*

similar to the feeling of buildings that might have been built hundreds of years ago.

During the slide presentation of this project, the faculty — at that time still under the influence of technical modernism — were very cruel, and laughed a good deal at my expense. They told me openly how silly these buildings were, and how unacceptable to the image of architecture and architects that prevailed in those years around 1980. I endured the cruelty quietly, since I thought it was important to show the pictures anyway. But it was not enjoyable. The main point of the ridicule was to say that these buildings had no connection with the image of architecture which an architect, in 1979, was supposed to follow.

Afterwards, as I walked down the passage away from the seminar room, one of the faculty who had been most extreme in his criticism, and who had led the ridicule about the pictures which I showed, came up to me in the passage and said in a half-whisper, “You know, Chris, I have always wanted to design buildings like that



*Low-cost housing, Mexicali, Mexico, 1976*

myself . . . but I have never dared to.” His tone was earnest, almost desperate.

Here was an astonishing acknowledgement of the false state of our art as it was then: this man had feelings and thoughts about the design of buildings, but the thought police in his head censored the possibility, did not allow him to do what he wanted. Indeed, his private thought police were so strong, that in public, perhaps in order to preserve his image as a good architect, and as a good member of the club, he felt it necessary to ridicule my photographs — in opposition to his own feelings.

This contrast between thought and feeling, between the image of architecture as it was supposed to be and the reality of human feelings as they actually are, has been a major theme of these four books. In the theory which I have put forward, the theoretical and factual substance of the world, its structure and its life, are *congruent* with the feelings we all have. They are not congruent with the image of architecture as it is *supposed* to be.

Thus the battle between the theory I put forward, and the then-prevailing myth was not only a battle between the faculty and me, not only a battle between the faculty’s view of mainstream architecture and the new view of archi-

ecture I was putting forward, but even a battle between their own inner feelings and the mental thought police they had inside their own heads, which repressed these thoughts and feelings and desires.

This middle-aged professor who spoke to me in the passage was, in the secret wishes he described to me, strongly connected to the I. But his social context, his aspiration to be a good member of the profession, had destroyed that connection, distanced him. This was the barrier which, in 1979, anyone in architecture had to overcome.

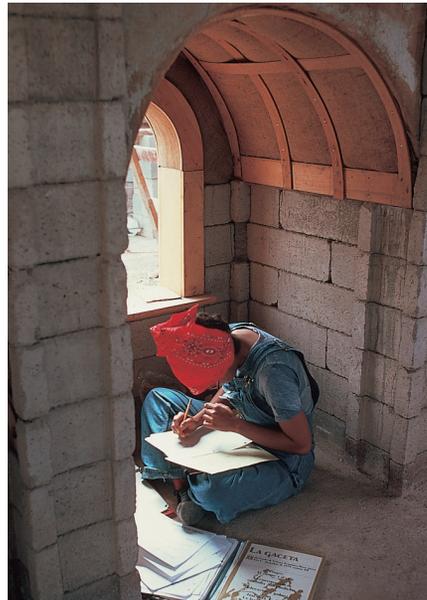
Do you see why the Mexicali project has this quality, why it pleases? It is rather childish, yes. But what I did was to draw, like a simpleton, only what is charming, what has some feeling in a house that only costs \$3,500. Domes, paint, white walls, courtyards. Columns for porches and arcades, wooden windows, each window different according to the inspiration of the place where it occurs. None of these things is arbitrary. Each one is common sense, a natural thing to like. And when you put them together, this is what you get. And, in addition, there are small charming touches. The fountain. The single round block on top of the round dome. The blue paint.



*Fountain and community building, Christopher Alexander, Julio Martinez, Howard Davis, and others, Mexicali, 1976*



*A small arcade inside the community buildings*



*Student sitting in a tiny niche*