

Commentary on Mexicali

Karl Linn ASLA, New Jersey School of Architecture

ADVENTURE CITIES

Each time I read Christopher Alexander's story about his Mexicali Project, I'm filled with a sense of both joy and concern. Alexander describes compassionately the engagement of five families in the building of their own dwellings clustered around a common area. I empathize and rejoice with Alexander as he was deeply moved when one participant told him:

... in words of almost inexplicable warmth and fervor that this was the most wonderful process he had ever experienced, that he had always a desire to work more, that he wanted to help the other families complete their houses

Whenever I hear of people's meaningful involvement in building their own habitat and the resulting sense of accomplishment, mastery, and dignity they experience, my sense of faith in the potential of such processes is renewed. Often enough in my own work over the last 20 years, I've witnessed a sense of community develop when people join forces to build a common environment. The potential that participatory building processes have to generate human strength and community has haunted and inspired me all these years.

The building process that Alexander initiated must have been extraordinarily successful, touching all involved, including Alexander, the catalyst, at the very core of their beings. Alexander exclaims:

... when I look at these five houses and the cluster I am filled with something which is as close to religious feeling as any social act in society today can bring me to . . . [The families] have become powerful, and are powerful, in a way which almost takes the breath away.

Having let myself feel, through Alexander's words, the exuberance that the Mexican families actually experienced, I'm also left with a sense of anxiety about the fate of the families. What will happen to them if officialdom reacts, provoked by the "rambling appearance" of the houses and by the growing sense of liberty that the families express? What will happen to the families' sense of powerfulness? What will Alexander's new friends do if political and economic pressures mount against them? Have they been able to inform themselves as to the uniqueness of their position in the midst of violent political and economic forces organized to keep poor people in their places? How long can such a system tolerate this life-affirming nucleus?

I have worked with grassroots communities in the United States and have witnessed people-removal through slum clearance, planned shrinkage, and gentrification (a process often triggered by the success of self-help rehabilitation efforts). I'm convinced that today, as the polarization of poor and rich and

of underdeveloped and developing countries intensifies, any engagement of people in the development of their habitat has to be accompanied by political consciousness-raising, so that the consequence of property development and the dialectic of property improvement (as illustrated by the gentrification process) are made clear. Having registered these reservations, I would like to focus on the fundamental programmatic contributions Christopher Alexander has made in his Mexicali experiment.

THE SYSTEM OF STEP-BY-STEP OPERATIONS

Alexander has succeeded in developing a self-help housing production system that "respects human feeling and human dignity first." The buildings are also cheaper than most, more in reach of the masses, costing only about \$3000 each. And the system is capable of mass production, drawing optimally on local resources as it did.

Architects' only actual physical contact with their work is the sharp point of a pencil. In grassroots work, people become much more intimately involved with building materials and building processes; a building system that encourages sensuous hands-on contact with materials fosters greater creativity. An architect-builder—a person sensitive to the organization of space as well as one intimately connected with materials—can nurture such a process. Christopher Alexander has carried this people technology a step further with his development of "step-by-step operations," a process with which I am eager to experiment in my own work. By organizing not the components but *the operations*—bricklaying, plastering, painting, etc.—into a functional system, he shows the way to tap community creativity fully: "If we cannot make adequate houses of identical components, then what we mean by the same way must somehow be deeper, more basic, and capable of more fluidity. . . ."

Through his use of the concept of step-by-step operations, Alexander was able to engage people who had never built before, unleash latent capabilities, and teach new ones, thus transforming building into an ongoing celebration of the builders' full humanness.

THE BUILDER'S YARD

Contrary to the static relationship between passive consumers and the preconceived housing products generated for them by architects designing for defense, prestige, profit, and regimentation, the Mexicali project aspires to reestablish the functional relationship between dwellers and their habitats common in indigenous architecture. Alexander has written:

The process not only builds the houses, but repairs them. . . . The houses are never finished; they exist, in an imperfect state, constantly changing and improving, just as we our-