

# THE SPIRIT OF HOME

*Every house has a warm soul waiting to be discovered, and enriched, by design from the heart*

## 253 • THINGS FROM YOUR LIFE

“DECOR” AND the conception of “interior design” have spread so widely, that very often people forget their instinct for the things they really want to keep around them.

*From A Pattern Language by Christopher Alexander. Copyright © 1977 by Christopher Alexander. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.*

SOMETIMES, I DREAM about being a child again. And my dream always takes place in a rambling house. I’m exploring, down halls and around corners and into rooms—a series of captionless scenes that fall into view like big pages in a book I might have looked at. In some rooms, there are shards of something familiar—part of a wallpaper pattern, like a signature not quite legible, or the wave in a piece of old window glass—a small optical toy that you could look through and change the world with. As I get older, it seems the house gets bigger—there are always new rooms. But it is always a house that collects and keeps precious all the important things I am, and will be—my memories and dreams.

“A hunting glove, a blind man’s cane, the collar of a favorite dog . . .” So writes architect Christopher Alexander in Pattern 253—“Things From Your Life”—in his now-classic *A Pattern*

*Language: Towns/Buildings/Construction*. Alexander believes, too, that our houses hold our consciousness, our true sense of self. “Who we are” has a structure—it’s a house. Alexander and the patterns (reprinted

here and on the next nine pages) propose something startling—basing design on those emotional elements that most of us think of only as lucky by-products of chance: Will I have a favorite window, how will my room seem like mine? Simple pleasures, necessary needs. What we’ve called “The Spirit of Home.”

We feel a strong kinship to Alexander’s patterns—the impulse for what makes a real home is rooted in the things we know, in those rituals we enjoy, in those times of day and moods that stir us, and never think twice about. They aren’t phantoms, they’re authentic and real. With a season of so much celebrating upon us,

we’re reminded that “home” celebrates so much that’s extraordinary, every day. In this special section, we set out to explore

## 141 • A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

NO ONE CAN BE CLOSE to others, without also having frequent opportunities to be alone . . . In terms of space, what is required to solve the problem? Simply, a room of one’s own. A place to go and close the door; a retreat.

## 251 • DIFFERENT CHAIRS

PEOPLE ARE DIFFERENT SIZES; they sit in different ways . . . Never furnish any place with chairs that are identically the same. Choose a variety of different chairs, some big, some small, some softer than others . . . some very old, some new, with arms, without, some wicker, some wood . . .

## 176 • GARDEN SEAT

**MAKE A QUIET PLACE in the garden—a private enclosure with a comfortable seat, thick planting, sun. Pick the place for the seat carefully; pick the place that will give you the most intense kind of solitude.**

that spirit. Each story that follows shows ways of discovering and creating that spirit. Reminders that home isn't just

having a place to withdraw to; it's creating a place that gives you back yourself in the most important ways: a small, restful urban garden; a room that's purely a library, a pocket of civilization. Says Alexander, "A house will become rich if a *feeling* of that kind wells up in the house and the people who live there. It's got to come from them—belongings, the way the family behaves, what the children do. Gradually all this rubs off on a house . . ."

**FIFTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD** Alexander, Viennese-born but raised in Britain, was a mathematics prodigy. He still has the tousled, serious but sincere air of the child prodigy about him, determined and deliberate in conversation to reveal his thoughts precisely, grinning with pleasure to have described something well. He never leaves anything, the smallest point, not understood. He stops periodically to be sure I *know* what is meant. He wants it to be ordinary enough for anyone to understand, but he also wants to share his wonder in gaining a glimpse of truth. He followed a Cambridge degree in mathematics with one in architecture, a subject much closer to his heart. Yet his interest in architecture was not its cut-and-dry design-by-number rationality. He was fascinated with ways in which a building "did" things for people, harbored intimate feelings in its very domesticity. How could the comfort of reading on a rainy day and sun flooding quietly across the kitchen counter upon which one is assembling the eggs for a cake share some universal spirit? Alexander's patterns were developed by him and his colleagues from observations of just those domestic things. They are an extraordinary "repertoire of relationships." Alexander says, "We give names to things but we don't give many names to relationships. Our language is full of nouns." So, in thinking about a window in a house, *A Pattern Language* gives us first the importance of a view: "It is a beautiful thing . . . Don't spoil it by building huge windows that gape at it incessantly." In detailing a roof, a pattern reveals how shape suggests the feeling of shelter: "The roof must not only be large and visible, but it must also include living quarters . . ." An attic. Patterns used as pieces of a language describe greater relationships, and

eventually form a unique kind of literacy—a literacy of feeling and spirit contained in a place. Hopefully, they make a poem, something built to contain mystery, an access to the heart. Says Alexander, with a quiet attention on his face, as he tries to grasp a pattern behind all the others, "What the house supports is life, that the people who live in it be themselves, that they know that and feel that. I don't think that this is over-optimistic. I'm talking about demonstrable things that happen when you build."

In 1982, a young couple outside Berkeley, California, Anna and André Sala, asked Alexander to design and build a first house for them. It would also be Alexander's first chance to try the patterns in an actual house in this country. Elaborate models, false sympathies and "fancy presentations" at architectural firms had discouraged what the Salas imagined was the most important thing they had ever decided to do. Then, almost accidentally, through a friend, they learned of Alexander. "We go to Chris' house, which is part of his Center for Environmental Structures in Berkeley, and it's a mess, books all over the place. No models or fancy presentations. He has very little to show us, just a simple chart."

**THE SALAS REALIZED** with disbelief that what Alexander was inviting them to design, with his help, was a house based on themselves—not a style, or "personal touches," but a house that sheltered the soul of their family. He proposed that they themselves imagine the house first, design it with that vision directing his actual plan, mock up each room at every step of the way so that it could be sat in and "felt," then finally build. The patterns would provide the stepping stones—their choices became the realities you will see ahead.

Now four years finished, with a recent addition by Alexander completed as well, Anna says of their house, "We had to put a lot of energy and thought into the building we were making. But it's your *home*, where you're going to live, and stay." Says architect

Alexander, with a smiling, genuine marvel at the power of the experience he shared with the Salas in "getting a home," "Making a building is not different really from an act of kindness, a small spark of joyfulness which is utterly persuasive in its own right. That's all there is to it."

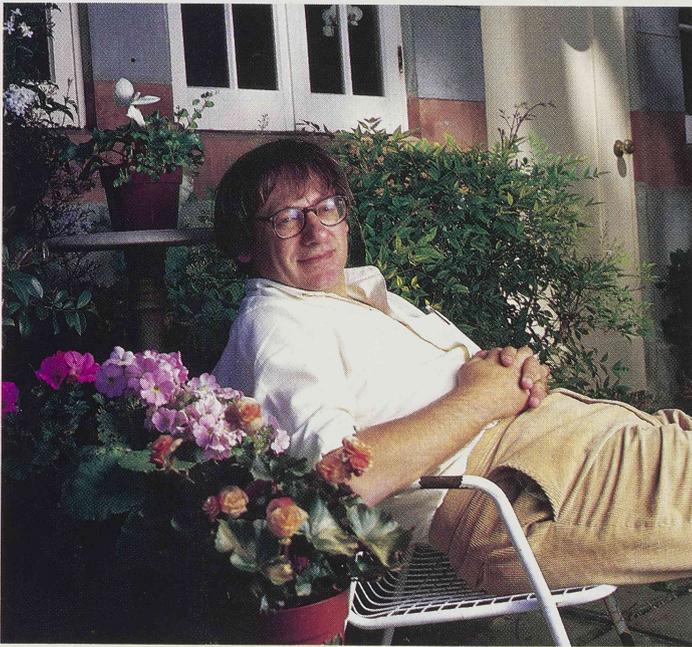
—William L. Hamilton

## 242 • FRONT DOOR BENCH

**BUILD a special bench outside the front door where people from inside can sit comfortably for hours on end and watch the world go by.**

## 139 • FARMHOUSE KITCHEN

MAKE THE KITCHEN BIGGER than usual, big enough to include the “family room” space . . . Make it large enough to hold a good big table and chairs . . . make it a bright and comfortable room.



GEORGE STEINMETZ

**L**OOK, JUST tell me the most comfortable room that you've ever been in and what your feelings are about it," architect Christopher Alexander (above) recalls asking the Salas, initiating an extraordinary process. The farmhouse-style kitchen (right) was fleshed out from a distant memory, dreamt into a final design.

"André began talking about a family friend's kitchen, in a farmhouse in the south of France. How he used to go there as a boy, that it was really just a table and a fireplace. There was incredible authenticity to what he described—it felt so unbelievably real." So they went to the site and started the house. "We started putting up

pieces of plywood and trying to imagine. I said, 'Tell me where the fireplace is, and where's the door? Which way is it out to the garden?'

André could imagine all of this. And that's where we began." Now, Anna Sala says, "The big kitchen table is the center of the house. The kids write and do their homework at it, we eat on it, the spirit of the house is exactly that—that it is to be lived in and used, not just looked at." And Alexander concurs—"It's their attitude of mind, of heart, which is where the richness comes from. I don't kid myself that the architect is the one who puts it in. It comes from the family." *See Resources*

*Produced and written by William L. Hamilton; Photos: Mark Darley*

## 181 • THE FIRE

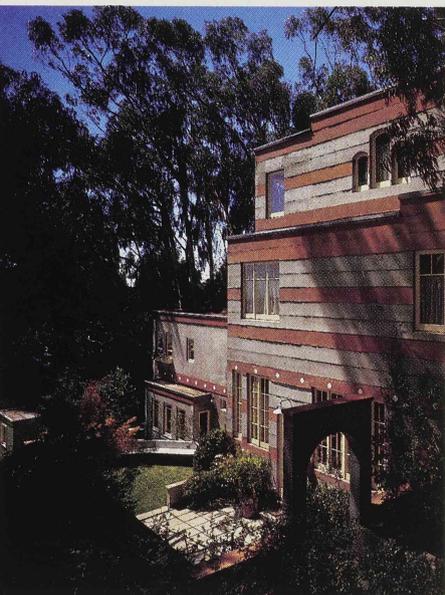
THERE IS NO substitute for fire . . . Build the fire in a common space—perhaps in the kitchen—where it provides a natural focus for talk and dreams and thought.





## 161 • SUNNY PLACE

**INSIDE** a south-facing court, or garden, or yard, find the spot between the building and the outdoors which gets the best sun. Develop this spot as a special sunny place—make it the important outdoor room, a place to work in the sun, or a place for a swing and some plants, a place to sunbathe.



**OUTDOOR PLACES** were as well-considered as rooms. "When we built this house, I learned how to be humble about things—there was no reason for me to be the tyrant of my world," says André. "Here was a site, it had trees, and life. We needed to put a house here. We were catalysts, more than people who came here and imposed something never meant to be."

## 135 • TAPESTRY OF LIGHT AND DARK

**CREATE ALTERNATING** areas of light and dark throughout the building, in such a way that people naturally walk toward the light, whenever they are going to important places: seats, entrances, stairs, passages, places of special beauty, and make other areas darker, to increase the contrast.



## 168 • CONNECTION TO THE EARTH

**CONNECT THE** building to the earth . . . by building a series of paths and terraces and steps around the edge. Place them deliberately to make the boundary ambiguous—so that it is impossible to say exactly where the building stops and earth begins . . . Use the connection to the earth to form the ground for outdoor rooms and entrances . . .



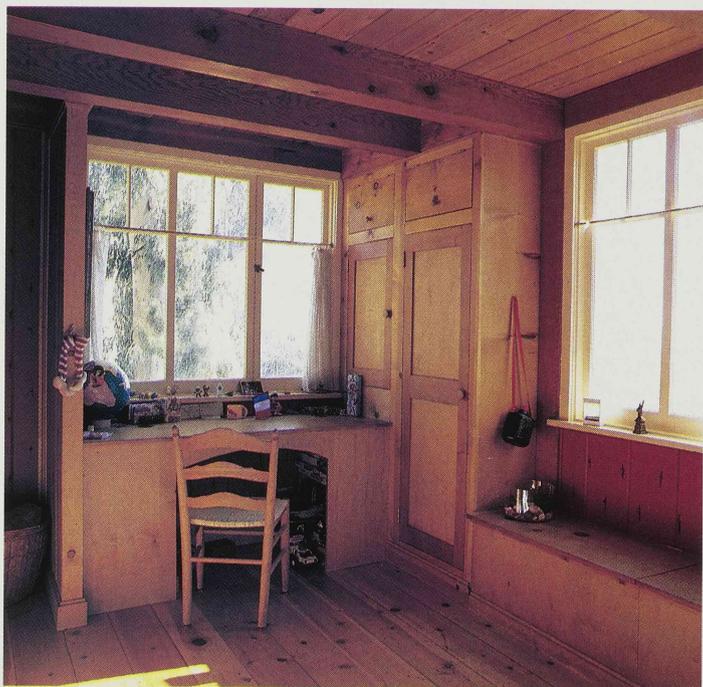
## 250 • WARM COLORS

NATURAL WOOD, sunlight, bright colors are warm . . . the warmth of the colors in a room makes a great deal of difference between comfort and discomfort.

## 204 • SECRET PLACE

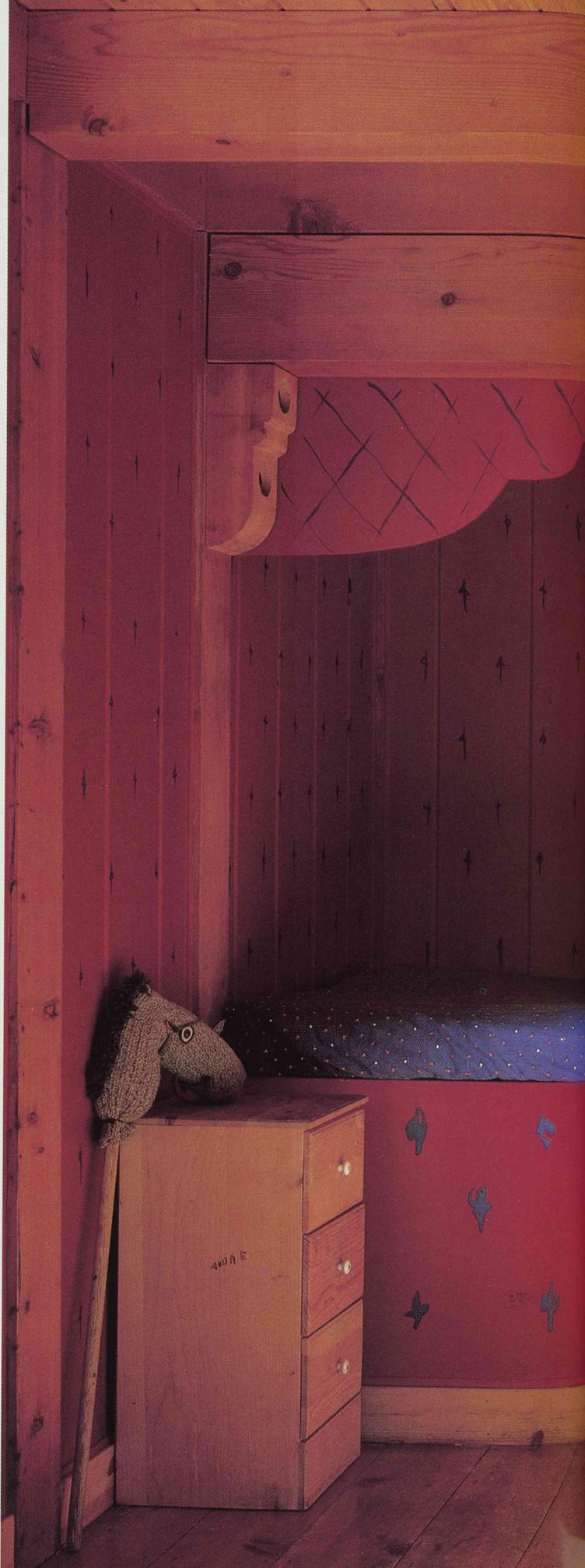
WHERE CAN the need for concealment be expressed; the need for something precious to be lost, and . . . revealed? To live in a home where there is such a place alters your experience . . . invites you to put something precious there.

**B**ECAUSE OF the spirited "public life" of the Salas' farmhouse kitchen, private realms in the house become more intensely personal places for each family member. A children's bedroom (right) has two sleeping alcoves—rooms within the room to foster a child's almost magical sense of being alone. Says Anna, "Little André won't sleep anywhere else—his bed is his place in the universe." Alexander designed a built-in (below) with a child's "cave" beneath: Asked his favorite spot, little André replied, without hesitation, "Under my desk."



## 188 • BED ALCOVE

BEDROOMS MAKE NO SENSE . . . Don't put single beds in empty rooms called bedrooms, but instead put individual bed alcoves off rooms with other nonsleeping functions, so the bed itself becomes a tiny private haven.





## 239 • SMALL PANES

WHEN PLATE-GLASS WINDOWS became possible, people thought that they would put us more directly in touch with nature. In fact, they do the opposite.

**A** SMALL GESTURE, like watering flowers, or a small detail, like a ceramic tile, can be a glimpse of truth into the life of a house. Alexander recalls, "The leopards in the floor took months. First it was a very casual thought, then I suddenly began to see these things in it—the vision of the room, animated by these leopards, was simple and powerful. It was as though its life was coming forward through these things." Raised flowers [Pattern 245] (below) bring the garden to an upstairs bedroom—tending them becomes an emotional attachment of living in that particular room.

## 192 • WINDOWS OVERLOOKING LIFE

... PLACE THEM in positions which give the best possible views out over life: activities in streets, quiet gardens, anything different from the indoor scene.

## 249 • ORNAMENT

ALL PEOPLE have the instinct to decorate their surroundings . . . Corners, places where materials meet, . . . windows . . . the place where one wall meets another . . . all these are natural places which call out for ornament.

