
Book Review

A holistic approach to architecture: The Felicja Blumental Music Center and Library

Nili Portugali

Am Oved Publishers, Tel Aviv, Israel, 2011, 120pp., \$39.00, ISBN: 978-9651322532

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Nili Portugali is an Israeli architect who strives to implement the theory of wholeness developed by architect Christopher Alexander in books like *A Pattern Language* (1977) and the four-volume *The Nature of Order* (2002–2005). In this well-illustrated volume, Portugali describes efforts to create architectural and environmental wholeness by presenting her Felicja Blumental Music Center and Library, completed in 1996 in Tel Aviv. In designing this complex of auditorium, music library and musical-instrument museum, Portugali sought to generate a building that is experientially and esthetically integrated into its larger urban neighborhood, which has important historical significance at both local and national levels.

Providing text in both English and Hebrew, the book is arranged in a series of chapters that presents the building, its genesis, its urban context and Alexander's theory of wholeness from which Portugali draws design inspiration. The book begins with an introductory chapter by Israeli cultural geographer Maoz Amaryahu, who presents the historical geography of Bialik Hill, the Tel Aviv neighborhood where the building is located. This site is one of the few hills in Tel Aviv, and by the 1920s and 1930s, was a built-up neighborhood where distinguished Tel Aviv citizens had their homes, including Chaim Nachman Bialik, an important Tel Aviv figure associated with a national revival of Hebrew culture. The pathway on which his house is located eventually took the name of Bialik Street, at the end of which developed a plaza – Bialik Square – that came to play an important role 'in the ceremonial fabric of Tel Aviv' (p. 115).

Portugali's building is located on this plaza, which became her starting point for envisioning her design. She explains that 'my intention was to design a building that would integrate organically with the square' (p. 97). In addition, the commission required that she incorporate in the new structure a small portion of the façade of a 1931 residence demolished in 1994. To move toward

a context-sensitive design, she describes how she stood in the square for long periods of time, attempting to sense the ambience of the place:

The key question I asked myself ... was, what would be the right language that would create a dialogue between the new contemporary building I design and the historical square, that will preserve and enhance the spirit of the square, which is so human and so right ... I was not trying to reconstruct the past nor was I trying to disassociate myself from it by using an architectural language that would impose an entirely new order. Rather, I considered any means which I could identify as having the capacity to create and enhance the dialogue. (p. 97)

The completed building is a four-story structure with an open porch and lobby with full views to Bialik Square. The ground floor includes the lobby and a 103-seat auditorium for lectures and musical performances. On one side of the lobby is a wide staircase with high windows providing natural light to all spaces within the building. On the first floor is a lending library, and on the second and third floors, respectively, are the museum and an audiovisual library that includes a roof terrace with sea views.

Throughout the design process, Portugali drew on an interrelated set of Alexander-inspired patterns that helped integrate each architectural part in the larger building whole. For example, in envisioning the relationship between building and square, she held in mind a set of patterns that included: (i) establishing building dimensions in sync with the human scale of the square; (ii) evoking a serene outside ambience by painting the building a bright orange complementing the plaza's greenery and the blue of the sky; (iii) incorporating in the façade a series of jutting cornices that 'belong' to both building and square and thus knit them together visually; (iv) designing the building's entry porch to

double as a stage for musical performances listened to by an audience sitting in the plaza, and thus ‘creating a physical and human connection between the building and the square’ (p. 96).

Portugali studied architecture with Alexander at the University of California at Berkeley from 1979 to 1981, and this experience has clearly shaped her approach to programming, design and construction. Throughout the text, she has harsh words for modernist architecture, whether of the twentieth century or in its contemporary, edgier versions. Like Alexander, Portugali believes that beauty and effective design involve objective qualities that can be discovered and actualized through careful looking, thoughtful programming and inspired design. She strives to make buildings that are ‘endowed with a timeless relevance and that touch our hearts and have the power to release feelings’ (p. 102). In working toward this end, she emphasizes two questions that she holds in mind throughout the design process: First, what are the patterns and processes grounding a right relationship between architectural parts and the building whole? Second, what are the qualities that sustain a ‘feeling of unity in a building?’ (p. 106).

This volume is a useful complement to Portugali’s earlier *The Act of Creation and the Spirit of Place* (Stuttgart: Edition Axel Menges, 2006), which laid out her design philosophy in broader terms. Although the chapters of her new book could be better arranged and the music center’s ‘pattern language’ could be explicated in greater detail, this book is significant because it demonstrates that Alexander’s theory of wholeness can be given architectural flesh and generate buildings that are esthetically pleasing and responsive to human needs. There are very few contemporary architects or architectural firms attempting or even expressing interest in an architecture of wholeness. In this sense, Portugali’s work is important because it demonstrates that buildings evoking Alexander’s ‘quality without a name’ are possible, though demanding an on-going, intensive engagement with context, tectonics and client needs.

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