In Pursuit of a Living Architecture

Continuing Christopher Alexander's Quest for a Humane and Sustainable Building Culture

Edited by

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In Pursuit of a Living Architecture:
Continuing Christopher Alexander's Quest for a Humane and Sustainable Building Culture

Kyriakos Pontikis and Yodan Rofè (eds.)

In the chapters of this book, former students and collaborators of Christopher Alexander continue to explore the central concepts of his approach, connecting them explicitly to the urgent need for a more sustainable energy- and resource-conscious building culture.

The book's three parts address conceptual perspectives of Alexander's work and the methodological development of the "pattern language" approach over the last twenty years. They also reflect on built projects, ranging from small neighborhoods to buildings and interiors, showing how these illustrate the concepts and themes recurrent throughout the book.

This book represents the greater movement of which it is a part, one dedicated to pursuing a practice of architecture that has at its core a concern for human well-being and the continued care of our shared environment. Through their manifold and diverse contributions, its authors show that a truly sustainable architecture must also be humane, and that a truly humane architecture is fundamentally sustainable.

Editor Bios:

Kyriakos Pontikis, architect and Professor of Interior Design at California State University, Northridge. His courses and research focused on humane and sustainable design and architecture. He had over twenty years of professional experience in Europe and the US. Professor Pontikis passed away in 2015.

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CHAPTER 18

Architecture is Made for People: A Holistic-Phenomenological Approach to Architecture

Nili Portugali

> The aim of this essay is to present my particular interpretation of the holistic-phenomenological worldview in practice. I will demonstrate how this approach, as well as the planning process I follow - a process fundamentally different from conventional ones - were implemented in a residential neighborhood I designed and built in the social, economic and physical structure of the collective known in Israel as a 'kibbutz'. Hopefully, it raises discussion and a challenge to 21st-century architecture as to how we should intervene in a moral and human way within an existing environment - urban or natural - that we must respect and preserve when integrating within it new contemporary buildings.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to present my particular interpretation of the holistic-phenomenological worldview in practice using one selected project I designed and built in Israel. In recent years this worldview stands at the forefront of scientific discourse in disciplines like cosmology, neurobiology, psychology, particle physics, and brain sciences. This worldview is linked to recent theories of complexity, and is in convergence with the fundamentals of Buddhist teachings.

The purpose of architecture, as I see it, is first and foremost to create a human environment for human beings. The real challenge of current architectural practice is to make the best use of the potential inherent in our modern technological age. However,, modern society has lost the value of man and thus created a feeling of alienation between man and the environment. Buildings affect our lives and the fate of the physical environment in which we live over the course of many years. Therefore, their real test is the test of time. The great buildings, villages and temples in which man feels 'at home' – the places we

always want to return to, and thus have timeless relevance, are the ones that touch our hearts and have the power to create a deep emotional experience. There are different ways to describe buildings that have this timeless quality, buildings that convey an inherent spiritual experience. Frank Lloyd Wright called them "the ones which take you beyond words." Quoted by Stephen Grabow, Christopher Alexander says: "The buildings that have spiritual value are a diagram of the inner universe or the picture of the inner soul" (Grabow 1983). The Dalai Lama calls this timeless quality "The great self" or the "nature of reality"(His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 1997).

Although this timeless quality exists in buildings rooted in different cultures and traditions, the emotional experience they generate is common to all people, no matter where or from what culture they come from. Thus, Christopher Alexander's basic assumption is that behind human architecture there are universal and eternal codes common to us all as human beings, and that there is absolute truth underlying beauty and comfort that reflect the *"innate patterns"* (used by Chomsky's terminology of the spoken language), which are already structured in our mind.

Contemporary architecture (and art) sought to dissociate itself from the world of emotions and connect the design process to the world of ideas, thus creating a rational relation between building and man, devoid of any emotion.

The basic argument presented here is that in order to change the feeling of the environment, and create places and buildings we really feel 'at home' in and want to live in, what is needed is not a change of style or fashion, but a transformation of the mechanistic worldview underlying current thought and approaches.

In this essay I will demonstrate how this approach, as well as my unique planning process stemming from it, strictly related to the spirit of the place (based on the way things actually exist already on site) generate that common spiritual experience people undergo in buildings endowed with soul. This was implemented in a residential neighborhood designed by me in Kibbutz Ma'agan Michael facing the Mediterranean Sea and was in relation to the unique physical and social reality of the place it was planned and built on.

This approach tries to identify and base the design process on the Patterns (needs) common to us all as human beings, codes that cross cultures and link them together in harmony, and applies a planning process which structurally responds to the identity of each cultural and social group we build for, and to the uniqueness of each site. I do hope that by implementing this approach I can contribute something towards replacing current conceptions and approaches

whereby political motives and egotistical ambitions create the kind of architecture that forms a real threat to the physical and human environment we live in.

Figure 5: Panoramic view of the neighborhood, kibbutz Ma'agan Michael.
Source: Portugali,2001.

STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN KIBBUTZ LIFE REQUIRE A NEW CONCEPT OF HOUSING - FROM QUANTITATIVE UNIFORMITY TO QUALITATIVE EQUALITY

The social, economic and physical structure of the collective known as a 'kibbutz' was founded in Israel in the early 20th century. Its uppermost value since its very beginning was equality, translated in most realms of community life not as equality of opportunities - in its qualitative sense - but rather in its quantitative sense, as formal uniformity. This dogmatic equality obliterated the self-identity and uniqueness of the individual and saw him only as part of the collective.

In recent years, however, this old conception of equality has been redefined in many respects. The social structure reverted back to the nuclear family, with children raised at home and no longer in a communal house where they were regarded as the possession of the community as a whole. Wages, previously based on the notion that every member contributed according to his or her own ability but supported according to his or her needs, have now become differential, based on one's contribution.

Housing in the kibbutz is perhaps the last fortress of the old and simplistic conception of equality, a conception that now more than ever can change. According to this conception, houses are regarded as static models of predetermined uniform shape, arbitrarily positioned on the building site.

Environmental factors, such as the direction of light or the angle open to the view on any specific plot, are disregarded and the result is that all houses have an identical plan including the same elevations. Thus a tenant whose window happens to face the orchard has the advantage on the one whose window faces the cow shed.

This approach created a qualitative inequality between the houses and inequality of opportunities among the tenants. Moreover, the outcome of this dogmatic approach was that houses built in the desert environment of the Negev or the hilly Galilean environment were exactly the same.

The new model I implemented in the design of the new houses in kibbutz Ma'agan Michael was fundamentally different. The planning process I adopted was based on patterns common to all the houses, patterns that grew out both of the social structure of the kibbutz and the geographic location facing the sea. When these common patterns were used in different site conditions, a variety of houses emerged sharing one architectural language.

Figure 2: House Type A Figure 3: House Type B
Source: Portugali, 1999.

Kibbutz Ma'agan Michael is situated on a hill, with the new neighborhood on the western side that faces the sea
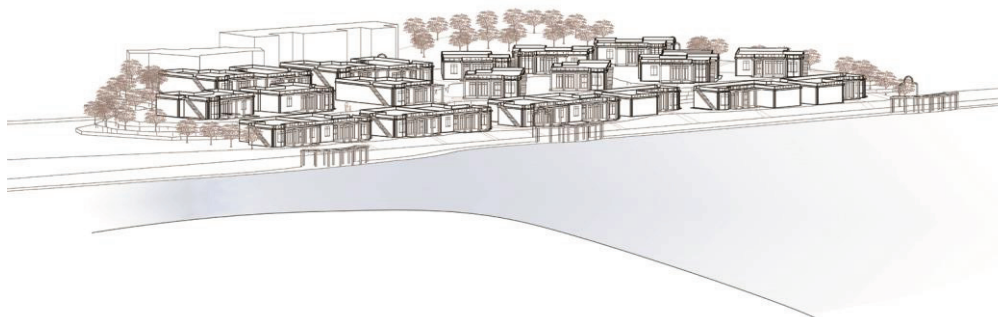
Figure 4: To determine the level of each house so one could see the sea while sitting on the terrace, I used a crane to lift me up to where I could see the sea.
Source: Portugali, 1999.

Each planning decision, from the positioning of the house on the site, through the determination of the direction of its entrance in relation to the path, to the location of each window, was taken on the site of each plot.
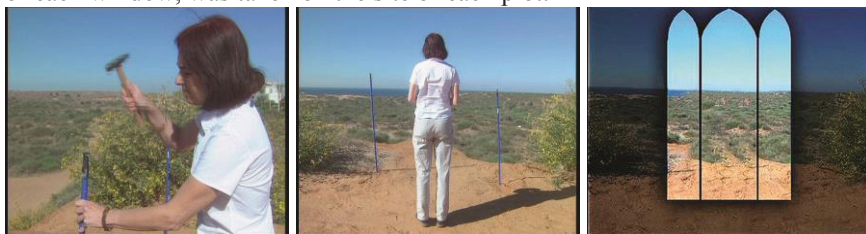

Figure 5: Each planning decision was taken on the site literally marked on the ground.
Source: Portugali, 1998.

The position of each house in relation to the others was determined so as to ensure that each one has an open view to the water and can enjoy the breeze coming from the sea.

Figure 6: The position of each house was determined on the site in relation to the other houses to ensure an open view to the sea.
Source: Portugali, 2001.

To determine the level of each house so one could see the sea while sitting on the terrace, I used a crane to lift me up to where I could see the sea. This height was measured and the level of the house was determined accordingly.

Figure 7: View of the water from a house's terrace.
Source: Portugali, 2001.

At the center of the neighborhood, a path was planned connecting the promenade that runs along the water and the path that runs from the communal dining hall at the heart of the kibbutz to the neighborhood. What dictated the course of the path was my wish to see the water from every spot along the path.

Figure 8: What dictated the course of the path was the wish to see the water from every
spot along it.
Source: Portugali, 2001.

The houses were arranged in small clusters sharing a communal open space.
Unlike the traditional pattern in the kibbutz, where all open spaces - called 'the
lawn' - are communal and buildings are dispersed arbitrarily in between, the
secondary paths running between houses defined in a non-formal way with no
fences the "private" zone of each family.

Figure 9: The "private" zone of each family (new in the collective), defined in a non-
formal way by the paths running between the houses, generated a new pattern of behavior
where each family started to grow its own garden.
Source: Portugali, 2001.

This sense of "private territory" unexpectedly created a new reality in which each
family started to grow its own garden. This new pattern of behavior could not

have developed in the traditional model where the open spaces between the houses were planned as a property used and maintained by everyone and therefore of no one.

At this stage the site plan was completed. The position of each house in the neighborhood in relation to the paths and its position in relation to the sea produced different types of house plans. On plots where the entrance from the path was in the same direction as the sea view, type A plan emerged.

Figure 10: House Type A. The entrance to the house from the path is through the garden. Both are in the direction of the sea view.
Source: Portugali, 2001.

On plots where the entrance was from the opposite direction of the sea view, type B plan developed, and the entrance was through the opposite side of the garden and living areas.

Figure 11: Type B - Entrance Floor. The entrance to the house from the path is from the opposite side of the garden and has a direct view to the sea through the living room and dining area.

Source: Portugali, 1999.

In front of each house there is a bicycle rack (the only means of transport allowed within the boundaries of the kibbutz). Next to the entrance door a place for muddy boots was allocated, a prominent symbol of the kibbutz.

The walls are all whitewashed light blue, complemented by regionally quarried sandstone characterizing the construction details.

The introduction of a conceptually new model in a very rigid social framework became possible now, as a result of an overall change in the reality of the kibbutz communities, a change that was inevitable in the twenty-first century.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nili Portugali is a practicing architect for more than 40 years (born in Israel). She was a senior lecturer at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Department of Architecture, Jerusalem, and at the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning at the Technion, Haifa. Her multidisciplinary work in the Visual arts and Architecture focuses on both practice and theory closely connected to the holistic-phenomenological school of thought. She is a graduate of the 'Architectural Association School of Architecture', London (A.A Dip 1973). She did post graduate studies in Architecture and Buddhism at the University of California, Berkeley, working and participating in research with Prof. Christopher Alexander at the 'Center for Environmental Structure', Berkeley. She did selected postgraduate studies in film at Tel-Aviv University.

She has won prizes in competitions for her work and her projects were exhibited in the Venice and San Paolo Architecture Biennale. Her work is documented in books; the Dictionair De l'Architeture Du XXe Scielle, Hazan press, France; journals; daily press and on television.

Her first book: *The Act of Creation and the Spirit of Place: A Holistic-Phenomenological Approach to Architecture*, Edition Axel Menges, Stuttgart, was listed in the books of the year by the Royal Institute of British Architects (R.I.B.A). Her second book*: A Holistic Approach to Architecture: "The Felicja Blumenthal Music Center and Library", Tel Aviv*, was published by Am Oved Publishers Ltd, Tel-Aviv 2011.

Portugali has recently completed directing her feature length *Essay/Art film* for which she wrote the script, did the production design, completing post production.