

PARTICIPATION IN DESIGN

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PREFACE

I had been in business designing and building houses using this method on the North Shore of Vancouver for eight years before writing this architectural thesis under the patient guidance of Murray Silverstein of the University of California, Berkeley over three years.

Murray is co-author of “A Pattern Language” along with Christopher Alexander and others in which they created over 400 what they considered “archetypal patterns” for clients to choose which ones they thought applicable.

What I discovered as introduced to me by former fellow architecture students from the University of British Columbia was that “living patterns” developed directly from the clients were more meaningful and productive. As a test, I presented two sets of clients with the 'archetypal patterns' receiving mostly negative responses. Actually, both parties were somewhat annoyed that I should offer them ideas for consideration which had been developed by others. When Progressive Architecture 6:86 did a review of Christopher Alexander, they included my name and very different approach.

In a way, this process could be considered as a practical application of my M.F.A. (M.B.A) thesis (1972, Instituto Allende, Mexico), entitled “Evolution and Art”. In it I explored the concept of psychogenesis which view man not from what he is or seems but from what he may become, i.e., his possible evolution.

Evolution of man in general is synonymous with the evolution of individuals in current time. An integral part of this process is self awareness and so when I reconnected with my friends who had a design/build business in Deep Cove, North Vancouver who were promoting self-expression of people in the design of their homes, I was instantly attracted to the possibilities.

One's immediate environment is crucial to personal development. Unless your dwelling can be made genuinely one's own, it cannot help but offer resistance to this goal. My design partner (Charles Reif, B.Arch, UBC) and I witnessed personal growth in clients who participated in the design of their house and who openly admitted as much.

By allowing the participation to continue in construction this personal evolution continues. As they actually do some of the work, the place becomes more their own down especially to detailing which often can make or break projects.

There is no question in my mind that we create the reality that we live in, even to the health of our bodies. The Bible often equates 'home' with consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

The way in which we make architecture is changing. Many who live in past paradigm may still prefer the current relationship between architect and client, the tradition of architect as sole designer is no longer valid. People, groups and corporations are demanding more involvement.

The incredible diversity we see in designs reflects what is within us. Although this may seem at first 'progressive', many dislike the plurality and incoherence of our cityscapes and neighbourhoods. Buildings pop up with little or no regard for their neighbours and often their inhabitants. To almost everyone's 'artistic eye', our architectural environment seem never to equal the streets, buildings or cities of old. It is precisely why there are regulations protecting historical areas. Perhaps surprisingly, the culprit is democracy and how democratic thought has not only permeated our politics but has raised havoc in our social lives and changing the way we make our environment. Cultures, the sexes, age groups, even animals and plants are demanding or obtaining rights. Even the planet to some has environmental "rights".

Psychologist Alfred Adler warned us that a truly democratic society would eventually release a previously unknown aspect of our human potential, namely, a basic disregard for authority. Until recently there had always existed figures of real power who controlled our lives even to the point of our aesthetic tastes. Even in emerging democracies people no longer tolerate any kind of coercion. Within the family, one person is no longer the head of the household. This is an age of participation and cooperation and even young children insist on an equitable role (1). There is, however, a risk in this freedom from authority and that is a proportionate loss of belonging. This loss is so prevalent in our society that the need to belong which before was almost automatically satisfied has now become one of our strongest motivations.

In the past, this fundamental requirement of "meaning" was fully defined before we were born. We knew our place and the places of our lives reflected the meaning of our lives. In such environments we feel at home, i.e., we belong.

THE PROCESS

"Participation in Design" is a process which can make our environment meaningful again in light of this democratic spirit. It is not a mechanical process nor does it offer formulations for constructions in a universal sense. It involves a creative participation

of any number of people who have come together to build. More reliance is placed on group dialogue in which the inherent building language of each participant is allowed to speak. We need, however, to recognize and believe in the private identity of each individual and be willing to “concretize” the meanings which constitute his personal “existential content”. (2)

How can we create a place which will generate this “feeling at home”? Since for many the surroundings are more alienating than meaningful, we can begin our search with the places of our childhood. The house in which were raised is, “...a real cosmos in every sense” (3). In this first house as we pass a door we sense for the first time entering and leaving. In our first dining room we learned social interaction and relationships to other activities and spaces. As we look out our first window we see the outside world in relation to the safety and feelings of dwelling. In our first backyard, we learn exactly how it feels to walk on rocky or sandy soils, to be under cloudy or clear skies or to play under aspen or eucalyptuses. Everything which surrounds these first experiences could become standards by which all subsequent experiences are compared either positively or negatively. As we progress along other meaningful experiences become cast in memory.

The participation process seeks to uncover these unique images and to test for their possible validity in a meaningful expression today.

Bachelard believes that the chief benefit of the house is that it shelters daydreaming; it protects the dreamer allowing him to dream in peace. In other words, spaces identified with solitude are creative spaces. Accordingly, if a client requests a contemplative place in his dwelling, these earlier experiences could be invaluable.

As mentioned, our creative contemplative spaces are often the most important and so when we came to design our first house and our personal areas I had an instant image of my favourite table just below ground level of the main UBC library and copied it with a close booklined room and high window that I could not look out. In this house, it was a translucent skylight. You cannot get it exact as in my case I put in a small side window for air which I didn't have at school. My solution was an improved one but it definitely drew from the first experience. Even though at the School of Architecture we were able to design and build our own work space, it never came close to this simple table with books all around.

For my wife she chose to have a small nook off the Living Room. In our second house we found that we had repeated the same pattern only this time it was a corner off the kitchen hall next to the plant area. In retrospect we discovered that she had re-created, in both cases, attributes of a childhood desk arrangement which was a small desk in a shared room where she had spent many pleasurable hours reading books. In both design

processes there was no references to childhood experiences. The images of a work/daydreaming space were so strong, it wasn't necessary for her to reach beyond what was immediately available. In our third home she repeated it but included a “found pattern” by having a small couch in front of a fireplace just off the kitchen. By this time she was losing her sight with no need for a desk and only a set of shelves. In our temporary home, an old country manor, there was a couch in the large kitchen which neither of us had ever seen but so delightful. She could do her work and instantly get comfortably rest and linger. The kitchen had an old fashioned oil/wood cooking stove. In the new house we eventually we replaced a wood stove right in front of her couch with propane. She practically lives there. It is close to all her activities with laundry and bathroom a few steps away.

You may think that one could adapt to any space allotted for you as a 'study space' but as a counter point, in our second house, I specifically added a nook in a hallway with a build-in couch and window. I saw it somewhere (maybe in Pattern Language) and thought it would work. Never spent anytime there and no-one else did either. How many times do architects do this for their clients?

You could define a “found pattern” to be one that you instantly recognize as something you want in your house just as I did with my student table. In our current house, I am no longer in front of a desk but a built in table with a computer, a high window which I can't see out of (it is just there to bring light into the hallway beyond}. The venting window is to my back. Bookcases all around. I'm back at the UBC library! I didn't realize I had copied the high window of my student days until re-writing this thesis.

Unfortunately, not all living patterns are so easily determined. This is because we have lost touch with what Christopher Alexander refers to as “the nameless quality” deep within each of us, “.....the search which we make for this quality, in our lives, is the central search of any person, and the crux of any individual person's story. It is the search for those moments and situations when we are most alive. (4)

As designers, we want to assess those experiences which make us most alive. They are the key to making our environment or house alive, to help us once again to belong to something meaningful.

We are all unique clusters of emotions, feelings and ideas and there is no reason why this uniqueness cannot be expressed in design rather than being thrust on us by designers who assume they know better, say you should be 'contemporary' or even worse, give you the opportunity to brag that you live in a famous architect's house. Which reminds me of a rich woman on the West Coast who had an Arthur Erickson house. At a gathering, someone commented to her how great it must be to live in a house designed by him. Her response was in so many words that she didn't live there, it was only for parties.

Judge for yourself why. IMO, it must be rather chilly with all the glass on the not so nice days.

If, as philosophers tell us, reality is the product of the knowing being, why should intelligent and individualistic people be assimilated into the reality of the architect? One of the reasons we allow designers the privilege of designing our environment by themselves is due to one myth about perceptual reality which must be challenged before a participation process can begin in earnest. Philosophers from Plato to Kant have repeatedly stated that appearance is not reality. In other works, the world is not necessarily what it appears to be and therefore the perception of it must differ between individuals within the context of their accepted culture.

What this means for architecture is that all knowledge of the world is a matter of individual discernment and there cannot be a format of universally accepted aesthetics. This denies architects the rationale for perennial search for perfection based on a supposed unchanging and inherent human nature. Schools reinforce students to behave in such a manner. It is important to dispel this notion of universality as it is this idea more than any other which gives the architect authority to design for others.

A similar misguidedness is evident when the architect proclaims to his client that he will design a “contemporary” house or in another word “fashionable” (but he would never use that word). For a building to be alive it must come out of ourselves. Places and things of the mastermind are lifeless. They are so filled with the will of its maker that there is no room for the nature of its inhabitants or “its own nature” in Alexander's words. (5)

I've taken great liberty with Alexander in that reference. He was referring to egoless construction but in the context of designing a home, it is very applicable.

At this point I must make a distinction between designing something for those specifically who are going to live in it and public buildings for which there is no specific person. Great architects of the past had a sense of their times and created buildings and spaces which resonate today. Culture and sensibilities were more uniform in those days and so they had an easier time of it. However, Alexander and Silverstein (my advisor) did public buildings and spaces using a form of public participation as explained in their book, “The Oregon Experiment”. And yet, in the past Michelangelo received very specific instructions and revisions for the Sistine Chapel until he got it right (in the Pope's opinion!). We know how well that turned out. Two masterminds, cancel each other out, so to speak, giving it a wider appeal.

Speaking of art, another of my studies and practices, works of the “mastermind” are most appropriate because it is essentially an artist talking to himself. He may think he

is doing it for others or to alert others as in Picasso's *Guernica* but being around them I know it is an obsessive activity. Artists from the beginning have always had sharp societal evaluation and foresight to produce meaningful works. There are also “principles” of design generally accepted, that is, until the “Salon” was defrocked after which artists appealed to deeper emotions throwing aside anything outwardly rational yet nevertheless appealing. We are still going through this turmoil for the last 150 years. Much of what is considered “art” will be thrown into the dustbin. The problem for architecture is that there still remains the use of buildings as “sculpture”. “Street appeal” remains to this day the most important goal for most designers and unfortunately many clients. In other words, what does it look like and to hell with happens inside. We will just adapt, and usually we do but why should we? The participation process works from the inside out, not the other way around.

Of course, we don't want to present something unsightly. The skill is to balance the two but with function taking precedence or rather 'form following function'. Frank Lloyd Wright declared 'form and function as one' but as much as we revere his work (I designed my 2nd house inspired by Talison West), form must follow function as much as possible for in short time inhabitants realize they live in a house much more than look at it from the outside.

Another remarkable thing about participatory design is that visitors often instantly recognize the livability and comfort of the spaces. Is it perhaps they recognize their friends in the house itself? “This house is really you” is a comment I've heard a few times. One thing I'm pretty sure of, none have left their houses designed this way unless they had to. A few remain in excess of 40 years (to be confirmed).

For architecture to be meaningful, it must go beyond expressing the surface character of the times and even of its users. The designers must search directly for important spacial experiences particular to his clients. He must identify the life issues of the users and anticipate the objects, space and rituals related to those issues. (6).

For psychologist and architect Glen Lym, the house offers a unique opportunity: “The home, like the life it models, grows and decays. In seeking home, we bring our lives into a dialogue with our physical environment. We may create rigidifying or open and expansive home spatial orders. We may ingest the greater world or exclude it and reflect upon inner experiences. We may evolve ourselves in rented housing or build a house to custom fit our spatial orders. We may struggle for our internal order of home. In realizing our spatial order of home, we are embarked on a lifelong continuing journey. In seeking home and its location on earth, we spatialize our lives. We become architects for home and architects of our lives.” (7)

