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Mexicali Revisited

Christopher Alexander

Introduction

Seven years ago, a group of people under my direction built a few houses in Mexicali. The story of the construction is told in full in the book, *The Production of Houses*, which is being published by Oxford University Press in the summer of 1984.

Two of the people—at that time students—who played a very important role in the project were Dorit Fromm and Peter Bosselmann. A few months ago, Dorit had the idea that it would be helpful and interesting to visit the families and get their reactions seven years after construction to evaluate the extent to which we had been successful, and to what extent we had made mistakes.

A summary of their results is presented in the following article. I am very delighted that it is being published and that it appears at the time that the book about the project is published.

Since the authors' analysis is quite extensive, I will not try to add to their detailed observations about the families' feelings. However, I want to take this opportunity to make one important overall point about the project, to comment on it, and to underline it.

The dead and lifeless quality of modern housing projects is well-known. Whether we are talking about government housing of the type built by Infonavid in Mexico, or the typical condominium apartments built all over the United

States, we are all familiar with the abstract housing of modern times. This abstract housing is usually unrelated to people and somehow fixes the dead hand of its impress so strongly on them that the houses never have the chance to become human, even in time. With housing projects of this type, there is a grave danger that the world will gradually be filled with plastic and with untransformable environments that bear the mark and feeling of the machine process, of rigid money, rigid technology, and a rigid social process. It does not matter whether this terrible result is produced by socialistic good will, as in the case of public housing, or by the capitalistic desire for profit, as in the example of American condominium development.

In both cases the outcome is the same. The world is robbed of the fundamental humanness of the environment and people, within the process of development that they are given, no longer have the power to create anything different.

The main hypothesis put forward in *The Production of Houses* is that housing becomes better at a fundamental level only when the pattern of control is deeply changed.

Now, seven years after the families in Mexicali built their houses, we can begin to judge whether this hypothesis is really true or not.

What I find exhilarating about the project and about the observations recorded here by Peter and Dorit, is the way in which the passage of time has genuinely involved the

families, and the fact that these families have deeply and radically continued the process of design and construction.

By conventional standards, this may seem a small point. Indeed, by present architectural standards, one might even wonder if the families have not "spoiled" the design. The original form of the houses is already changed, almost unrecognizably, in many cases. The original design of the houses is, therefore, lost. In some ways, the present condition of the houses is so different and so "ordinary" that an architect using the standards of the 1980s might wonder whether the original architecture has perhaps not been superseded, or made irrelevant, because its contribution, as physical form, is gradually becoming more and more invisible as the houses are slowly buried and transformed by the many, many changes made by the families every year.

But, in my mind, this is the triumph of the project and the real proof of its success.

In the book we speculate a great deal about the way that the families were changed in their feelings of power, in their attitudes, and in the ways in which they were liberated, able to feel responsible and completely in charge of their own future, of their own lives.

This speculation was based on limited examination of the statements made by the families and on guesses about their enthusiasm seven years ago.

Now, seven years later, we see that this was not merely hopeful speculation, but solid fact. The lives of these families did change in a fundamental way. They did become liberated in the process of their work with us. The process of laying out their houses and making their dreams come true in physical reality did fundamentally transform their lives.

Clearly, the active, creative quality in their lives, which began to show itself in their work with us, has established itself as a permanent part of their everyday attitude towards the world. It is quite clear also from what we see in their houses, that these people feel completely free to do what they want, that they do what is necessary and comfortable for them, and they do it easily and promptly.

They are no longer prisoners in any sense of the feeling shared by so many millions that they must accept blindly whatever abstract housing is given them. Instead, the human environment, the physical world in which they live, has become something lively, molded at will and made to conform to their lives, needs, wishes, talents, and fantasies.

The world they live in is now their *own* world. They have been permanently changed by their experience.

The hope we had when we first built these houses with them, that we might be able to effect a fundamental transformation in the quality of life, has been realized, because what is now there is

absolutely and triumphantly theirs, not ours.

A handful of people on the earth has been liberated permanently by their experience with an unusual housing process.

The true meaning of a possible architecture of the future, in which people are deeply related to the earth and to their buildings, has, in this small example, been shown.

Now we need to do it on a larger scale.