The Timeless Way of Building

Christopher Alexander

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with love and thanks
to Ingrid, Sara, and Peter

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THE QUALITY

To seek the timeless way we must first know the quality without a name.

2. There is a central quality which is the root criterion of life and spirit in a man, a town, a building, or a wilderness. This quality is objective and precise, but it cannot be named.

3. The search which we make for this quality, in our

own 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. In order to define this quality in buildings and in towns, we must begin by understanding that every place is given its character by certain patterns of events that keep on happening there.

5. These patterns of events are always interlocked with certain geometric patterns in the space. Indeed, as we shall see, each building and each town is ultimately made out of these patterns in the space, and out of nothing else: they are the atoms and the molecules from which a building or a town is made.

6. The specific patterns out of which a building or a town is made may be alive or dead. To the extent they are alive, they let our inner forces loose, and set us free; but when they are dead, they keep us locked in inner conflict.

7. The more living patterns there are in a place—a room, a building, or a town—the more it comes to life as an entirety, the more it glows, the more it has that self-maintaining fire which is the quality without a name.

8. And when a building has this fire, then it becomes a part of nature. Like ocean waves, or blades of grass, its parts are governed by the endless play of repetition

and variety created in the presence of the fact that all things pass. This is the quality itself.

THE GATE

To reach the quality without a name we must then build a living pattern language as a gate.

9. This quality in buildings and in towns cannot be made, but only generated, indirectly, by the ordinary actions of the people, just as a flower cannot be made, but only generated from the seed.

10. The people can shape buildings for themselves, and have done it for centuries, by using languages which I call pattern languages. A pattern language gives each person who uses it the power to create an infinite variety of new and unique buildings, just as his ordinary language gives him the power to create an infinite variety of sentences.

11. These pattern languages are not confined to villages and farm society. All acts of building are governed by a pattern language of some sort, and the patterns in the world are there, entirely because they are created by the pattern languages which people use.

12. And, beyond that, it is not just the shape of towns and buildings which comes from pattern languages—it is their quality as well. Even the life and beauty of the most awe-inspiring great religious buildings came from the languages their builders used.

13. But in our time the languages have broken down. Since they are no longer shared, the processes which keep them deep have broken down; and it is therefore virtually impossible for anybody, in our time, to make a building live.

14. To work our way towards a shared and living language once again, we must first learn how to discover patterns which are deep, and capable of generating life.

15. We may then gradually improve these patterns which we share, by testing them against experience: we can determine, very simply, whether these patterns make our surroundings live, or not, by recognizing how they make us feel.

16. Once we have understood how to discover individual patterns which are alive, we may then make a language for ourselves for any building task we face. The structure of the language is created by the network of connections among individual patterns: and the language lives, or not, as a totality, to the degree these patterns form a whole.

17. Then finally, from separate languages for different building tasks, we can create a larger structure still, a structure of structures, evolving constantly, which is the common language for a town. This is the gate.

THE WAY

Once we have built the gate, we can pass through it to the practice of the timeless way.

18. Now we shall begin to see in detail how the rich and complex order of a town can grow from thousands of creative acts. For once we have a common pattern language in our town, we shall all have the power to make our streets and buildings live, through our most ordinary acts. The language, like a seed, is the genetic system which gives our millions of small acts the power to form a whole.

19. Within this process, every individual act of building is a process in which space gets differentiated. It is not a process of addition, in which preformed parts are combined to create a whole, but a process of unfolding, like the evolution of an embryo, in which the whole precedes the parts, and actually gives birth to them, by splitting.

20. The process of unfolding goes step by step, one pattern at a time. Each step brings just one pattern to

life; and the intensity of the result depends on the intensity of each one of these individual steps.

21. From a sequence of these individual patterns, whole buildings with the character of nature will form themselves within your thoughts, as easily as sentences.

22. In the same way, groups of people can conceive their larger public buildings, on the ground, by following a common pattern language, almost as if they had a single mind.

23. Once the buildings are conceived like this, they can be built, directly, from a few simple marks made in the ground—again within a common language, but directly, and without the use of drawings.

24. Next, several acts of building, each one done to repair and magnify the product of the previous acts, will slowly generate a larger and more complex whole than any single act can generate.

25. Finally, within the framework of a common language, millions of individual acts of building will together generate a town which is alive, and whole, and unpredictable, without control. This is the slow emergence of the quality without a name, as if from nothing.

26. And as the whole emerges, we shall see it take that ageless character which gives the timeless way its name. This character is a specific, morphological character, sharp and precise, which must come into being any time a building or a town becomes alive: it is the physical embodiment, in buildings, of the quality without a name.

THE KERNEL OF THE WAY

And yet the timeless way is not complete, and will not fully generate the quality without a name, until we leave the gate behind.

27. Indeed this ageless character has nothing, in the end, to do with languages. The language, and the processes which stem from it, merely release the fundamental order which is native to us. They do not teach us, they only remind us of what we know already, and of what we shall discover time and time again, when we give up our ideas and opinions, and do exactly what emerges from ourselves.

THE TIMELESS WAY

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alive to the extent that it is governed
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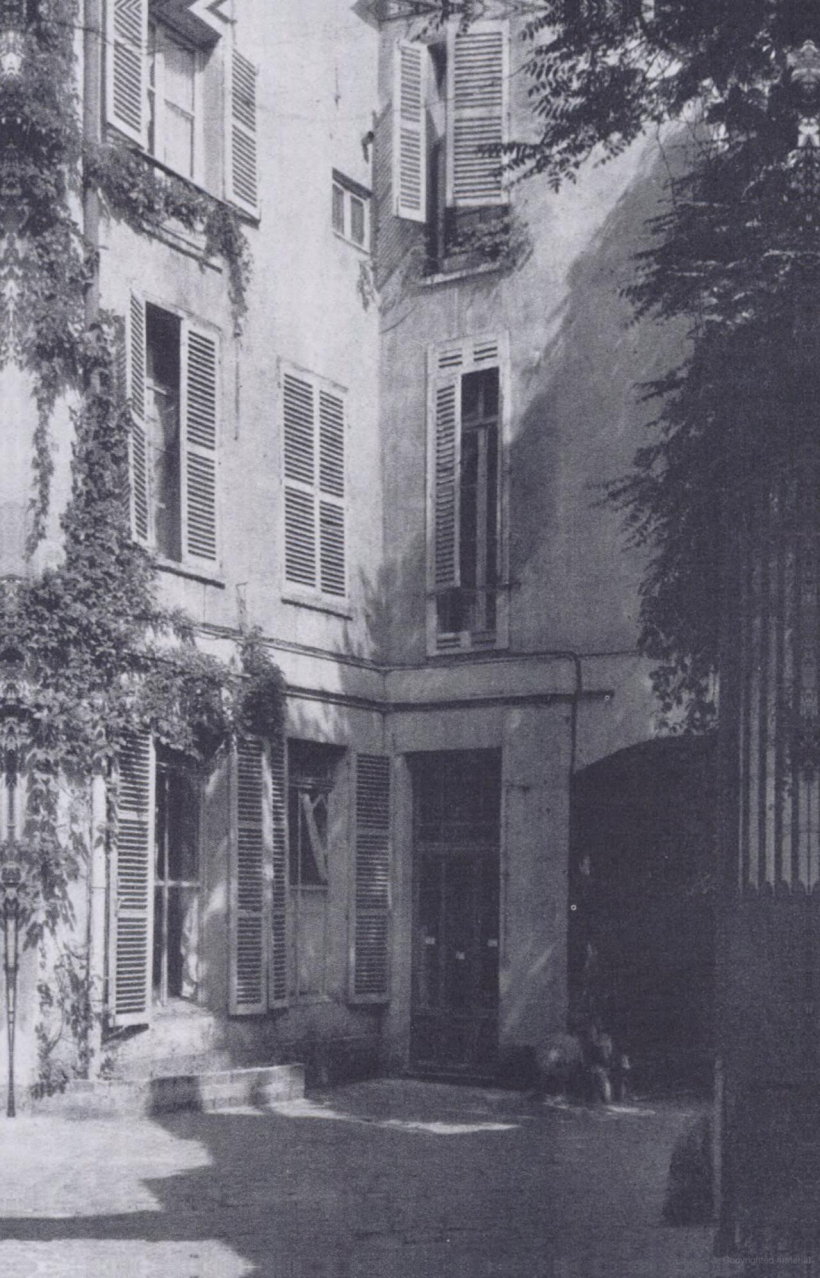
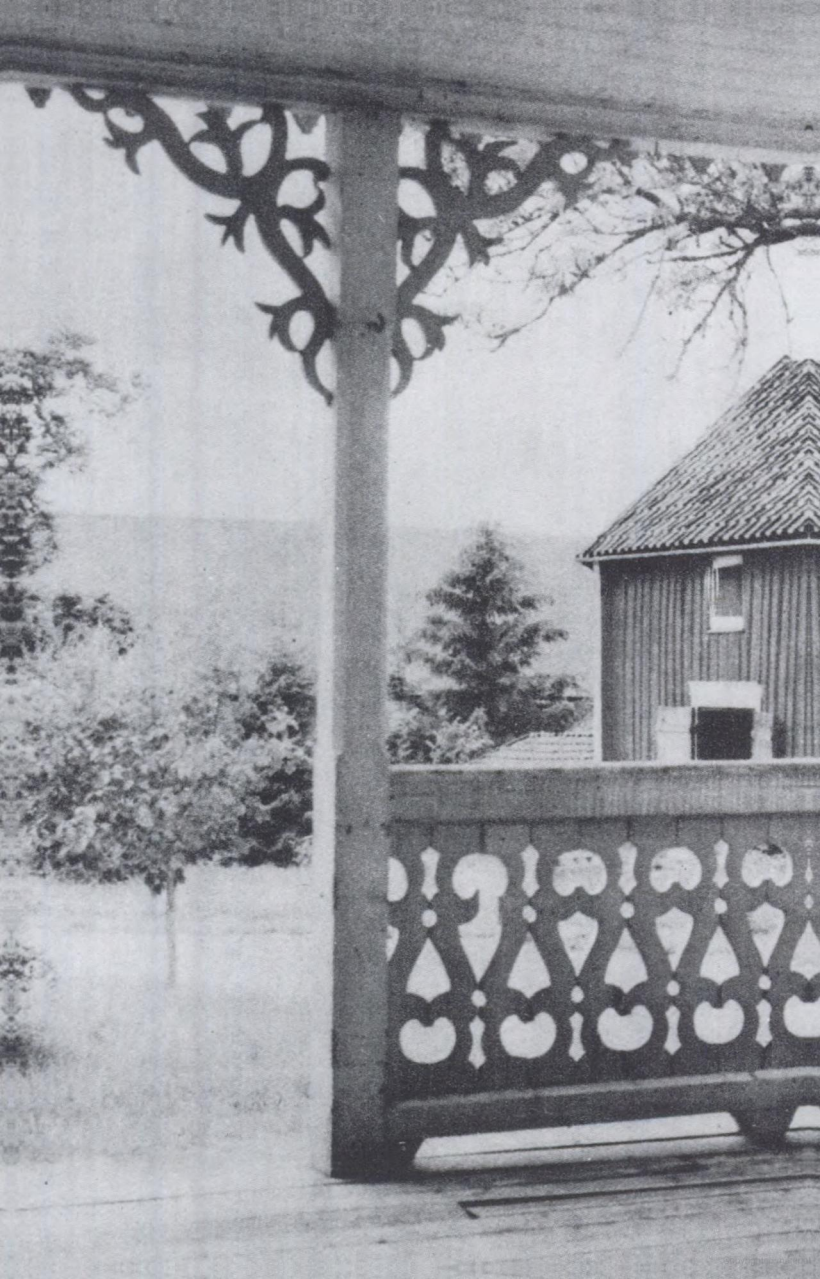
CHAPTER I

THE TIMELESS WAY

It is a process which brings order out of nothing but ourselves; it cannot be attained, but it will happen of its own accord, if we will only let it.





There is one timeless way of building.

It is thousands of years old, and the same today as it has always been.

The great traditional buildings of the past, the villages and tents and temples in which man feels at home, have always been made by people who were very close to the center of this way. It is not possible to make great buildings, or great towns, beautiful places, places where you feel yourself, places where you feel alive, except by following this way. And, as you will see, this way will lead anyone who looks for it to buildings which are themselves as ancient in their form, as the trees and hills, and as our faces are.

It is a process through which the order of a building or a town grows out directly from the inner nature of the people, and the animals, and plants, and matter which are in it.

It is a process which allows the life inside a person, or a family, or a town, to flourish, openly, in freedom, so vividly that it gives birth, of its own accord, to the natural order which is needed to sustain this life.

It is so powerful and fundamental that with its help you can make any building in the world as beautiful as any place that you have ever seen.

Once you understand this way, you will be able to make your room alive; you will be able to design a house together with your family; a garden for your children;

places where you can work; beautiful terraces where you can sit and dream.

It is so powerful, that with its help hundreds of people together can create a town, which is alive and vibrant, peaceful and relaxed, a town as beautiful as any town in history.

Without the help of architects or planners, if you are working in the timeless way, a town will grow under your hands, as steady as the flowers in your garden.

And there is no other way in which a building or a town which lives can possibly be made.

This does not mean that all ways of making buildings are identical. It means that at the core of all successful acts of building and at the core of all successful processes of growth, even though there are a million different versions of these acts and processes, there is one fundamental invariant feature, which is responsible for their success. Although this way has taken on a thousand different forms at different times, in different places, still, there is an unavoidable, invariant core to all of them.

Look at the buildings in the photographs which start this chapter.

They are alive. They have that sleepy, awkward grace which comes from perfect ease.

And the Alhambra, some tiny gothic church, an old

New England house, an Alpine hill village, an ancient Zen temple, a seat by a mountain stream, a courtyard filled with blue and yellow tiles among the earth. What is it they have in common? They are beautiful, ordered, harmonious—yes, all these things. But especially, and what strikes to the heart, they live.

Each one of us wants to be able to bring a building or part of a town to life like this.

It is a fundamental human instinct, as much a part of our desire as the desire for children. It is, quite simply, the desire to make a part of nature, to complete a world which is already made of mountains, streams, snowdrops, and stones, with something made by us, as much a part of nature, and a part of our immediate surroundings.

Each one of us has, somewhere in his heart, the dream to make a living world, a universe.

Those of us who have been trained as architects have this desire perhaps at the very center of our lives: that one day, somewhere, somehow, we shall build one building which is wonderful, beautiful, breathtaking, a place where people can walk and dream for centuries.

In some form, every person has some version of this dream: whoever you are, you may have the dream of one day building a most beautiful house for your family, a garden, a fountain, a fishpond, a big room with soft light, flowers outside and the smell of new grass.

In some less clear fashion, anyone who is concerned

with towns has this same dream, perhaps, for an entire town.

And there is a way that a building or a town can actually be brought to life like this.

There is a definable sequence of activities which are at the heart of all acts of building, and it is possible to specify, precisely, under what conditions these activities will generate a building which is alive. All this can be made so explicit that anyone can do it.

And just so, the process by which a group of independent people make part of a town alive can equally be made precise. Again, there is a definable sequence of activities, more complex in this case, which are at the heart of all collective building processes, and it is possible to specify exactly when these processes will bring things to life. And, once again, these processes can be made so explicit, and so clear, that any group of people can make use of them.

This one way of building has always existed.

It is behind the building of traditional villages in Africa, and India, and Japan. It was behind the building of the great religious buildings: the mosques of Islam, the monasteries of the middle ages, and the temples of Japan. It was behind the building of the simple benches, and cloisters and arcades of English country towns; of the mountain huts of Norway and Austria; the roof tiles on the

walls of castles and palaces; the bridges of the Italian middle ages; the cathedral of Pisa.

In an unconscious form, this way has been behind almost all ways of building for thousands of years.

But it has become possible to identify it, only now, by going to a level of analysis which is deep enough to show what is invariant in all the different versions of this way.

This hinges on a form of representation which reveals all possible construction processes, as versions of one deeper process.

First, we have a way of looking at the ultimate constituents of the environment: the ultimate "things" which a building or a town is made of. As we shall see, in chapters 4 and 5, every building, every town, is made of certain entities which I call patterns: and once we understand buildings in terms of their patterns, we have a way of looking at them, which makes all buildings, all parts of a town similar, all members of the same class of physical structures.

Second, we have a way of understanding the generative processes which give rise to these patterns: in short, the source from which the ultimate constituents of building come. As we shall see in chapters 10, 11, and 12, these patterns always come from certain combinatory processes, which are different in the specific patterns which they generate, but always similar in their overall structure, and in the way they work. They are essentially

like languages. And again, in terms of these pattern languages, all the different ways of building, although different in detail, become similar in general outline.

At this level of analysis, we can compare many different building processes.

Then, once we see their differences clearly, it becomes possible to define the difference between those processes which make buildings live, and those which make them dead.

And it turns out that, invariant, behind all processes which allow us to make buildings live, there is a single common process.

This single process is operational and precise. It is not merely a vague idea, or a class of processes which we can understand: it is concrete enough and specific enough, so that it functions practically. It gives us the power to make towns and buildings live, as concretely as a match gives us the power to make a flame. It is a method or a discipline, which teaches us precisely what we have to do to make our buildings live.

But though this method is precise, it cannot be used mechanically.

The fact is, that even when we have seen deep into the processes by which it is possible to make a building or a

town alive, in the end, it turns out that this knowledge only brings us back to that part of ourselves which is forgotten.

Although the process is precise, and can be defined in exact scientific terms, finally it becomes valuable, not so much because it shows us things which we don't know, but instead, because it shows us what we know already, only daren't admit because it seems so childish, and so primitive.

Indeed it turns out, in the end, that what this method does is simply free us from all method.

The more we learn to use this method, the more we find that what it does is not so much to teach us processes we did not know before, but rather opens up a process in us, which was part of us already.

We find out that we already know how to make buildings live, but that the power has been frozen in us: that we have it, but are afraid to use it: that we are crippled by our fears; and crippled by the methods and the images which we use to overcome these fears.

And what happens finally, is that we learn to overcome our fears, and reach that portion of our selves which knows exactly how to make a building live, instinctively. But we learn too, that this capacity in us is not accessible, until we first go through the discipline which teaches us to let go of our fears.

And that is why the timeless way is, in the end, a timeless one.

It is not an external method, which can
things. It is instead a proc
only needs to

THE TIMELESS WAY

nature that is in us, we must first learn a discipline which teaches us the true relationship between ourselves and our surroundings.

Then, once this discipline has done its work, and pricked the bubbles of illusion which we cling to now, we will be ready to give up the discipline, and act as nature does.

This is the timeless way of building: learning the discipline—and shedding it.

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And that is why the timeless way is, in the end, a timeless one.

It is not an external method, which can be imposed on things. It is instead a process which lies deep in us: and only needs to be released.

The power to make buildings beautiful lies in each of us already.

It is a core so simple, and so deep, that we are born with it. This is no metaphor. I mean it literally. Imagine the greatest possible beauty and harmony in the world—the most beautiful place that you have ever seen or dreamt of. You have the power to create it, at this very moment, just as you are.

And this power we have is so firmly rooted and coherent in every one of us that once it is liberated, it will allow us, by our individual, unconnected acts, to make a town, without the slightest need for plans, because, like every living process, it is a process which builds order out of nothing.

But as things are, we have so far beset ourselves with rules, and concepts, and ideas of what must be done to make a building or a town alive, that we have become afraid of what will happen naturally, and convinced that we must work within a "system" and with "methods" since without them our surroundings will come tumbling down in chaos.

We are afraid, perhaps, that without images and methods, chaos will break loose; worse still, that unless we use im-

ages of some kind, ourselves, our own creation will itself be chaos. And why are we afraid of that? Is it because people will laugh at us, if we make chaos? Or is it, perhaps, that we are most afraid of all that if we do make chaos, when we hope to create art, we will ourselves be chaos, hollow, nothing?

This is why it is so easy for others to play on our fears. They can persuade us that we must have more method, and more system, because we are afraid of our own chaos. Without method and more method, we are afraid the chaos which is in us will reveal itself. And yet these methods only make things worse.

The thoughts and fears which feed these methods are illusions.

It is the fears which these illusions have created in us, that make places which are dead and lifeless and artificial. And—greatest irony of all—it is the very methods we invent to free us from our fears which are themselves the chains whose grip on us creates our difficulties.

For the fact is, that this seeming chaos which is in us is a rich, rolling, swelling, dying, lilting, singing, laughing, shouting, crying, sleeping *order*. If we will only let this order guide our acts of building, the buildings that we make, the towns we help to make, will be the forests and the meadows of the human heart.

To purge ourselves of these illusions, to become free of all the artificial images of order which distort the

nature that is in us, we must first learn a discipline which teaches us the true relationship between ourselves and our surroundings.

Then, once this discipline has done its work, and pricked the bubbles of illusion which we cling to now, we will be ready to give up the discipline, and act as nature does.

This is the timeless way of building: learning the discipline—and shedding it.

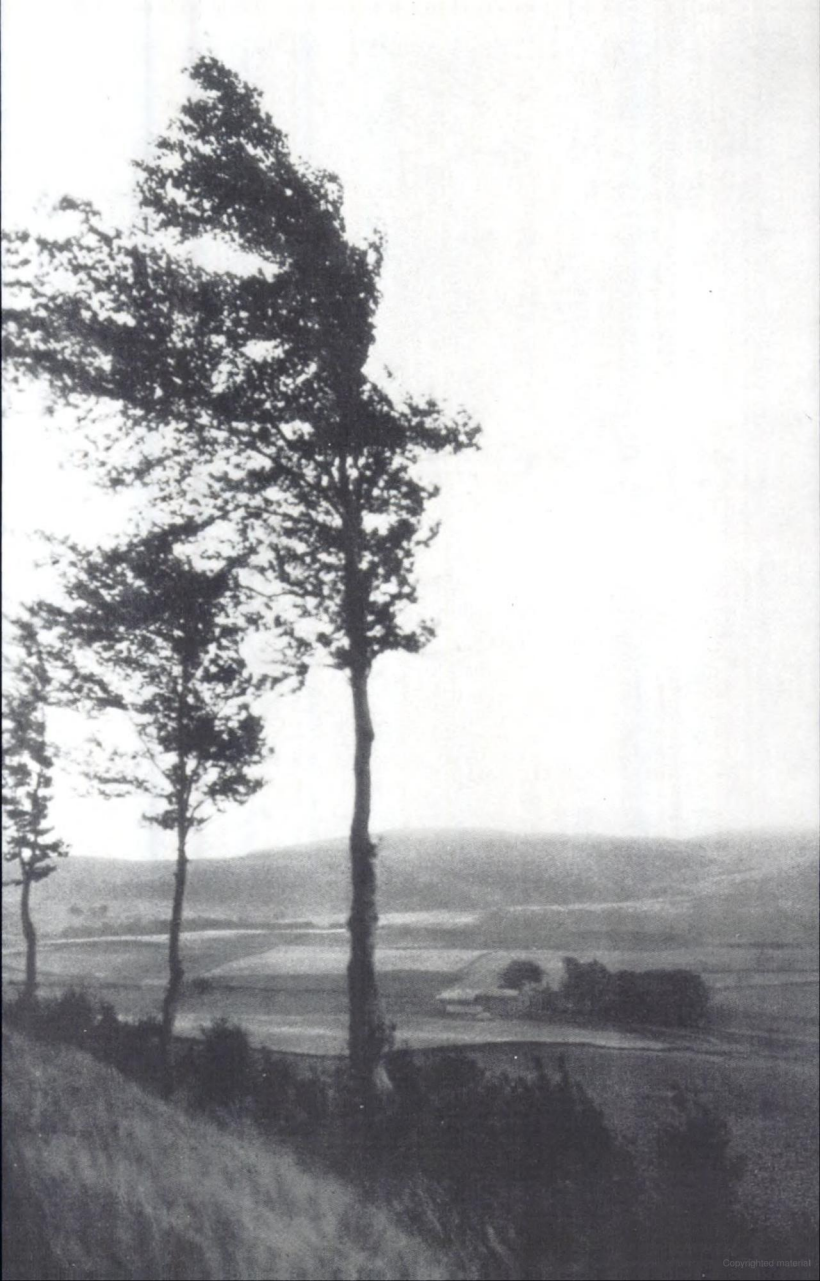
THE QUALITY

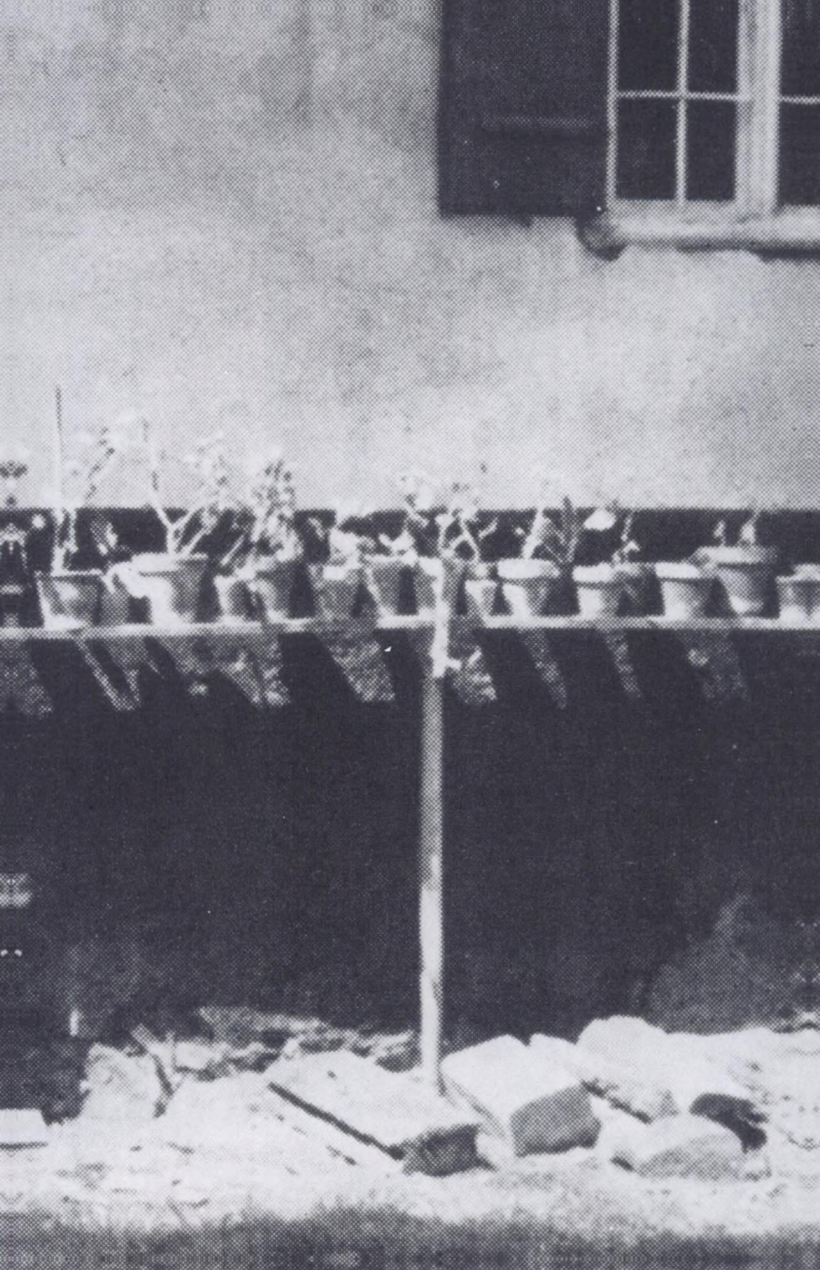
To seek the timeless way we must
first know the quality without a
name.

CHAPTER 2

THE QUALITY WITHOUT A NAME

There is a central quality which is the root criterion of life and spirit in a man, a town, a building, or a wilderness. This quality is objective and precise, but it cannot be named.





We have been taught that there is no objective difference between good buildings and bad, good towns and bad.

The fact is that the difference between a good building and a bad building, between a good town and a bad town, is an objective matter. It is the difference between health and sickness, wholeness and dividedness, self-maintenance and self-destruction. In a world which is healthy, whole, alive, and self-maintaining, people themselves can be alive and self-creating. In a world which is unwhole and self-destroying, people cannot be alive: they will inevitably themselves be self-destroying, and miserable.

But it is easy to understand why people believe so firmly that there is no single, solid basis for the difference between good building and bad.

It happens because the single central quality which makes the difference cannot be named.

The first place I think of, when I try to tell someone about this quality, is a corner of an English country garden, where a peach tree grows against a wall.

The wall runs east to west; the peach tree grows flat against its southern side. The sun shines on the tree and as it warms the bricks behind the tree, the warm bricks themselves warm the peaches on the tree. It has a slightly dozy quality. The tree, carefully tied to grow flat against the wall; warming the bricks; the peaches growing in the sun; the wild grass growing around the roots of the tree, in the angle where the earth and roots and wall all meet.

This quality is the most fundamental quality there is in anything.

It is never twice the same, because it always takes its shape from the particular place in which it occurs.

In one place it is calm, in another it is stormy; in one person it is tidy; in another it is careless; in one house it is light; in another it is dark; in one room it is soft and quiet; in another it is yellow. In one family it is a love of picnics; in another dancing; in another playing poker; in another group of people it is not family life at all.

It is a subtle kind of freedom from inner contradictions.

A system has this quality when it is at one with itself; it lacks it when it is divided.

It has it when it is true to its own inner forces; lacks it when it is untrue to its own inner forces.

It has it when it is at peace with itself; and lacks it when it is at war with itself.

You already know this quality. The feeling for it is the most primitive feeling which an animal or a man can have. The feeling for it is as primitive as the feeling for our own well-being, for our own health, as primitive as the intuition which tells us when something is false or true.

But to grasp it fully you must overcome the prejudice

of physics which tells us that all things are equally alive and real.

In physics and chemistry there is no sense in which one system can be more at one with itself than another.

And no sense at all in which what a system "ought to be" grows naturally from "what it is." Take, for example, the atoms which a physicist deals with. An atom is so simple that there is never any question whether it is true to its own nature. Atoms are all true to their own natures; they are all equally real; they simply exist. An atom cannot be more true to itself, or less true to itself. And because physics has concentrated on very simple systems, like atoms, we have been led to believe that what something "is," is an entirely separate question from what it "ought to be"; and that science and ethics can't be mixed.

But the view of the world which physics teaches, powerful and wonderful as it is, is limited by this very blindness.

In the world of complex systems it is not so. Most men are not fully true to their own inner natures or fully "real." In fact, for many people, the effort to become true to themselves is the central problem of life. When you meet a person who is true to himself, you feel at once that he is "more real" than other people are. At the hu-

man level of complexity, then, there is a distinction between systems which are true to their "inner nature," and those which aren't. Not all of us are equally true to our inner nature, or equally real, or equally whole.

And exactly the same is true in those larger systems, outside us, which we call our world. Not all parts of the world are equally true to themselves, equally real, equally whole. In the world of physics, any system which is self-destroying simply ceases to exist. But in the world of complex systems this is not so.

Indeed, this subtle and complex freedom from inner contradictions is just the very quality which makes things live.

In the world of living things, every system can be more real or less real, more true to itself or less true to itself. It cannot become more true to itself by copying any externally imposed criterion of what it ought to be. But it is possible to define a process which will tell you how the system can become more true to itself, in short what it "ought to be," only according to what it is.

This oneness, or the lack of it, is the fundamental quality for any thing. Whether it is in a poem, or a man, or in a building full of people, or in a forest, or a city, everything that matters stems from it. It embodies everything.

Yet still this quality cannot be named.

The fact that this quality cannot be named does not mean that it is vague or imprecise. It is impossible to name because it is unerringly precise. Words fail to capture it because it is much more precise than any word. The quality itself is sharp, exact, with no looseness in it whatsoever. But each word you choose to capture it has fuzzy edges and extensions which blur the central meaning of the quality.

I shall try to show you now, why words can never capture it, by circling round it, through the medium of half a dozen words.

The word which we most often use to talk about the quality without a name is the word "alive."

There is a sense in which the distinction between something alive and something lifeless is much more general, and far more profound, than the distinction between living things and nonliving things, or between life and death. Things which are living may be lifeless; nonliving things may be alive. A man who is walking and talking can be alive; or he can be lifeless. Beethoven's last quartets are alive; so are the waves at the ocean shore; so is a candle flame; a tiger may be more alive, because more in tune with its own inner forces, than a man.

A well-made fire is alive. There is a world of difference between a fire which is a pile of burning logs, and a fire which is made by someone who really understands a fire. He places each log exactly to make the air between

the logs just right. He doesn't stir the logs with a poker, but while they are burning, grasps each one, and places it again, perhaps only an inch from where it was before. The logs are so exactly placed that they form channels for the draft. Waves of liquid yellow flame run up the logs when the draft blows. Each log glows with full intensity. The fire, watched, burns so intensely and so steadily, that when it dies, finally, it burns to nothing; when the last glow dies, there is nothing but a little dust left in the fireplace.

But the very beauty of the word "alive" is just its weakness.

The overwhelming thing that stays with you is that the fire lives. And yet this is a metaphor. Literally, we know that plants and animals are alive, and fire and music are not alive. If we are pressed to explain why we call one fire alive and another dead, then we are at a loss. The metaphor makes us believe that we have found a word to grasp the quality without a name. But we can only use the word to name the quality, when we already understand the quality.

Another word we often use to talk about the quality without a name is "whole."

A thing is whole according to how free it is of inner contradictions. When it is at war with itself, and gives rise to forces which act to tear it down, it is unwhole. The more

free it is of its own inner contradictions, the more whole and healthy and wholehearted it becomes.

Compare the trees along a wild and windblown lake, with an eroded gully. These trees and branches are so made that when the wind blows they all bend, and all the forces in the system, even the violent forces of the wind, are still in balance when the trees are bent; and because they are in balance, they do no harm, they do no violence. The configuration of the bending trees makes them self-maintaining.

But think about a piece of land that is very steep, and where erosion is taking place. There aren't enough tree roots to hold the earth together, let's say; the rain falls, in torrents, and carries the earth down streams which form gullies; again, the earth is still not bound together because there aren't enough plants there; the wind blows; the erosion goes further; next time the water comes, it runs in the very same gullies, and deepens them; and widens them. The configuration of this system is such that the forces which it gives birth to, which arise in it, in the long run act to destroy the system. The system is self-destroying; it does not have the capacity to contain the forces which arise within it.

The system of the trees and wind is whole; the system of the gully and the rain is unwhole.

But the word "whole" is too enclosed.

It suggests closure, containment, finiteness. When you call a thing whole, it makes you think that it is whole

unto itself, and isolated from the world around it. But a lung is whole, only so long as it is breathing oxygen from the air outside the organism; a person is whole only so long as he is a member of some human group; a town is whole only so long as it is in balance with the surrounding countryside.

The word carries a subtle hint of self-containment. And self-containment always undermines the quality which has no name. For this reason, the word "whole" can never perfectly describe this quality.

Another facet of the quality which has no name is caught by the word "comfortable."

The word "comfortable" is more profound than people usually realize. The mystery of genuine comfort goes far beyond the simple idea that the word first seems to mean. Places which are comfortable are comfortable because they have no inner contradictions, because there is no little restlessness disturbing them.

Imagine yourself on a winter afternoon with a pot of tea, a book, a reading light, and two or three huge pillows to lean back against. Now make yourself comfortable. Not in some way which you can show to other people, and say how much you like it. I mean so that you *really* like it, for *yourself*.

You put the tea where you can reach it: but in a place where you can't possibly knock it over. You pull the light down, to shine on the book, but not too brightly, and so that you can't see the naked bulb. You put the cushions

behind you, and place them, carefully, one by one, just where you want them, to support your back, your neck, your arm: so that you are supported just comfortably, just as you want to sip your tea, and read, and dream.

When you take the trouble to do all that, and you do it carefully, with much attention, then it may begin to have the quality which has no name.

Yet the word "comfortable" is easy to misuse, and has too many other meanings.

There are kinds of comfort which stultify and deaden too. It is too easy to use the word for situations which have no life in them because they are too sheltered.

A family with too much money, a bed which is too soft, a room which always has an even temperature, a covered path on which you never have to walk out in the rain, these are all "comfortable" in a more stupid sense, and so distort the central meaning of the word.

A word which overcomes the lack of openness in the words "whole" and "comfortable," is the word "free."

The quality without a name is never calculated, never perfect; that subtle balance of forces only happens when the ideas and images are left behind; and created with abandon.

Think of a truck, filled with bags of cement. If the bags are stacked perfectly, in lines, it may be careful, and intelligent, and quite precise. But it will not begin to

have the quality without a name, until there is a certain freedom there: the men who piled the bags, running, and throwing them, forgetting themselves, throwing themselves into it, lost, wild. . . .

And a steel mill too can have this quality because its freedom and its wildness show there, blazing in the night.

And yet, of course, this freedom can be too theatrical: a pose, a form, a manner.

A building which has a "free" form—a shape without roots in the forces or materials it is made of—is like a man whose gestures have no roots in his own nature. Its shape is borrowed, artificial, forced, contrived, made to copy outside images, not generated by the forces inside.

That kind of so-called freedom is opposite to the quality which has no name.

A word which helps restore the balance is the word "exact."

The word "exact" helps to counterbalance the impression of other words like "comfortable" and "free." These words suggest that the quality without a name is somehow inexact. And it is true that it is loose and fluid and relaxed. But it is never inexact. The forces in a situation are real forces. There is no getting round them. If the adaptation to the forces is not perfectly exact, there can be no comfort, and no freedom, because the small forces which have been left out will always work to make the system fail.

Suppose that I am trying to make a table for the blackbirds in my garden. In winter, when the snow is on the ground, and the blackbirds are short of food, I will put food out for them on the table. So I build the table; and dream about the clusters of blackbirds which will come flocking to the table in the snow.

But it is not so easy to build a table that will really work. The birds follow their own laws; and if I don't understand them, they just won't come. If I put the table too low, the birds won't fly down to it, because they don't like to swoop too close to the ground. If it is too high in the air, or too exposed, the wind won't let them settle on it. If it is near a laundry line, blowing in the wind, they will be frightened by the moving line. Most of the places where I put the table actually don't work.

I slowly learn that blackbirds have a million subtle forces guiding them in their behavior. If I don't understand these forces, there is simply nothing I can do to make the table come to life. So long as the placing of the table is inexact, my image of the blackbirds flocked around the table eating, is just wishful thinking. To make the table live, I must take these forces seriously, and place the table in a position which is perfectly exact.

And, yet, of course, the word "exact" does not describe it properly.

It has no sense of freedom in it; and it is too reminiscent of those other things which are exact in an entirely different sense.

Usually, when we say something is exact, we mean

that it fits some abstract image perfectly. If I cut a square of cardboard, and make it perfectly exact, it means that I have made the cardboard perfectly square: its sides are exactly equal: and its angles are exactly ninety degrees. I have matched an image perfectly.

The meaning of the word "exact" which I use here is almost opposite. A thing which has the quality without a name never fits any image exactly. What is exact is its adaptation to the forces which are in it. But this exactness requires that it be loose and fluid in its form.

A word which goes much deeper than the word "exact" is "egoless."

When a place is lifeless or unreal, there is almost always a mastermind behind it. It is so filled with the will of its maker that there is no room for its own nature.

Think, by contrast, of the decoration on an old bench —small hearts carved in it; simple holes, cut out while it was being put together—these can be egoless.

They are not carved according to some plan. They are carefree, carved into it, wherever there seems to be a gap. It is not in the least contrived; there is no effort in the decoration; it does not seek to express the personality of the man who carved it. It is so natural, that it almost seems as though the bench itself cried out for it: and the carver simply did what was required.

And yet, although the old bench and its carving may be egoless, this word is also not quite right.

It does not mean, for instance, that the man who made it left his own person out of it. It was part of his person that he liked the bench, and wanted to carve hearts in it. Perhaps he made it for his favorite girl.

It is perfectly possible to make a thing which has the quality which has no name, and still let it reflect your personality. Your person, and the likes and dislikes which are part of you, are themselves forces in your garden, and your garden must reflect those forces just as it reflects the other forces which make leaves grow and birds sing.

But if you use the word "ego" to mean the center of a person's character, then the idea of making something egoless can sound as though you want the person to efface himself completely. That is not what the word means at all; and yet because of it, the word is not quite right.

A last word which can help to catch the quality without a name is the word "eternal."

All things and people and places which have the quality without a name, reach into the realm of the eternal.

Some are eternal in almost a literal sense: they are so strong, so balanced, so strongly self-maintaining, that they are not easily disturbed, almost imperishable. Others reach the quality for no more than an instant, and then fall back into the lesser state, where inner contradictions rule.

The word "eternal" describes them both. For the instant that they have this quality, they reach into the realm of eternal truth. At that moment when they are free

from inner contradictions, they take their place among the order of things which stand outside of time.

I once saw a simple fish pond in a Japanese village which was perhaps eternal.

A farmer made it for his farm. The pond was a simple rectangle, about 6 feet wide, and 8 feet long; opening off a little irrigation stream. At one end, a bush of flowers hung over the water. At the other end, under the water, was a circle of wood, its top perhaps 12 inches below the surface of the water. In the pond there were eight great ancient carp, each maybe 18 inches long, orange, gold, purple, and black: the oldest one had been there eighty years. The eight fish swam, slowly, slowly, in circles—often within the wooden circle. The whole world was in that pond. Every day the farmer sat by it for a few minutes. I was there only one day and I sat by it all afternoon. Even now, I cannot think of it without tears. Those ancient fish had been swimming, slowly, in that pond for eighty years. It was so true to the nature of the fish, and flowers, and the water, and the farmers, that it had sustained itself for all that time, endlessly repeating, always different. There is no degree of wholeness or reality which can be reached beyond that simple pond.

And yet, like all the other words, this word confuses more than it explains.

It hints at a religious quality. The hint is accurate. And yet it makes it seem as though the quality which that pond has is a mysterious one. It is not mysterious. It is above all ordinary. What makes it eternal is its ordinariness. The word "eternal" cannot capture that.

And so you see, in spite of every effort to give this quality a name, there is no single name which captures it.

Imagine the quality without a name as a point, and each of the words which we have tried as an ellipse. Each ellipse includes this point. But each ellipse also covers many other meanings, which are distant from this point.

Since every word is always an ellipse like this—then every word will always be too broad, too vague, too large in scope to refer only and exactly to the quality which is the point. No word can ever catch the quality without a name because the quality is too particular, and words too broad. And yet it is the most important quality there is, in anyone, or anything.

It is not only simple beauty of form and color. Man can make that without making nature. It is not only fitness to purpose. Man can make that too, without making nature. And it is not only the spiritual quality of beautiful music or of a quiet mosque, that comes from faith. Man can make that too, without making nature.

The quality which has no name includes these simpler sweeter qualities. But it is so ordinary as well, that it somehow reminds us of the passing of our life.

It is a slightly bitter quality.

CHAPTER 3

BEING ALIVE

The search which we make for this quality, in our own 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.

We know, now, what the quality without a name is like, in feeling and in character. But so far, concretely, we have not seen this quality in any system larger than a tree, a pond, a bench. Yet it can be in anything—in buildings, animals, plants, cities, streets, the wilderness—and in ourselves. We shall begin to understand it concretely, in all these larger pieces of the world, only when we first understand it in ourselves.

It is, for instance, the wild smile of the gypsies dancing in the road.

The broad brim of the big hat, like arms spread wide, open to the world, confident, huge, . . . The embrace of the child's arms about the grass. . . . It is the solid and entrenched repose of the old man lighting a cigarette: hands on his knees, solid, resting, waiting, listening.

In our lives, this quality without a name is the most precious thing we ever have.

And I am free to the extent I have this quality in me.

One man is free at that one instant when you see in him a certain smile and you know he is himself, and perfectly at home within himself. Imagine him especially, perhaps, wearing a great wide hat, his arm flung out in an expansive gesture, singing perhaps and for one instant utterly oblivious to everything but what is in him and around him at that second.

This wild freedom, this passion, comes into our lives in the instant we let go.

It is when all our forces can move freely in us. In nature, this quality is almost automatic, because there are no images to interfere with natural processes of making things. But in all of our creations, the possibility occurs that images can interfere with the natural, necessary order of a thing. And, most of all, this way that images distort the things we make, is familiar in ourselves. For we ourselves are, like our works, the products of our own creation. And we are only free, and have the quality without a name in us, when we give up the images which guide our lives.

Yet each of us faces the fear of letting go. The fear of being just exactly what one is, of letting the forces flow freely; of letting the configuration of one's person adjust truly to these forces.

Our letting go is stifled, all the time, so long as we have ideas and opinions about ourselves, which make us hug too tightly to our images of how to live, and bottle up these forces.

So long as we are still bottled up, like this, there is a tightness about the mouth, a nervous tension in the eyes, a stiffness and a brittleness in the way we walk, the way we move.

And yet, until one does let go, it is impossible to be alive. The stereotypes are restricted; there are very different configurations. The infinite variety of actual

people, with their vastly and utterly different forces, require a huge creation, to find the resolution of the person: and in finding this resolution truly, one must above all be free of the stereotypes.

The great film, Ikiru—*to live—describes it in the life of an old man.*

He has sat for thirty years behind a counter, preventing things from happening. And then he finds out that he is to die of cancer of the stomach, in six months. He tries to live; he seeks enjoyment; it doesn't amount to much. And finally, against all obstacles, he helps to make a park in a dirty slum of Tokyo. He has lost his fear, because he knows that he is going to die; he works and works and works, there is no stopping him, because he is no longer afraid of anyone, or anything. He has no longer anything to lose, and so in this short time gains everything; and then dies, in the snow, swinging on a child's swing in the park which he has made, and singing.

Each of us lives most fully "on the wire," in the face of death, daring to do the very thing which fear prevents us from.

A few years ago a family of high wire artists had a terrible fall from the high wire, in the middle of their performance. All of them were killed or maimed, except the father, who escaped with broken legs. But even

after losing his children in the fall, a few months later he was back to work, in the circus, on the wire again.

Someone asked him in an interview, how he could bring himself to do it, after such a terrible accident. He answered: "On the wire, that's living . . . all the rest is waiting."

Of course for most of us it is not quite so literal.

The fear which prevents us from being ourselves, from being that one person unique in all the world, from coming to life—that may mean nothing greater than the fear of giving up the image of a certain job, an image of a certain kind of family life.

One man can be as free in lighting up a cigarette, as that old man dancing on the wire. Another traveling with the gypsies. A handkerchief around your head; a horse-drawn yellow caravan, pulled up in a field; a rabbit stew, simmering and bubbling on the fire otuside the caravan; licking and sucking your fingers as you eat spoonfuls of the stew.

It has above all to do with the elements.

The wind, the soft rain; sitting on the back of an old truck moving clothes and baskets of possessions while the gentle rain is falling, laughing, crouching under a shawl to keep from getting wet, but getting wet. Eating a loaf of bread, torn in pieces, hunks of cheese cut crudely with a hatchet which is lying in the corner; red flowers

glistening in the rain along the roadside; banging on the window of the truck to shout some joke.

Nothing to keep, nothing to lose. No possessions, no security, no concern about possessions, and no concern about security: in this mood it is possible to do exactly what makes sense, and nothing else: there are no hidden fears, no morals, no rules, no undercurrent of constraint, no subtle sense of concern for the form of what the people round about you are doing, and above all no concern for what you are yourself, no subtle fear of other people's ridicule, no subtle train of fears which can connect the smallest triviality with bankruptcy and loss of love and loss of friends and death, no ties, no suits, no outward elements of majesty at all. Only the laughter and the rain.

And it happens when our inner forces are resolved.

And when a person's forces are resolved, it makes us feel at home, because we know, by some sixth sense, that there are no other unexpected forces lurking underground. He acts according to the nature of the situations he is in, without distorting them. There are no guiding images in his behavior, no hidden forces; he is simply free. And so, we feel relaxed and peaceful in his company.

Of course, in practice we often don't know just what our inner forces are.

We live, for months, for years, acting in a certain way, not knowing whether we are free or not, doubting, not even sure when we are successfully resolved, and when we aren't.

Yet still there are those special secret moments in our lives, when we smile unexpectedly—when all our forces are resolved.

A woman can often see these moments in us, better than a man, better than we ourselves even. When we know those moments, when we smile, when we let go, when we are not on guard at all—these are the moments when our most important forces show themselves; whatever you are doing at such a moment, hold on to it, repeat it—for that certain smile is the best knowledge that we ever have of what our hidden forces are, and where they lie, and how they can be loosed.

We cannot be aware of these most precious moments when they are actually happening.

In fact, the conscious effort to attain this quality, or to be free, or to be anything, the glance which this creates, will always spoil it.

It is, instead, when we forget ourselves completely: playing the fool perhaps among a group of friends, or swimming out to sea, or walking simply, or trying to finish something late at night over a table with a group of friends, cigarette stuck to lower lip, eyes tired, earnest concentration.

All these moments in my own life—I only know them now, in retrospect.

Yet each of us knows from experience the feeling which this quality creates in us.

It is the time when we are most right, most just, most sad, and most hilarious.

And for this reason, each one of us can also recognize this quality when it occurs in buildings.

We can identify the towns and buildings, streets and gardens, flower beds, chairs, tables, tablecloths, wine bottles, garden seats, and kitchen sinks which have this quality—simply by asking whether they are like us when we are free.

We need only ask ourselves which places—which towns, which buildings, which rooms, have made us feel like this—which of them have that breath of sudden passion in them, which whispers to us, and lets us recall those moments when we were ourselves.

And the connection between the two—between this quality in our own lives, and the same quality in our surroundings—is not just an analogy, or similarity. The fact is that each one creates the other.

Places which have this quality, invite this quality to come to life in us. And when we have this quality in us, we tend to make it come to life in towns and buildings which we help to build. It is a self-

supporting, self-maintaining, generating quality. It is the quality of life. And we must seek it, for our own sakes, in our surroundings, simply in order that we can ourselves become alive.

That is the central scientific fact in all that follows.

CHAPTER 4

PATTERNS OF EVENTS

In order to define this quality in buildings and in towns, we must begin by understanding that every place is given its character by certain patterns of events that keep on happening there.

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Christopher Alexander, winner of the first medal for research ever awarded by the American Institute of Architects, is a practising architect and builder, Professor of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, and Director of the Center for Environmental Structure.

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