

# Architecture is Made for People, A Holistic-Phenomenological Approach to Architecture: A Case Study of Kibbutz Ma'agan Michael, Israel

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to present my interpretation of the holistic-phenomenological worldview in practice. This study demonstrates how this approach, as well as the planning process that I followed (a process fundamentally different from conventional ones) was 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'. The intention is to raise a broad public discussion and pose a challenge to 21st-century architecture regarding how to intervene in a moral and human way within an existing environment, urban or natural, which must be respected and preserved, when integrating within it a new contemporary architecture.

**Keywords:** Holistic; Phenomenology; Architecture; Kibbutz; Residential neighborhood

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present my interpretation of the holistic-phenomenological worldview in practice, through a selected project I designed and built in Israel. This worldview stands in recent years at the forefront of the scientific discourse as a whole in disciplines like cosmology, neurobiology, psychology, particle physics, and brain sciences, and is linked to recent theories of complexity, and is in convergence with the fundamentals of Buddhist teaching <sup>[1]</sup>.

The purpose of architecture 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. Yet, modern society has lost the value of man and thus created a feeling of alienation between man and the environment.

Buildings affect human lives and the fate of the physical environment in which they live over the course of many years, and therefore, their real test is the test of time. The great buildings, villages, and temples in which man feels 'at home', the places to which people always long to return to, thus with timeless relevance are the

ones that touch the 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” <sup>[2]</sup>. Stephen Grabow, in “Christopher Alexander: The Search for a New Paradigm in Architecture”, explores this concept of timeless quality. The Dalai Lama refers to this same essence as “the great self” or “the nature of reality”, as described in “The Joy of Living and Dying in Peace” <sup>[1]</sup>.

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 was 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”, a term borrowed from Chomsky’s theory of spoken language, which suggests these patterns are already embedded in the human mind <sup>[3]</sup>.

Contemporary architecture (and art) sought to dissociate themselves 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 that truly feel like home and are desirable 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 <sup>[4]</sup>.

This presentation demonstrates how this approach, along with a unique planning process derived from it and deeply rooted in the spirit of the place, was applied by me in the design of a residential neighborhood in Kibbutz Ma’agan Michael, facing the Mediterranean Sea. The process was generated from spatial patterns that have consistently underpinned human experience in all timeless buildings and was carefully tailored to the distinct physical and social context of the site (**Figure 1** and **Figure 4**).

It is hoped that by presenting an approach, which tries both to identify and base the design process on those spatial patterns that generate a positive feeling shared by people of all cultures <sup>[5]</sup>, as well as apply a planning process which structurally responds to the identity of each cultural and social group it is build for, it will contribute something towards replacing current conceptions and approaches, whereby unhuman alienated architecture derived only by the egotistical ambitions of the creator forms a real threat to the physical and human environment we live in.



**Figure 1.** Panoramic view of the neighborhood

## 2. Structural changes in Kibbutz life require a new concept of housing

### 2.1. 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 was 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 was exactly the same.

The new model I implemented in the design of the new houses in kibbutz Maagan Michael was fundamentally different. The planning process adopted was based on patterns that were 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 and Figure 3)

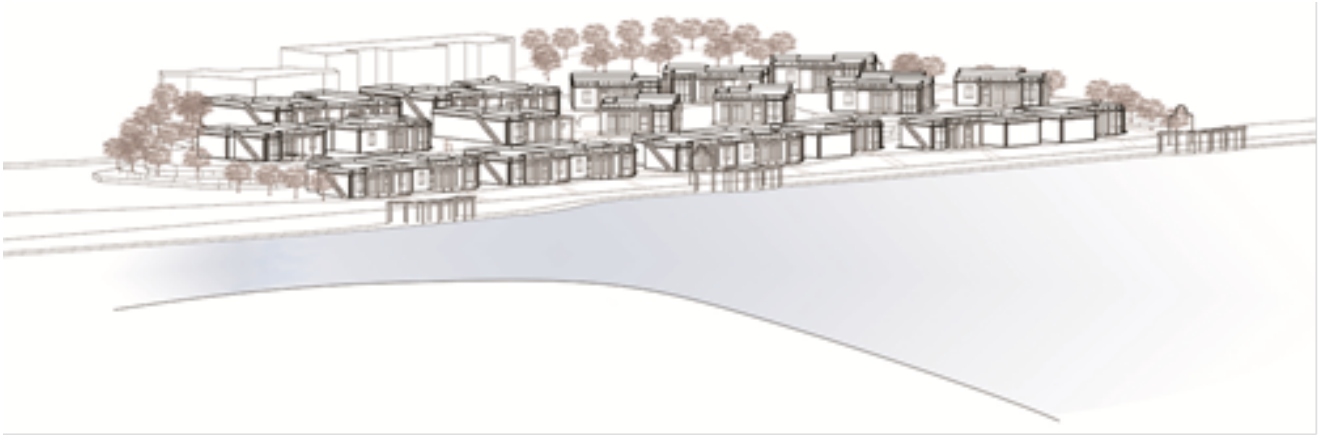


Figure 2. House type A



Figure 3. House type B

Kibbutz Ma'agan Michael is situated on a hill, with the new neighborhood on the Western side that faces the sea (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** To determine the level of each house so that 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.

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, and unto the location of each window, was taken on the site of each plot. (Figure 5)



**Figure 5.** Each planning decision was taken on the site literally marked on the ground

The position of each house in relation to the others was determined to ensure that each one has an open view to the water and can enjoy the breeze coming from the sea (Figure 6).

To determine the height of each house so that the sea would be visible from the terrace while seated, a crane was used to lift and identify the exact elevation at which the sea became visible. This height was measured, and the level of the house was determined accordingly. (Figure 7)

At the center of the neighborhood, a path was planned to connect 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.

The course of the path was guided by the intention to ensure a view of the sea from every point along its length (Figure 8).





**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



**Figure 7.** View of the water from a house's terrace



**Figure 8.** What dictated the course of the path was the wish to see the water from every spot along it.

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 the buildings are dispersed arbitrarily in between, here the secondary paths running between the houses defined in a non-formal way, with no fences, the "private" zone of each family (**Figure 9**).

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 in 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**).

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**).



**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.



**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.



**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.

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.

### 3. Conclusion

It is my hope that a holistic phenomenological approach will guide the creation of buildings, streets, neighborhoods, cities, and villages that people truly want to live in and feel at home in, across all cultures, places, and times. This would replace current conceptions and approaches that pose a real threat to both the physical and human environment we live in.

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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