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A Holistic Approach to Architecture
A Case Study: Music Center and Library, Tel-Aviv

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to present a unique interpretation of the holistic worldview, both in theory and in practice. It explores how this approach, along with a planning process fundamentally different from conventional methods, was implemented in the design and construction of the Music Center and Library in the city of Tel Aviv. This process forms a coherent representation of a complete worldview: a humanistic, holistic worldview developed and adopted through more than five decades of architectural practice across all scales of design. In this approach, a building is not regarded as a collection of isolated design elements, but as one hierarchical language, in which the building, its interior, and its ornamented details down to the handle of the door is one continuous system. Within this system, the building, its interior spaces, and even the smallest ornamental details, down to the door handles, are conceived as parts of a single, continuous whole. This worldview aligns with contemporary scientific discourse in fields such as cosmology, neurobiology, psychology, complexity theory, and Buddhist philosophy, disciplines with which this body of work is closely associated.

Keywords: Holistic; Phenomenology; Architecture; Organic; Music center and library

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1. Introduction: Architecture is made for people

The purpose of architecture, first and foremost, is to create a human environment for human beings. Nevertheless, modern society has lost sight of the central value, the human being, and created an environment in which there is a feeling of alienation between man and place.

Buildings influence both the quality of life and the fate of the physical environment over extended periods of time. Their true measure, therefore, lies in the test of time. The most cherished historic buildings, those that evoke a sense of being “at home” and invite repeated return, possess a timeless relevance. These are the ones that have the capacity to resonate emotionally, offering a profound and enduring architectural experience (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Villages that evoke a deep sense of belonging, The Island of Paros, Greece

Although this timeless quality exists in buildings in different places, rooted in different cultures and traditions (**Figure 2**), the experience they generate is similar and common to all people, no matter where or what culture they come from. Hence, Alexander's basic assumption was that behind this quality, which he calls "The quality without a name" lies a universal and eternal element common to us all as human beings [1].

Figure 2. Left to right: Tholos, 4th century, Delphi, Greece; Great Gander Pagoda, 7th–8th century, Hsi- an-Fu, China; Abuhab Synagogue, Safed, Israel.

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 Garbow *et al.*, "The buildings that have a spiritual value are a diagram of the inner universe, or the picture of the inner soul" [2].

The emotional interrelationship created between the users and the building at the Music Center and Library occurs at all levels of scale down to the light fixtures, the furniture, the railings, the golden color of the wall the tiles in the toilet and more (**Figure 3**). Details which were designed by me as inseparable organic part of the building.

Figure 3. Music Center and Library, designed as an inseparable organic part of the overall architectural composition.

Contemporary architecture and art in general sought to dissociate themselves from the world of emotions, by generating the design process to the world of ideas, consequently creating a conceptual relation between a man and their environment devoid of any emotion. The central argument presented here is that fostering a sense of belonging within the built environment requires more than a change in architectural style or trend. Rather, it demands a fundamental transformation of the prevailing mechanistic worldview, replacing it with a holistic perspective that reconnects individuals with their surroundings in a meaningful, emotionally grounded way.

2. Between two worldviews - the holistic approach vs the mechanistic approach

2.1. The relationship between the parts and the whole

The difference between the worldview which resulted in dissociating man from his environment and the worldview that considers man to be part of the physical world he lives in (as well as part of nature), emphasizes the difference between the holistic organic school of thought to which my own work belongs, and the mechanistic-fragmentary worldview. These are two different set of orders.

The mechanistic worldview, which has long dominated Western thought and underpins much of contemporary architecture, promotes a separation of elements, leading to environments composed of autonomous and mechanically ordered fragments. This fragmented approach is evident in urban developments such as Brasília in Brazil, Chandigarh in India, and the satellite towns of England. In these settings, the structured disconnection between the house and the street, the street and the neighborhood, and the neighborhood and the city contributes to a pervasive sense of detachment and alienation.

The house appears to be a random collection of objects; the street appears to be a random collection (catalogue)

of buildings that do not create together a street, (often even prefabricated transported units made in a factory and superimposed on the site); the streets do not form together a neighborhood; and the neighborhoods do not create a city.

In contrast to these fragmented developments are buildings designed by those who recognized that architectural responsibility lies first and foremost in shaping the quality of the street, whose boundaries the buildings help define. These designers understood that urban design does not begin and end with arbitrary sketches drawn at a scale of 1:1000, but rather with a continual sensitivity to the scale of the human experience—the scale of 1:1. This sensitivity is expressed in the view of balcony railings from the street, the detail of an iron bar on a window, and the smell and sight of fruit trees in nearby gardens.

This school of thought bears a close resemblance to the approach embraced by the anonymous craftsmen who created Japanese folk art between the 13th and 19th centuries (**Figure 4**). Soetsu Yanagi, founder of the Museum of Folk Art in Tokyo, documented this unpretentious yet profound tradition in his book *The Unknown Craftsman*. He described these artifacts as the embodiment of a worldview in which the boundaries between art, philosophy, and the creator's spiritual or "God-given" state of mind are fluid and inseparable [3].

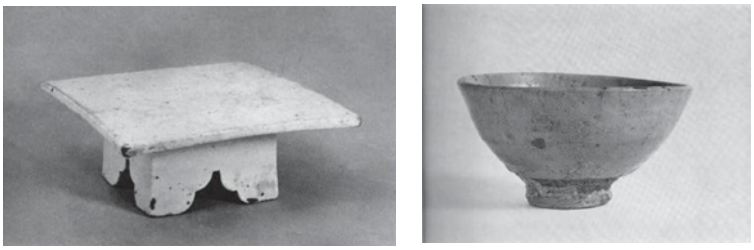

Figure 4. (from left) Ceremonial stand, porcelain, Yi dynasty (18th century), Korea; Kizaemon Ido tea bowl, Y dynasty (26th century), Korea

This approach was not understood by Le Corbusier, Oscar Nimier and others around the world, who were part of the mechanistic school of thought, who consciously considered architecture to be no more than icons-environmental sculpture, totally dependent on the arbitrary vision of its creators.

The holistic-organic approach that has been for many years at the forefront of scientific thought in general, implemented by Alexander in architecture, regards the socio-physical environment as a system, the existence of which depends on the proper, ever-changing interrelations between the parts [1, 4].

Moreover, the creation and existence of each part depend on the interrelations between that part and the whole. In any organic system, while each element has its own uniqueness and power, it always acts as part of a larger entity to which it belongs and which it complements (**Figure 5**).

Figure 5. Organic system

Within this conceptual framework, urban design, architecture, and interior design are not regarded as separate disciplines, but as components of a continuous and dynamic system. The building and its environment are not perceived as a collection of designed fragments, but as one hierarchical language, in which this historic square, the building, and its interior details is one continuous system [5].

Every design detail, at any level of scale, is derived from the larger whole to which it belongs, which it seeks to enhance and for whose existence it is responsible. The overall feeling of inner wholeness and unity, whether in a building, a street, a neighborhood, or a city, eventually evolves from the proper interrelations between its parts. This led to the focus being about the square at first, rather than the building itself, during the process of designing the Music Center and Library (**Figure 6**). All the decisions regarding the volume of the building, the construction materials, and the color were generated from the spirit of the square, meaning from the larger whole it had to be integrated with respect and enhancement.

Figure 6. Music Center and Library, Tel-Aviv. The square, the building and the interior are one continuous system.

3. The beauty is in the details

3.1. The detail is not an ornament for its own sake

The essence of a building's beauty lies in its spatial order and the nature of its details. These are not seen as a collection of isolated design elements, but as structural segments derived from a hierarchical language in which the square, the building, and the interior are perceived as a single, continuous system. Each specific detail originates from the larger whole to which it belongs, for which it holds responsibility, and which it is intended to enhance. As such, every detail, including the design of the furniture, lighting fixtures, and even the selection

of flower colors in the garden, is treated as an integral part of the planning process, contributing to the creation of a distinct and unified architectural whole. In the case of the auditorium, for instance, it is the accumulation and coherence of these details that ultimately define the space.

The formal similarity among various details (**Figure 7**), such as the shape of the crown atop the building, the patterns of the cement tiles at the entrance porch, the reliefs on the surrounding fences, the form of the chairs in the auditorium, and the design of the light fixtures, serves as a series of visual echoes, all resonating from the same underlying design language.

Figure 7. (from top left) The shape of the auditorium chairs, the light fixture, the relief on the fence, the pattern of the cement tile, the ornament on the external steel panels, the crown on the building are all echoes of one voice.

In modern society, beauty has become a term of abuse, often associated with inefficiency, impracticality, lack of functionality, and high cost. That notion of beauty is true when it relates to details as decorative elements and ornamentation for its own sake.

The Shakers, a religious sect that created an abundance of useful furniture and utensils in the mid-eighteenth century, noted that the wholeness and beauty of form are products of pure functionalism, and that there is no room for beautiful forms that do not flow from a functional need.

At the same time, the Shakers did not interpret the concept of “pure functionalism” in the narrow sense

adopted by modernist architects, for whom the expression "form follows function" was understood primarily in relation to the physical structure of a building. Instead, the Shakers embraced a broader interpretation that connected function to both the physical and spiritual experience of being within a space. This broader understanding was reflected in the design of the building. For example, while a solid wall might typically separate the entrance lobby from the auditorium, a transparent glass wall was used instead. This allows visitors, upon entering the building, to visually connect with the auditorium and enjoy a view extending to the orange trees in the rear garden (**Figure 8**).

Figure 8. The glass wall of the auditorium creates a visual continuity once entering the lobby.

The six silver painted iron columns that rise from all the floors of the building are structural. However, their precise location was determined by the way they would help to distinguish the public territory from the other areas at each floor (**Figure 9**). In other words, the structural layout of the building followed the social activities on the floors. The gold leaves capital of the iron column (**Figure 10**), the part which connects it to the beam, is functionally different from the other parts of the column and was therefore given a different form and color.

Figure 9. The location of the iron columns is defining a social area.

Figure 10. The gold leaves capital of the iron column.

The iron balustrades of the stairs and the auditorium are painted gold, providing a melody of its own. When the sunrays hit these decorated iron balustrades, they create beautiful silhouettes on the various surfaces (**Figure 11**). The interior walls are painted in golden texturing. The soft reflection of the light when it touches the walls creates an inner glow that envelops all parts of the building.

Figure 11. Sunlight hitting the decorated iron balustrades, creating beautiful silhouettes on the surface

4. The generative language of the building-A pattern language

Alexander's basic assumption was that beauty and harmony are objective properties related to the geometrical properties inherent in the structure itself and that feelings are an objective fact [4]. Accordingly, in his book *The Timeless Way of Building,* he states that all places of organic order that may seem unplanned and disorderly are a clear expression of order on a deep and complex level [1]. This order is based on absolute rules that have always determined the quality and beauty of a place and are the source of the good feeling in it. In other words, there is a direct connection between the pattern of events that occur in a place and the physical patterns, patterns of space in his terminology, that constitute it.

This assumption led Alexander and his team to empirical research, conducted at The Center for Environmental Structure in Berkeley, California, with the aim of exploring two primary questions:

(1) What is the nature of the spatial order present in places that make us feel good?

(2) What is the planning process to create an environment that possesses that same organic order?

Organic order can be achieved when all those participating in the planning process share a common language. In the past this language evolved out of tradition, when everyone knew exactly what should be done. Nowadays, a time of confused pathways, there is a need to revive a language that will restore order and wholeness in the environment. This phenomenon gave him rise to the hypothesis, that beyond what appears different, there is something else, much more basic and common to them all.

Empirical research conducted in the mid 1960 for over a decade by Alexander *et al.* at The Center for Environmental Structure in Berkeley California, aimed to analyze all those places that share a common pattern of events and feel similar, to identify the common element [4].

Their basic assumption was that just as every substance has a basic component called an atom, the man-made environment consists of "atoms" which he called patterns. Each pattern is an archetype of a structure that repeats itself in an infinite variety, and although its form varies from place to place, there is an underlying

structure, the archetype, which remains the same (**Figure 12**).

Figure 12. (from the left), Arcade, Sehzade mosque, Istanbul, Turkey; Arcade, cloister, Capri island, Italy; Arcade, Shitennoji Temple, Osaka

The importance of these patterns, 250 in number as listed the book, *A Pattern Language*, lies in the fact that they constitute a system which generates an entire language [5]. It includes patterns from the city scale level to that of individual buildings and construction details. Each pattern in the language consists of other smaller patterns and is at the same time part of a larger pattern. In other words, each pattern is a pattern of relationships. The language is a generative one and the hierarchical order of the patterns it consists of is determined by the rules of the language itself.

What ultimately gives meaning to a house, a street, or a city is comparable to what gives meaning to a sentence in spoken language: its syntax. Architecture can be understood as a generative language, in which the hierarchical order of patterns is determined by the rules inherent to that language. Once the relevant set of patterns is identified for a particular project, a system of interrelationships naturally emerges, defining the connections among the various components of the building. As in any organic system, the underlying "genetic codes" not only govern the function of each individual element, akin to the behavior of cells, but also ensure their integration within the larger whole, in this case, the building as a complete organism.

5. The planning process

The planning process proposed here is fundamentally different from the common planning processes. Unlike the common ones, where planning first takes place in the office and is later transferred to the site, here the drawings were merely the recordings of the planning decisions taken on the site itself while being aware of the visible and hidden forces acting on the site itself [6, 7].

In his book *The Joy of Living and Dying in Peace* H.H. the Dalai lama writes: "Things have a natural and innate mode of existence…. Reality is not something that the mind has fabricated anew. Therefore, when we search for the meaning of truth, we are searching for reality, for the way things actually exist…." [8].

Once the list of patterns for the project was established, all planning decisions regarding the building complex were made directly on-site. Unlike the common planning process where the shape of the building is predetermined in the office with no relation to the site, and later superimposed on any site, here a dynamic process took place by which the plan of the building that was finally created was a structure of balance between the abstract pattern language chosen for this project and the living reality of the site itself.

6. A dialogue between a new building and the existing historical square

Bialik square is a micro-document of the architectural history of Tel-Aviv from 1920 to 1930. It was in the 1920's when European architecture was brought to Israel, carried out by Jewish refugee architects who immigrated to Israel from Europe, trying to become integrated with the local oriental architecture, thus named the "Eclectic period". It stemmed from a balance between their affinity to the land of Israel and their knowledge and love of it, and the use of cross-cultural and cross-national patterns brought by them from their European countries of origin. They consciously attempted to create a new "Israeli" architecture by integrating East and West. They understood that it was precisely that connection with the local reality in which they lived and created that could bring out the universal. A reality that was broad and complex and embodied landscapes, architecture, and local lifestyle.

The nature of their work until the mid-1930's, as opposed to the Bauhaus that was imported to Israel as a package deal, stemmed from a balance between their affinity to the land of Israel and their knowledge and love of it, and the use of cross-cultural and cross-national patterns brought by them from their European countries of origin. They consciously attempted to create a new "Israeli architecture". The patterns of space and the beautiful construction details that were used can't be considered as a matter of style. The architects of that time who used them understood in a most profound way what are the fundamentals of harmony in architecture. These were the timeless cross-cultural patterns which underlines the beauty and comfort in any building that transcends styles.

Evidently, a pattern such as an entrance hall, an arch, or a capital in the column can be found in buildings of all periods and cultures. These patterns were, on purpose, ignored by the modernists (in general), which resulted in the creation of an environment devoid of any emotions and meaning. The design aimed to create a building that would integrate organically with the square, based on the principle that the powerful presence of a building within a place arises from its integration into the context, rather than from efforts to distinguish it from its surroundings. Preserving the spirit of a historical environment is not an act of nostalgia, nor does it require a rigid repetition of its architectural language. The essential question in approaching the design was to determine the appropriate language that could foster a meaningful dialogue between the new contemporary building and the historic square, one that would preserve and enhance the square's human character. Rather than adopting conventional approaches, the design neither sought to reconstruct the past nor to disassociate from it by imposing an entirely new architectural order.

The façade of this building defines the boundaries of the square, and therefore determines the feeling it inspires. Thus, the dimensions of the building were generated out of the wish to be in harmony with the human scale of the square. The orange paint of the building's façade, which at first was expected to violate the tranquility of the square, was the element that complemented the blue color of the sky and the green color of the trees. The cornices that jut out of the façade belong morphologically both to the building and to the space next to it, and hence are the elements that unite them together (**Figure 13**). The entrance porch connects the building to the square in a gradual way. The dialogue between the building and the square continues through the high windows overlooking the square (**Figure 14**). The crown on top of the building provides a gradual link to the sky. A good boundary is an entity that both separates and connects two entities at the same time. The role of the crown is to provide a graduated link between the top of the building to the sky.

Figure 13. The orange building's façade with the cornices jutting out.

Figure 14. The high windows of the building overlooking the square.

7. Conclusion

The hope is that a holistic worldview will ultimately prevail, guiding the creation of buildings, streets, neighborhoods, cities, and villages that foster a genuine sense of belonging, places where individuals feel truly at home, and where artifacts are attuned to the human body. This vision applies across cultures, places, and times. It calls for the replacement of prevailing conceptions and approaches that pose a real threat to both the physical and human environments.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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