

Nili Portugali

The Act of Creation and the Spirit of a Place

A Holistic-Phenomenological
Approach to Architecture



The Act of Creation and the Spirit of a Place: A Holistic-Phenomenological Approach to Architecture

NILI PORTUGALI

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Beginning in the 1960s with Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* and Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of the City*, numerous books have described the failures of modern architecture. Some have focused on abstraction and alienation, finding modern buildings to be ill-sited, poorly-scaled, and generally miserable places to inhabit, problems many feel exist to this day. Architecture has continually generated new approaches to design, from systems building to semiology to postmodernism to deconstructivism, but none has led to a more humane architecture.

Another line of thinking was proposed by Christopher Alexander in three seminal works in the 1970s. In *The Timeless Way of Building*, *A Pattern Language*, and *The Oregon Experiment*, Alexander and his coauthors asked, "How was it possible that any simple farmer could make a house a thousand times more beautiful than all the struggling architects of the last fifty years could do?" Their answer was that vernacular buildings are assembled from traditional elements long used in given building types. Since these elements are as much events as objects, and since their relationships are more important than their dimensions, Alexander called them "patterns." More recently, Alexander has extended his ideas in another series of books beginning with *The Nature of Order*.

Israeli architect Nili Portugali studied with Alexander and describes her approach as following in his tradition. In *The Act of Creation*, she describes her own philosophy as belonging to the "phenomenological holistic school of thought," which seeks to

understand phenomena as dynamic wholes, rather than reductively from their parts. This means viewing the site, the building, and the interior as one, and the person and the building together. She describes this approach as "holistic-organic" and situates it at the forefront of contemporary science and in relation to Buddhism. There have been broad efforts in science over the past hundred years to see process and relationship as more fundamental than matter, but attempts to relate those efforts to architecture will probably remain metaphoric.

Portugali argues that her approach stands in opposition to a "mechanistic-fragmentary world-view" by allowing humans to "feel part of the physical world" in which they dwell. She uses her own design process to support this distinction effectively explaining how she begins with choosing a pattern or archetype appropriate to the project, getting to know the living reality of the site, understanding details, choosing colors, and balancing tradition with modern technology. While Alexander identified 253 patterns diminishing in scale from the region to the town to the building, and then down to details, Portugali is briefer and her patterns and archetypes are more generalized. She is an architect more than a theorist. This is an important distinction because what she is presenting in the book is a codified methodology derived from her architectural practice.

Portugali, like Alexander, believes in universals in the human psyche because, as she writes, "there is an ultimate truth common to us all as human beings." For Portugali, a lack of architectural absolutes and the prevalence of subjective concepts of beauty and comfort have been the downfall of numerous movements, including postmodernism. What Portugali overlooks is the possibility that beauty and comfort also have cultural and social specificities. Here, of course, Portugali (again following Alexander) differs with much twentieth-century thought that has rejected absolutist and essentialist approaches in all areas and see our notions of beauty, art, architecture, civilization, indeed even of human being, as culturally constructed.

Even as the world Westernizes and adopts European Enlightenment principles, other cultures, including those in the Middle East, China, and India have long traditions that are still ingrained in individual and cultural psyches that are different from those of the West. The predominant position today is that there is not “an ultimate truth common to us all as human beings.” Obviously, there is material for a rich argument here, but that goes beyond the scope of Portugali’s book.

All of this leads to the question of the role of architecture. Is it to represent the culture and reflect the human condition in its current context, which at the moment might include some discordance? Or is it to provide beautiful places in which to live? Obviously, there is need for both, but when one and when the other? For Portugali, the answer is clear and the remainder of the book presents a series of her built work as living illustrations of her approach. If Portugali’s holistic-phenomenological approach to architecture is not new, it is nonetheless refreshing and her book will be of great value to anyone who believes that what ever else buildings should mean or be or do, they should at the very least satisfy us as humans.

John Lobell