Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology

This *EAP* begins 36 years of publication and includes regular *EAP* features of "items of interest" and "citations received." We present book notes on geographer **Paul Merriman's** *Space* (2022); philosopher **Timothy D. Mooney's** *Merleau-Ponty's* Phenomenology of Perception (2024); theologian **Benjamín Valentín's** *Touched by This Place* (2024); and a reprint of naturalist **Paul Krafel's** *Shifting* (2024).

We learned late last fall that archeologist and anthropologist **Christopher Tilley** died in London in March 2024. In part, he was known for his highly innovative efforts to use first-person phenomenological method to picture how ancient peoples experienced and understood the landscapes and places in which they found themselves. He emphasized material and corporeal aspects of moving through everyday landscapes. In memoriam, we publish excerpts from his writings and folklorist **John Billingsley's** review of Tilley's 2012 *Interpreting Landscapes*. This review originally appeared in the spring 2015 *EAP*.

Longer entries begin with independent researcher **Stephen Wood**, who introduces the possibilities by which aquatic life may have lived connections to the dialectic of darkness and light via such phenomena as water depth and terrestrial location.

Next, Israeli architect **Nili Portugali** discusses her design efforts to implement the theory of wholeness developed by American architect and architectural theorist **Christopher Alexander**, whose ideas are featured regularly in *EAP*. Portugali's real-world focus is her design of an apartment house in Tel Aviv, Israel (image, right). She considers how her envisioning and building this structure are grounded in and actualize Alexander's understanding of making environmental and place wholeness.

We remind readers that we are always seeking out items related to topics covered in *EAP*. Send us citations, conference events, publications news, and so forth. Also, we are always looking for new contributors to *EAP*, particularly younger researchers and designers just beginning their professional careers. Contact information is on the last page of this issue.

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*Below: A model of an apartment house in Tel Aviv, Israel, designed by Israeli architect **Nili Portugali**, who draws on the envisioning and construction methods of the late American architect **Christopher Alexander**. For images of the finished project, see her essay beginning on p. 22.*

Architecture Made for People
A Residential Building in Tel Aviv

Nili Portugali

Portugali *is a practicing architect, writer, and film director. She graduated from the A.A. School of Architecture in London and did research work with Christopher Alexander at the Center for Environmental Structure in Berkeley, California. Her books include:* The Act of Creation and the Spirit of Place: A Holistic-Phenomenological Approach to Architecture *(Stuttgart: Edition Axel Menges, 2006)*; A Holistic Approach to Architecture: The Felicja Blumenthal Music Center and Library, Tel Aviv *(Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 2011);* And the Alley She Whitewashed in Light Blue—The Secret of All Those Timeless Places where One Feels at Home *[includes accompanying film] (Stuttgart: Edition Axel Menges, 2022).* nili_p@netvision.net.il. *Text and images ©2025 Nili Portugali. Captions for images are on p. 26.*

In this essay, I present my interpretation of the holistic-phenomenological world view in theory and in practice that I have sought to implement in over 45 years of professional design and planning efforts that incorporate a process fundamentally different from conventional practice. I demonstrate how this approach was implemented in a residential building I designed and built in the city of Tel-Aviv, Israel (image, right). For 21st-century architecture, I raise the challenge as to how we should intervene in a moral way within an existing environment, whether urban or natural, when integrating within it a new building.

Architecture made for people

As I see it, the purpose of architecture is first and foremost to create a *human environment for human beings*. Yet modern society has often lost the value of human being and created a feeling of alienation between people and the environment. Buildings affect our lives and the fate of the physical environment in which we live. I refer to the great buildings, temples, and villages in which people feel "at home—the ones we want to return to again and again. These structures have timeless relevance, touch our hearts, and have the power to create a deep emotional experience (photo, right).

An apartment building is much beyond shelter. The residential project in Tel Aviv that I designed and present here was built on a site assigned for an ordinary apartment building (image, upper left). As opposed to typical apartment buildings typically designed today, my intention was:


- First, to create a place where the tenants feel at home and a sense of belonging from the moment they enter the site until they reach their private apartment (photos, top, next page);
- Second, to create a building that contributes significantly to its wider public space—i.e., to the street that the building abuts. As in any organic system, each building has its own uniqueness and power, but at the same time always functions as part of a larger environment for which it is responsible.

A timeless quality

There are different ways to describe buildings that have a timeless quality and convey an inherent spiritual experience. Frank Lloyd Wright called them "the ones which
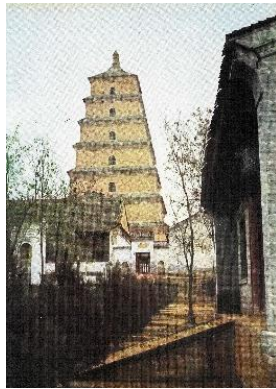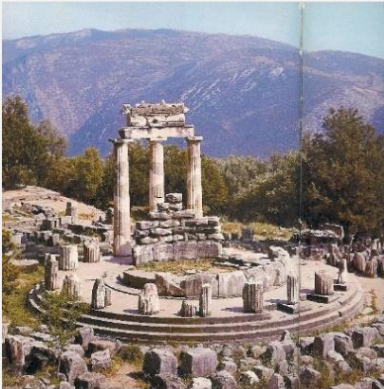
take you beyond words." Christopher Alexander described them as "The buildings that have spiritual value [and] are a diagram of the inner universe or the picture of the inner soul" (Grabow 1983). H.H The Dalai Lama (1997) calls this timeless quality "The great self" or the "nature of reality." Although this timeless quality exists in buildings rooted in different cultures and traditions (photos above), the emotional experience they generate is common to all people, no matter where or from what culture they arise (e.g., in photos, above).

Thus, Christopher Alexander's basic assumption was that behind all architecture there are universal qualities, and that beauty and harmony in architecture and in human-made works of art are objective properties inherent within the structures themselves, reflecting "innate patterns" already structured in our mind from the outset, thus common all human beings.

My personal experience creating in multidisciplinary fields of the arts allows me to claim that there is no essential difference between designing a town square, a building, a chair, a layout of a book, or creating a film. The same set of rules that sponsors the correct relationship between parts and whole and gives a sense of architectural unity and beauty also applies broadly to anything else comprising matter, form, and color, at any level of scale. The difference lies in the content, the components, and the level of complexity.

Contemporary architecture and art too often aim to dissociate themselves from the world of emotions. Instead, they connect the design process to the world of ideas, thus creating a rational relation between buildings and human beings, devoid of emotion. My argument is that to change the feeling of the environment and to create places and buildings where we really feel "at home," what is needed is not a change of style or fashion, but a transformation *from a mechanistic to a holistic world view.*

Mechanistic vs. holistic views

There is a huge difference between the mechanistic worldview that dissociates people from their physical worlds and the contrasting worldview that considers people to be an integral part of their physical worlds. I chose this second, organic, holistic school of thought for grounding my professional work.

The mechanistic worldview is dominant in Western thinking today and underlies most contemporary architecture that separates elements and creates an imposed environment of autonomous fragments—for example, Brazil's Brasilia (image next page); India's Chandigarh; England's satellite towns; Ramat Gan, Israel's diamond stock exchange district in Ramat Gan (image next page); or Jerusalem's new neighborhoods that incorporate a structured disconnection between buildings, streets, and larger city—a fragmentation that arouses a feeling of detachment and alienation (image next page).

Buildings are treated as a random collection of objects; and streets as a random collection of buildings that do not create together a meaningful urban place. Sometimes, prefabricated factory houses are superimposed artificially on the site (image next page).

This approach was most notoriously used by renowned architects such as Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, whose iconic buildings were no more than environmental installations, generated totally from arbitrary visions of their creators. This school of thought is directly responsible for the many disasters we witness in today's human-constructed environments.

As opposed to this mechanistic approach to design is an effort by architects to be immersed in *the thing itself* and *thinking about users.* These architects understand that urban design does not start and end via arbitrary sketches on a scale of 1:1000. Rather, the focus is the scale of human being, grounded in the dialogue between pedestrians and buildings—for example, the sight of decorated iron railings for stairs and balconies; or the smell and sight of fruit trees at flats' entrance courtyards (photos above, top).

The holistic-organic approach that I draw on was originally envisioned and applied in architecture by Alexander and his Center for Environmental Structure in Berkeley California. As in any organic system where each element has its own uniqueness and

power but always acts as part of a larger entity to which it belongs and which it complements, the socio-physical environment at all levels of scale is a system—a dynamic whole the existence of which depends on appropriate, ever-changing interrelations between the parts.

One continuous, organic system

Having adopted this approach to design, I do not regard architecture, interior design, landscape design, and urban design as independent disciplines but as *one continuous organic system*. The building is not perceived as a collection of designed fragments but as one hierarchical presence in which street, buildings, and interiors are one continuous whole (photos, p. 22 and p. 23).

This overall feeling of inner wholeness evolves from proper interrelations between parts. The Dalai Lama (1997) claims that an understanding of these expressions of dependent arising, cause and condition, and cause and effect is a fundamental insight of Buddhist philosophy.

If we return to the apartment in Tel Aviv that I designed (image, p. 22), one notes that the walk from public street to private

apartment is through a continuous system of open spaces that opens one into another, leading gradually from an *internal outdoor street* that separates apartments from a busy street alongside the site (images, top, p. 23). There is no isolated internal lobby or private entrance balconies for upper apartments. Rather, balconies are connected to the open stairs, which creates a sense of connectedness to the ground.

Essential ornamental detail

The secret of architectural beauty lies in spatial order and detailing. Every design detail, at any level of scale, is derived from the larger whole to which it belongs, which the detail enhances and is responsible for. I do not perceive the details of a building as a collection of designed elements but as a structural system derived from a hierarchical language in which surroundings, building, and interior are one continuous system. Each detail—down to light fixture, door handle and choice of wall color—is an inseparable part of my planning and creating "the whole."

In modern society, beauty has too often become an abusive term, associated with such other negatives as inefficiency, impracticality, and high cost. That manner of beauty is true if applied to buildings where ornamentation is used for its own sake.

The early American religious community of Shakers noted that the wholeness and beauty of a household object are products of pure functionalism. The Shakers claimed that there is no room for beautiful forms that do not flow from a functional need. At the same time, however, the Shakers did not interpret the term "pure functionalism" in the narrow sense of the modernists, who linked "form follows function" only to the physicality of buildings. The Shakers understood "functionalism" by connecting it both to the physical and the spiritual-emotional experience that one feels in a building.

Note, for example, the apartment building's iron decorated balustrades of stairs and balconies (photo, right). They are painted gold, and when the sun hits them, they cast beautiful silhouettes on building surfaces.

Beauty as objective

Based on research conducted at the Center for Environmental Structure, Alexander

concluded that beauty and harmony are objective properties related to inherent geometrical properties. In turn, these properties evoke feelings that are an objective fact. In his 1979 *The Timeless Way of Building*, Alexander explains that places of organic order may seem unplanned and disorderly but are in fact a direct expression of order at a deep, complex level. This order is based on geometric rules that determine the quality and beauty of a place. These rules are the source of any vibrant, pleasant feelings.

There is a direct connection between the "pattern of events" that occur in a place and its "patterns of space." These patterns are archetypes of structures that repeat themselves in an infinite variety. Although the specific forms of these patterns vary from place to place and time to time, there is an underlying structure—*an archetype that remains the same*.

When, for example, we encounter an unfamiliar species of tree, we still know that what we see is a tree. According to Alexander, this certainty is so because we do not identify the tree as a specific visible form but as an *underlying structure*—the relationship among parts that makes a tree. Although the form of "tree" repeats in an infinite variety, the pattern of relationship remains the same.

The value of the 253 patterns in Alexander's *Pattern Language* is that they constitute a system that generates an entire language at all levels of scale. Each pattern is related to other smaller and larger patterns so that each pattern is a *matrix of relationships*. Moreover, Alexander assumes that

people from different cultures share similar experiences, no matter from what place or social environment.

The planning process

In designing the Tel Aviv apartment house, it was important to determine the patterns of space relevant for this residential project. These patterns arose from the location of the site (facing two main streets) family needs, and common needs required by all human beings—for example, daylight being essential for all buildings anywhere, whether house, school, senior center, or offices (photo, above).

The planning process I propose here is fundamentally different from conventional planning approaches where planning first takes place in the office and then is transferred to the site via drawings often out of touch with the site itself. For the apartment house, once its pattern language was established, all planning decisions concerning the physical structure of the building complex were taken on the site directly. The aim was a dynamic planning process whereby the plan of the building was created via a dynamic balance between the project's pattern language and the living reality of the site.

The unpredictable conditions continuously developing on the actual site triggered openings for new design possibilities. The order by which planning decisions were taken was guided by the order of the patterns in the building's pattern language. Decisions were first made on matters affecting larger-scale concerns followed by other decisions raised by those concerns. The planning process was not conceived as an additive but as a *differentiating* process in that each new element was differentiated gradually from previous decisions. Each planning addition taken on the site and marked on the ground changed

the configuration of the site as a whole, forming the basis for the next addition toward the final plan.

In envisioning the apartment house, I first made the decision to use the pattern *entrance gate*—an entry to the site and a threshold connecting the building to the street. This entry was designed to be immediately visible once entering the street. (photo, above). The easily identifiable location of this entry is critical and contrasts with the more standard entries of modernist architect whereby pedestrians cannot readily find building entries and literally get lost. Experience has shown me that placing the *entrance gate* in a deviation of even 10 centimeters can confuse users. For this reason, the precise location of a building entry can be ascertained only by the architect's being on the site itself.

Another decision important in site design was drawing on the two patterns of *entrance transition* (a passage between the sequence of transition spaces between the street and the site) and *internal street* (a sense of transition to entrances of private apartments) (photos, p. 24 and p. 25). Next, I incorporated the pattern of apartments' *main entry door*, which was placed to be immediately visible from the *internal street*.

Reconstructing traditional architecture?

One criticism of my apartment-house design is whether it is a "reconstruction" of similar traditional buildings of the past. This criticism assumes that iconic architecture must dissociate itself from its surroundings and architectural history. The assumption is that a building supporting pleasant feeling and well-integrated with its surroundings cannot possibly be a new building.

Let me be clear, I do not aim to reconstruct the past or nostalgically reproduce this or that style. The similarity between the buildings I design and past building styles (that respect the environment and facilitate a feeling of "at homeness" for users) originates in my use of fundamental patterns of space and a planning process as real today as it was in the past.

This approach aims at fulfilling timeless values and is in no way a reaction against contemporary design. Rather, my approach is a genuine attempt to fully use the potential inherited in modern technological society available today, but not as a value in itself but as a tool to create a friendly, human environment that satisfies basic needs common to all human beings.

The real challenge of architectural practice is to make the best use of the potential inherent in our modern technological age. We currently pinpoint this possibility via "trademark" labels such as "sustainable development," "green building," "ecological design" and the like.

Unfortunately, these approaches too often reduce down to saving energy, saving water, saving electricity, and recycling material. There is minimal reference to the number one environmental resource—*the human being*. What is good for people will necessarily be good for the environment and consequently will save energy and reduce cost—for example incorporating natural daylight for physical and mental well-being.

I hope that the holistic approach described here might be used by other architects and planners. I believe that it can lead us collectively to create buildings, streets, neighborhoods, and cities in which we really want to live, whatever the culture, time, or place.

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Image captions

p. 22: N. Portugali, model for apartment house, Tel Aviv, Israel.

p. 22: Streetscape, Paros, Greece.

p. 23, top: N. Portugali, apartment house, Tel Aviv. Left to right: Access progression from site entrance to private apartments.

p. 23: Left to right: Tholos, 4th century, Delphi, Greece; Great Gander Pagoda, 7th-8th century, Hsi-an-Fu, China; Yosef Karo Synagogue,16th century, Safed, Israel.

p. 24: Brasilia, Brazil; Diamond Exchange, Ramat Gan, Israel; mass-produced dwelling units, Modiin,Israel.

p. 24, bottom: N. Portugali, apartment house, Tel Aviv, decorated iron railings.

p. 25, top, left: N. Portugali, apartment house, Tel Aviv; building designed as "long wings of day light."

p. 25, top, right: N. Portugali, apartment house, Tel Aviv; entrance gate as "threshold" connecting site and street.