

Perspectives




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with good design**

**The tin can homes of
the American West**

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**West Dean:
a radical building
in a rural guise**



Set in the rolling hills of West Sussex, West Dean, above, with its new Visitor Centre on the right. Built from local materials, opposite page, the building develops a completely new approach to design

WEST DEAN, A large flint-faced country house near Chichester, in Sussex, is a well known college of arts. Unusually for an institution in a former country house, both house and garden are kept up to an Edwardian level of trim, thanks to the endowment given by Edward James, the late eccentric poet and patron of the Surrealists. So popular is the garden that a separate entrance and visitor centre has just been built a short distance from the house.

So far so normal, but the tradition of doing things in unusual ways, begun by James, has been continued by the trustees of West Dean who commissioned the building. It is the first work in Britain by the influential architect and theorist Christopher Alexander, and it embodies some of the ideas with which he has been challenging the orthodoxies of architectural production over the past 35 years.

The West Dean Visitor Centre looks like a nicely built vernacular building. It has a big, hipped tiled roof, a low entrance for selling tickets and a larger restaurant reached through arches. But it is not neo-vernacular in the manner that we have come to expect for supermarkets and service stations all over England – brick walls and tile roofs on a

steel frame, quickly built and internally the same as any other modern building. Neither is it just a superior and more careful version of the same thing. Nor is it the result of absorption in the spirit of Sir Edwin Lutyens, although he too worked on the West Dean estate and built the charming small house at Monkton that James later made the centre of his Surrealist fantasies.

Alexander certainly chose to build in flint and brick because these are the local materials, but sensitivity to place began earlier in the process of design, with an experimental pegging out of the site before a single line was drawn on paper. The Visitor Centre runs askew to the lines of the surrounding garden walls but completes its corner in a satisfactory and inevitable looking way.

Alexander has always been a teacher as well as an architect, and the earliest stages of the design, in the spring of 1994, were worked out with graduate students from the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture. He is also a registered building contractor in America, and a vital aspect of his alternative method is to control the building contract which, under more normal conditions, would become a barrier between architect and client, to be varied only at the risk of overspend or possible litigation.

Unlike the procedure for most projects, the details of the Visitor Centre were "designed" first and the totality gradually assembled from these. Design is hardly the word, though, because the designing was the same as the making. Alexander made test panels of herringbone brick, full-size windows and sections of the plaster ceiling. From these beginnings came the design that was submitted for planning permission. But essential to the transformation that Alexander wishes to make in architecture is the possibility of change and evolution in the building as it progresses. The professional builders on the site were given freedom to introduce variations, particularly in the way that the flints were laid in the walls. They were supervised by John Hewitt, the project manager, who found the process a rewarding challenge.

The aim of all this unconventional behaviour is to make buildings that live, such as the vernacular buildings nearby at the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum or millions of others all over the world that have an air of simply being right that is universally recognised but seemingly impossible to reproduce. This is the same issue that Alexander has tackled since he felt angry disillusion over the architectural methods he was taught at Cambridge in the 1950s. He approached the issue first »



The Alexander technique

The Visitor Centre at West Dean breaks new ground. Alan Powers is impressed by Christopher Alexander's inspirational building which challenges common codes of construction and design. Photographs by Nicholas Kane



Inside the Visitor Centre Christopher Alexander has created spaces, such as the restaurant, *above and right*, which have a special quality of their own. Some details recall the Arts and Crafts Movement, although Alexander has advanced the tradition by several steps





➔ from the standpoint of mathematics, then in a series of books, developed with colleagues, such as *The Timeless Way of Building* and *A Pattern Language*, which are now widely known. These search for an answer in examining the totality of the built environment, its physical, human and behavioural dimensions and the ways to establish connections between them.

If Alexander's buildings often evoke memories of Edwardian Arts and Crafts architects or their American equivalents, such as Bernard Maybeck, this is no surprise for they were searching along similar lines. In his more recent writings he has looked for other ways to find the "quality without a name", and done brilliant and fascinating work on the links between the molecular and cell structures of nature and the ways in which the brain sees and understands them.

Alexander collects early Turkish carpets. He has found in these a level of spiritual awareness, conveyed through abstract colour and form, that reinforces the metaphysical basis of his latest writing and designing, to the extent that his book on them is called *A Fore-shadowing of 21st Century Art*.

By the same token he has come to realise what a vast field was left

unexplored by the Arts and Crafts period, which did not develop a systematic methodology. He has also recognised that the alternative to Modernism in the arts does not consist merely of returning to the past for inspiration but in discovering "concretely and with a tough mind" what carpet-weavers, artists and builders of the past knew that we do not. In one sense, Alexander is taking up the threads of research into the visual world that were begun at the Bauhaus, only with the hindsight of its shortcomings and with an added dimension of spirituality. His desire to research and explain things that have normally been considered beyond explanation leads the Enlightenment project of Modernism to the limits of its known world in an exciting way.

He challenges the assumptions of architectural practice on lines similar to those of John Ruskin which, as Dr Brian Hanson (director of the Prince of Wales's Projects Office, and a champion of Alexander) points out, were far more radical than Arts and Crafts architects generally admitted. The workman was to become a genuine participant in the creative process.

All this, however interesting to read about, is a lot to load onto one simple building, such as the

West Dean Visitor Centre. Architectural specialists visiting the building have wondered what all the fuss is about, or cavilled at the unexpected juxtaposition of concrete with "traditional" materials in the framing. The public, on the other hand, has been much in favour of the building because the Visitor Centre has the sort of easy familiarity that non-architects understand more readily. These are certainly the people that Alexander wants to please. The client, represented by Simon Ward, the agent and secretary at West Dean, has lived through anxious times as the nature of the building process made for delays. But he now feels unequivocally that it was all worthwhile.

To anyone searching the horizon for an architectural future that does not retread the paths of Classicism, Modernism or any other style-based solution, the Visitor Centre at West Dean represents a set of possible answers. In other conditions, these answers could look completely different but they would similarly focus on the process of production as the key to the building's success, combined with an awareness of the aesthetic potential of a full range of building materials, ornament and colour and the special quality of the spaces inside. □

The early stages in the design of the Visitor Centre were worked out with graduate students from the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture. The building runs askew to the lines of the surrounding garden walls but completes its corner with great skill