

# AN UNCOMMON BENCH

A SMALL BUILDING BY  
ARCHITECT CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER AND ASSOCIATES

by Pete Retondo

I'D BEEN WORKING AS A CARPENTER for a decade when I became aware of some peculiar occurrences in my work, things for which I could find no logical explanation. One was that I started receiving messages about the everyday mistakes that plague building projects — the sort of mistakes that give rise to trade quips like, "Gee, I cut it twice and it's still too short." The messages were in the form of hunches, and once I started paying attention to them it had a remarkable effect on my ability to work without mistakes. A thought would come into my head like, "Wouldn't it be awful if, after making this cut I'm about to make, this vertical grain 2×12 ends up being an inch short." More often than not, I'd check, and sure enough — an inch short. I think those messages had always been there, but I'd dismissed them as doubt and vacillation.

Another thing that started to nag at me was awareness of proportions. A piece of work could be flawlessly executed, even done both beautifully and cleverly, yet if something about the proportions struck me as off-key, it bothered me more than a big nick in the wood.

At about this time I was introduced by a friend to Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*. (NWEA, p.217). As is my habit with new books I opened it to the middle, skeptically

read a page or two, and immediately set about reading it from cover to cover. Always very suspicious of the architectural profession, I was astounded to discover a text that both made sense on the level of common sense and had obviously deep intellectual roots. *A Pattern Language* was a breath of fresh air after years of feeling queasy about contemporary architecture, its steel and glass buildings totally out of scale to human proportions, its homes built to resemble mechanical drawings. I thought, "Someone has

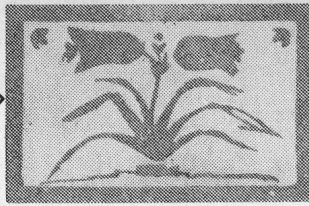
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"Maybe the best book in The Next Whole Earth Catalog" is how I described Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language* in 1981. Ernest Callenbach called it "The most important book in architecture and planning for many decades." It's a cookbook of the kinds of things that really make towns, buildings, and construction work — "light on two sides" in rooms, "pools of light," "anything over 5 stories high makes people crazy," "balconies narrower than 6 feet aren't used," "make sure the edge of a building is a thing, a place, not a line," "have fingers of city and fingers of country interlocking," "'picture' windows cut you off from the outdoors" . . . are just a few insights of the book from memory. People read it like a novel, up all night. They memorize whole sections involuntarily.

Last year Imine Steltzner, the keeper of our project called UNCOMMON COURTESY — School of Compassionate Skills, wanted to build a class around Christopher Alexander. In Spring '84 she brought it off, as here reported. If you want to see the bench, go to Fort Mason in San Francisco (a former Army base now part of the National Park System) and find your way to the restored Liberty Ship, the Jeremiah O'Brien. To the right along the shore is a special nook sporting a celebrated piece of furniture.

Carpenter and contractor Pete Retondo is a long-time political activist and former Rolling Stone writer, now returned in his thirties to college (graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley). — Stewart Brand

There are more details on the process, and the bench itself in full color, with additional comments by Christopher Alexander in the July 1984 *Architecture* (AIA, 1735 New York Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20006 [\$26/yr]).



An uncommon bench collaboratively designed by Christopher Alexander and 23 friends. The objective was to make an ornamental seat that would be something worth fighting to save in 100 years. Made of poured concrete with inlaid green and white terrazzo decorations. About 20 feet long, it's four feet high at the crest.

finally come out and said what has been obvious to everyone, like the child in the fable of 'The Emperor's New Clothes.'"

Alexander evoked the same fable in his book, *The Linz Cafe* (Spring '82 CQ), which is mostly a picture book about a building built by him — a cafe attached to a design exposition in Austria. It struck me immediately — "This is an ordinary looking building!" If you know anything about contemporary architects, you know that in such a context he or she will strive to distinguish their work with the most unusual and stunning new effects possible. Yet here an architect, distinguished in academic circles and just beginning to make his way in the competitive world of built design, seemed to be satisfied with subtlety. In the midst of clattering egomania, the building itself spoke of an overriding care for the comfort and sensibility of the ordinary people who would use it. I was quite moved by that statement.

Last year I was fortunate enough to be able to attend a series of talks by Chris Alexander on the nature of harmony. (The course was in the Department of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley.) In the course of those lectures, I began to see how those peculiar occurrences I'd encountered in my work might be part of a larger phenomenon Alexander had been

pondering for years. He calls for a closing of the rift between the tangible and intangible worlds. At the hub of his ideas on form is a concept he calls "the field of centers." Like with holograms, any part of a living thing is a center that somehow echoes the whole being, itself a larger center. Created things can be living things if they become a field of centers. For example, the leg of a table would be a center; it may in turn be composed of a series of segments, each of which is a center; and the whole collection of legs and top must form a center if the object is to be alive. The more all of these centers support and help create each other, the more alive is the object. As we work to achieve this, the object comes alive like a musical instrument coming into tune.

These were the ideas which brought twenty students and practitioners of design to San Francisco from all around the country — from Massachusetts, Puget Sound, North Carolina, California — to take part in a workshop sponsored by Point Foundation's School of Uncommon Courtesy. After two weeks of effort, the workshop produced a two-tiered bench on a site on San Francisco Bay, overlooking Alcatraz. The bench is a gift to the public (a well-received one, judging from the thanks I received from a man I found sitting on it the other day, to whom I mentioned that I'd



been part of the group that built it). It's twenty feet long and curved slightly, so that those sitting at opposite ends and facing straight ahead can see each other out of the corners of their eyes.

Alexander believes strongly that we learn by doing things, by following an example, by trial and error. This belief follows from his notion that all matter in the universe is created out of "mind stuff," that it has an organic predisposition to fall into order and that if we watch and listen carefully we can align our efforts with that order. He alternately gave the workshop participants a feeling they were collaborating in the design, then reined them in and insisted they

have been incorporated in small ways, but at each point it was Chris who said, "Yes, this is the way we're going to do it."

He has a reputation for being high-handed at times, but that quality was experienced by participants in different ways. Peter Gradjansky, a landscape architect: "Sometimes I found it mystifying and irritating, mostly because I want to learn to have the kind of eye that sees what's just right when I'm looking at things. When he just comes in and says, 'That one's good, that one's no good, that one's — no good, that one's okay,' and we don't get to talk about it, that's frustrating. I think, 'Gee, I'm just around him these few

days, I want to hear some of the rationale behind it.' But I also realize that there *isn't* a rationale."

Geri Monosoff, a designer from Monterey, California: "I think the only time I've heard him in all these hours say anything that was the slightest bit edgy was to me, when I said at one point about that little table, 'It looks like a lady's hat box.' And he said, his voice was elevated, 'That's not helpful.' And I said, 'Tell me why?' I was acutely pained.

"Then he began to talk about what it takes to have a space for creativity, and what it does when something grating to others swells oneself. But his eyes stayed with mine until he saw that I was okay, and that the pain had grown from pain to learning. Then he went away. It was intuitive. If he had dropped his eyes and walked away from me at that moment I would have really been infuriated.

"He's never done that to any one of us."

Alexander has been criticized by his colleagues for attempting to create a cult, and has been derisively referred to as a "guru" in print. Mitzi Vernon, a design student at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, felt disappointed that the workshop discussion "seemed too vague. There wasn't a lot of explicated reason for the decisions that were made."

Elias Velonis, director of an owner-builder school called Heartwood in Massachusetts, had a more sympathetic perspective: "Apparently his work in the last four or five years is in the *feeling* of things. It lapses into poetry or mysticism,



*The configuration and location of the bench were determined with concrete block mockups which let the design be felt. The creators sit in the work-in-progress and discuss the value of a second small seat on which one can sit and face friends.*

pay attention to his solution. I heard someone comment the first day, when ideas were in a formative stage, "Is this a design workshop or an exercise in collective decision making?"

Chris Royer, a Bay Area designer who helped organize the workshop, had this to say about the process: "I was very interested in seeing if a group could get together to design and build something that has a special spirit or life to it without having some one person who is the leader and who dictates the decisions . . . I think, more often than not, Chris has made the final decisions. Various people's ideas may

but you can't help it when you get to that realm. I mean, what makes Picasso put the eye right *there*?"

Because his ideas run counter to the mainstream, Chris is counted as a renegade. Still, there is a growing group of supporters of his approach. He was applauded at Harvard when, in the course of a debate with Peter Eisenman, he made the following statement about an architect who had designed a structure to be deliberately disharmonious: "I find that incomprehensible. I find it very irresponsible. I find it nutty. I feel sorry for the man. I also feel incredibly angry because he's screwing up the world."

Participants in the Uncommon Courtesy workshops agreed with him. Jim Shipsky, an architectural writer from Pennsylvania: "In the canon of modern architecture, what he's doing is not done. And he is very serious about what he is doing, about the importance of 'decoration' — I hesitate to use the word because 'decoration' is a pejorative term in design today. In modern architecture you don't use the word 'decoration' without preceding it with the word 'mere.'"

Annie Phillips, a Berkeley builder and designer: "The basic form of the bench is a very powerful experience. It took the space out there and completely changed it in the way he had been talking to us about it — creating a whole out of it. He talks a lot about how the design is *there* and just has to be discovered, which also brings up the question of the thing that is there, is it only *one* thing? It's a very interesting question because I fought to have the bench moved back a foot or something, and we finally did move it back, but I wanted it back a whole 'nother foot."

"There is a way that is right and you just have to use whatever powers you have to reach it. A lot of my attitude before was, 'Well, this is better than what most people would do,' or 'Oh, this is good enough.' Even though I'm a real perfectionist, I think that this is a whole different concept: there is a way that's going to work and you'll know it when you get it. It's not a gradation. I think that's a really valuable tool."

## DEBRIEFING

PETE RETONDO: Do you have any comments about the workshop you've just finished?

CHRIS ALEXANDER: I've enjoyed myself tremendously so far, much beyond my expectations, actually . . . I think it's a beautiful bench. And I felt also that people somehow got a lot from the situation; again, beyond my expectations. I thought it was also an exceptionally nice group of people. By the way, you should understand that I certainly would not say this if it were not true. It's not inevitable — I just had a tremendous time. Just a great lot of luck, that's all.



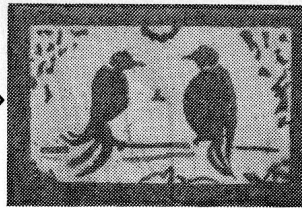
Dave Depper and Chris Berendes glue white diamonds of styrofoam onto the bench end. Terrazzo, a mixture of cement, marble dust, marble chips, and, in this case, green pigment is packed into the recessed areas. When it hardens the foam is picked out, and white terrazzo is packed into the remaining areas.

RETONDO: You told me that last Monday, the last day of the project, was one of the hardest workdays you've ever put in. What was that all about?

ALEXANDER: I thought it was going to be very, very quick. We had cut most of the styrofoam, and all I had to do actually was put it into those nine panels. So each one of these things had, I don't know — what, about fifty bits of styrofoam to go in there.

It was emotionally and physically arduous. The first thing was, I was on my knees for nine hours





straight. And there was a gale blowing, so I had to work under plastic. In other words, they just wrapped me up in a cocoon of Visqueen. Because, just the slightest breath of wind and of course it was just all over the place. Then the thing that I didn't realize was that I actually had to recreate each of those pictures. In other words, it wasn't at all just glue it in. I tried that, and it immediately went wrong, because the whole sense of space in the actual concrete was totally different from the drawings; even if the dimensions are off by 1/8 of an inch, the whole picture just starts to go differently, and sometimes you can feel it differently, and you realize that things have to be a little bit further apart in concrete than they do on a drawing, and all that *stuff*. So basically I had to recreate each picture. Plus I was burning myself with this glue gun. Aye, it was wild . . . The next twenty-four hours I was just completely out.

RETONDO: Why a bench?

ALEXANDER: Certainly, I haven't got a special thing about benches. But it does have a combination of qualities which are not *that* easy to find. First of all, there's no way around the fact that it's a *building*, probably the smallest building it's possible to make. People sitting together also has a tremendous, a powerful sort of human reality . . . If you succeed, it immediately belongs to everybody in a very powerful way.

There are other things, I think, that are capable of working in somewhat similar ways. You actually can put that amount of energy into almost *anything*.

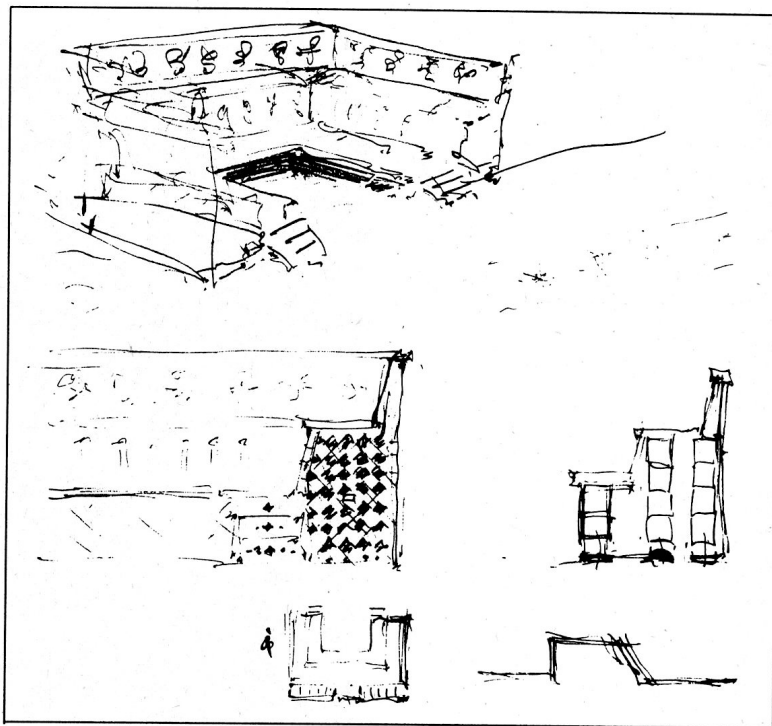
For instance, you can put it into a piece of floor. (I'm going to build a floor in Fresno in a couple of weeks, a public masonry floor.) Sometimes in the old days people put that much work into a *ceiling*. We've almost lost touch with ceilings as being a very special object. In some times, people took a ceiling with *incredible* intensity. Occasionally you go into a room where somebody's done that and you realize what a colossal effect it has.

RETONDO: How did you approach designing the bench?

ALEXANDER: When I undertook the workshop,

I made an incredibly rough sketch of an idea of a bench for that place. I was arrogant enough to think that we were actually going to build that thing I sketched. In doing the kind of thing I do, I have to pay attention to reality. If I'm wrong about something, I've got to know I'm wrong. But actually, I did *believe* that I already knew what to build there. Then the very first thing I did was ask people to lay out with some concrete blocks roughly the kind of thing I had sketched, and to my astonishment it was completely wrong!

RETONDO: How did you know that?



A page of the quick sketches that Christopher Alexander brought to the workshop. Once the blocks were arranged in the actual space the builders diverged from the original notion of a square outline.

ALEXANDER: It simply was not harmonious with the place in a tremendous number of specific ways. This corner was abrupt, and it didn't correspond to how people naturally wanted to sit there, and that corner was abrupt, and the angle of that part of the seat wasn't looking in the right direction towards the water — in probably fifteen specific ways it wasn't right, which one could see immediately. And I wasn't the only person who saw it, I think everybody saw it. I had assumed, just to be quite clear, that we were going to do a mock-up, and therefore we were going to modify whatever I had thought

about until then. And in that sense I did come with an absolutely open mind.

I'm continually astonished by how wrong one is in the face of reality. It's funny. I'm probably the world's biggest teacher of this thing, but I constantly get surprised myself.

RETONDO: Would it be accurate to describe this process as a process of elimination?

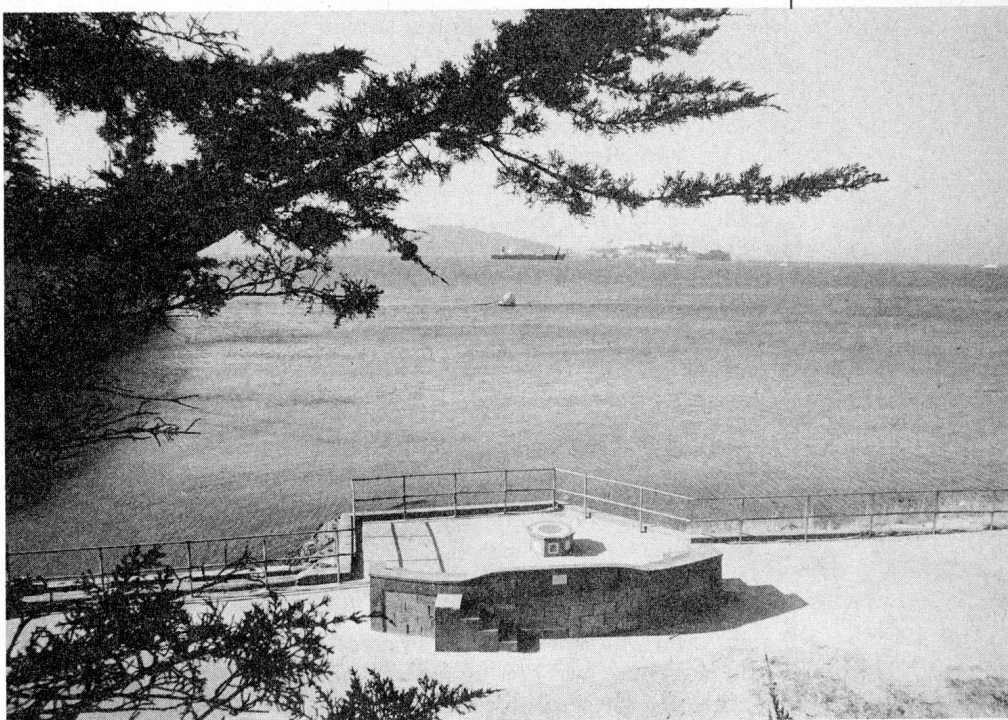
ALEXANDER: No, I don't think that would be very accurate. There's elements of that because it is true that one's constantly rejecting things, and one has to reject very fast when it's clear that things aren't right. Let me be very specific, for instance, with what actually happened at the moment when the major configuration of that bench was made. After realizing that it didn't work, I tried to explain what I felt the problems were, and we had some talk about it, and moved chairs around, and moved blocks around, and tried to get some sort of empirical sense — how close together people wanted to be, and how far away from the sea, and looking in which direction. Then I said, okay, now come on in and let's go to the blackboard and sketch this thing out a little bit, and I asked each person to make a drawing. So then we had twenty drawings. I made one, too. Mine was no better than anybody else's. They were all lousy, actually.

It was a very, very complicated problem because there was the axis inviting you towards Alcatraz on the one hand, there was the slight concavity that one needed from the human point of view, there was the very peculiar fact that the railing is asymmetrical, you know, it's a right angle on one side and a forty-five on the other. It's a very difficult situation to put a nice shape into. And when we went back outside, I sort of thought about all this for a while, and then I very, very quickly put the chairs in that curve at one moment. I remember — several people were rather shocked by its simplemindedness. And I myself at first thought, this is too simpleminded. But anyway I'd better do it because I can see that it does the things that have to be done here, so I can deal with simplemindedness later. So I did it.

And then there was a bit of a gasp, because it was kind of *dumb*. In fact some of the students wanted to start moving stuff around, they started wanting to bring in all of those *elements*.

Then I had to get slightly aggressive and I said no, let's just leave it alone, let's just look at it for a few minutes here and experience this thing before we start messing it up. Gradually I realized that even though it was very simpleminded, it was in fact just right. So there's that kind of process as well.

You say, is it a process of elimination? Well, there are two other processes I've just men-



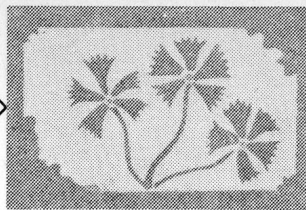
The bench sits on the ledge of a rocky hillside, sheltered from the wind in a natural cove. The view stares in the face of weekend sailboats and Alcatraz Island. Far behind the old prison are the hills of Berkeley on the other side of the bay.

tioned. One is being very simpleminded. And then there's the process of aggressively hanging onto something.

RETONDO: I know that you do a lot of work with cement, so it was natural that you would choose to do the bench out of cement.

ALEXANDER: I think the main thing I have to say about materials is this: I feel that when you go to the kind of trouble making something that I like to go to, then you have to meet two conditions. One of them is that it has to be permanent, because it just isn't worth putting this





much heart into something if it isn't fairly well made, in the sense of having a long life. And the other thing is, it has to be very *sensuous*, because any material object *has* to be. Now if you use concrete by itself, it's very difficult to be sensuous. Being able to introduce the marble dust, which is much colder and has a more polished surface to the touch and also a beautiful jewel-like quality — that's essential. If one were to do the same in wood, it would involve higher levels of skill — first of all to make the thing well enough so that it would have the same kind of lifetime. And secondly, to be able to introduce that sensuous quality also requires tremendous skill. People sometimes assume that wood is an innately sensuous material, but I don't think so.

I definitely don't have an innate preference for concrete over wood, or anything like that. I love many, many materials. I'm actually beginning to get a renewed interest in wood, for a rather minor reason in a way, but a realistic one — that is, because I deal directly with Oregon lumber mills, I've come in contact recently with the possibility of buying incredibly beautiful and very, very massive pieces of wood at amazingly low prices.

RETONDO: Did you learn anything about the nature of form in making this bench?

ALEXANDER: I did learn one very interesting thing, actually. If I compare the bench and the little octagon, the little octagon was torture. You remember that I first cut out a blossom shape — I mean, it was a *nightmare*, because it wasn't right, and we tried endlessly different things, and everybody was getting fed up and grumpy — this was the second weekend. And actually I was in despair. The bench came fairly easily. In a matter of hours, there we were, everybody felt very happy, it was comfortable and just right. The octagon thing was horrible. Anyway, we just kind of stuck our teeth into it and grabbed on and kept going, kept going. I had to make the decision the second Sunday, and all Saturday we'd been wrestling with it, it didn't work, we had tried *everything*. Then I realized in the middle of the night that the octagon shape, even though it was a more *formal* shape, was the thing that left Alcatraz and the Bay alone the most perfectly. So it was most mild and kind to the wonderful surroundings. That interested me. I'd known about such things, which were certainly very well known a few hundred years ago. It's surprising, actually that that would *leave everything alone* better.

RETONDO: A lot of people commented to me

that they were most impressed with the decorations. They all used your word — having gotten "permission" to decorate things. I don't know if "decorate" is the right word, by the way —

ALEXANDER: Yeah, it's a slightly unhappy word, because it has connotations, from *our* time, which make less of it than I think it really is. I have a rather peculiar set of beliefs. I think that when one makes things of such a kind, you experience a healing of your own soul. This business about the field of centers does not stop at the gross scale of spatial and physical organizations. To create a structure that has the quality, what we'd call "ornamented," is like eating food, it actually nourishes you.

RETONDO: Do you think it's absolutely essential?

ALEXANDER: To go to that level of ornament, and the more intricate level of organization? I believe it's essential, yes. I don't think, by the way, that *everything* has to be ornamented. Sometimes sparseness is a tremendous virtue. You have to have a balance of the two, so I don't think it's essential in that sense. I think, for instance, that if one were in a place where every single object had roughly the same level of ornamentation, it would be quite frighteningly ghastly. Even if you think of that place out there — after all there's the old metal railing and there's a little concrete upstand, and there's a concrete slab, and there's the chain-link fence and so forth — if every one of those things had ornament on this level, it'd be completely screwball nuts.

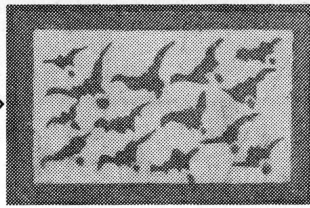
RETONDO: About the pictures in the nine panels, done with the marble dust compound — is this the first time you've done that sort of thing?

ALEXANDER: In such a realistic way, yes, I think it is. In a way, I don't know that I ever *dared* to do it before. It wasn't because I didn't feel it was the right thing to do. I think, luckily, we've brought it off.

There's a form of drawing that I was trying to teach to the few people who were doing drawings with me, where you draw living things from the point of view of the field of centers. You're simultaneously representing it, but you're actually getting its *life* from the field of centers, not from so-called "making it life-like." If somebody says, draw a life-like dog — in our time, that has come to mean a certain sort of thing —

RETONDO: Norman Rockwell.

ALEXANDER: For example, yes. Then there's a more sophisticated version of Norman Rockwell,



other artists who are able to draw a life-like dog; but it gets its life-likeness from being a St. Bernard, or a Spaniel, or Pekingese, or whatever. But there's another way, completely, to interpret what it means "to make that thing live." And that is, whether you can get the configuration of the animal to produce a field of centers in the space where it exists. Of course, a living thing is entirely made up of the field of centers, anyway — a *real* living thing. But to produce it in a drawing of a bird — it's completely different from drawing a life-like bird.

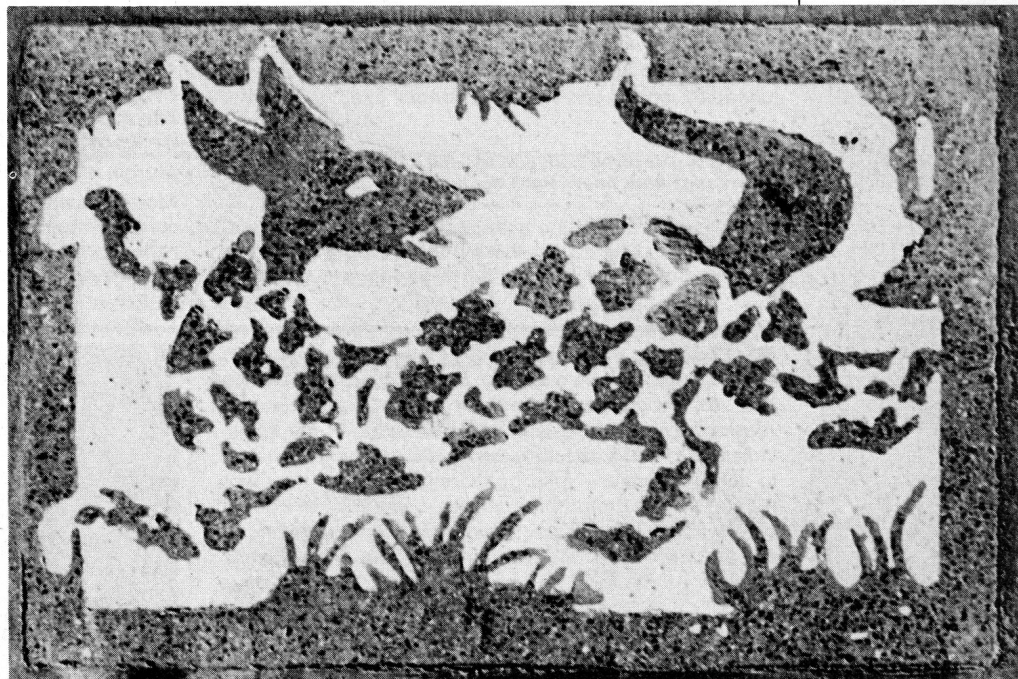
I can show you this if we were looking at the actual panels. For instance, these green swatches or whatever you want to call them, on the body of the dog — they don't resemble the particular markings of a particular species of a dog. What they are is a way of making this body solid by having a perfect balance of green and white in which both are continuously positive space all over the body of the dog. On the final panel, we have some blades of grass underneath the dog, and I put some other blades of grass pointing downwards from the sky, right near the head of the dog — again, because it produced the right balance of centers. So that if the drawing succeeds and comes to life, it will be because of this, and not because it's a particular species of dog, and so forth.

RETONDO: Along these lines, some of the words and phrases you use have a special meaning for you. For example, what do you mean by "heart" when you say something like, "You must feel it, in your heart?"

ALEXANDER: One could talk about that question for hours.

I think there are two very quick answers I could give. One is, I feel that we have been burdened by too much sophistication and too much thought, too much intellectual imagery. Our very basic, simple responses to things have been obscured.

So I think the first thing I mean by using that phrase refers to the childlike part of yourself, which is prohibited, basically, by adult society. The second answer — these are terrible answers because this is such an enormous topic you've suddenly opened up — is to take the phrase quite literally. Having things touch you in your heart — it's the sort of a phrase that is pretty much reserved for certain kinds of private matters in normal everyday experience, for things that have to do with your family, maybe — wife, children, brother, parents.



*The prancing dog that plays in the center panel. The sketch was taped to the unfinished bench, cut out of styrofoam, glued in separate pieces to the rough concrete, and rendered solid as marble-chip terrazzo.*

Various moments that occur in such contexts clearly do touch you somehow in your heart, and everybody knows what that means. I think it's pretty rare for people to realize that the physical world around us can communicate with us on exactly that same level. And if we once admit that possibility, and then start seeking out those things which move us in exactly the same way — that a very intimate moment between a parent and child might — it opens the door to completely new ways of looking at objects, choosing them, feeling them, and making them. ■

**NEXT TIME:** Another summer project led by Christopher Alexander is scheduled for the summer of 1985. Time, place, and adventure are currently undecided. Supply your name and address to Irmine Steltzner, 27 Gate Five Road, Sausalito, CA 94965 if interested. You will be notified when the particulars of the class are firm.