patterns for living

two contributors to *a pattern language* and their partner identify the 10 most important patterns.

by max jacobson, murray silverstein, and barbara winslow

William Helsel

The rear porches on this house by Jacobson Silverstein Winslow Architects in Oakland, Calif., provide places of refuge and outlook, one of the authors' patterns for homes.

Designing a home has always been one of the most challenging and rewarding tasks an architect can tackle. Each project brings a unique set of personalities, site conditions, and programmatic needs together, and the results can be infinitely varied. A house requires thousands of decisions at every scale, as well as knowledge of fields ranging from psychology to engineering. Every choice must work with the rest of the design; each one has an impact on the final result. Perhaps it was this enormous, demanding, and unwieldy potential that led us as young architects to seek a theory that would guide the design process. We were looking for a way to ensure that all issues would be addressed and that all decisions would work together to create a cohesive whole.

We—Max, Murray, and Barbara—studied architecture at the University of California at Berkeley, during the questioning 1960s and '70s. This was a period of cultural change—a time when both faculty and students stepped back from business as usual, questioned basic premises, and tried to reformulate the purpose of professions. Along with many of our fellow students, we believed that architects often were designing for each other and not for the users of their buildings, that the ultimate users should have a say in the design process, and that professional knowledge should be developed and presented to that end. We felt that less attention should be paid to "style" than to the traditional indigenous solutions that produce comfortable, lively places. And we were of the mind that residential design should address the needs of *all* users, including the poor, the elderly, children, the physically and mentally disabled—any group that presents the designer with singular demands and challenges.

The search for an approach to architecture that could incorporate these ideas led Max and Murray to join Christopher Alexander, a professor at Berkeley, in a time of research and experimentation that led to the discovery of "pattern languages"—a kind of DNA of architectural design. This led to the book *A Pattern Language* (Oxford University Press, 1977, by Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein, with Max Jacobson, Ingrid King, and Shlomo Angel).

The book put forth the concept of patterns—design ideas presented in a way

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that lay people could understand and use, that could be applied to a variety of different sites and situations, and whose use would solve fundamental, recurring design problems. It contained our deepest intuitions and understandings about what makes buildings work.

practice makes perfect

A Pattern Language was an important step, but it was not a building. As young architects, we wanted, above all, to build. Furthermore, living in the Bay Area, we found ourselves surrounded by inspiring, inventive houses by the likes of Bernard Maybeck, Greene and Greene, Julia Morgan, Charles Moore, Joe Esherick, William Turnbull, and many others. Hungry to put ideas into practice and undaunted by the lack of any prior office experience, Max and Murray found a client and started a residential design firm in 1974.

In 1980, Barbara Winslow joined the partnership. She had just co-authored, with Ray Lifchez, *Design for Independent Living,* a pioneering book that resulted from her design consultations with members of the physically disabled community. With Barbara's expertise, our practice expanded into areas of design for a whole range of specific users, including low-income and developmentally and physically disabled residents.

Mark Darley/Esto

With this house in San Anselmo, Calif., JSW explored a system of sheltering roofs, designing a shed dormer and a deeply shaded porch.

(From left) Silverstein, Winslow, and Jacobson, photographed by Helen Degenhardt

"the house is one building form that every student has experienced, yet designing a *good* house is a real challenge."

Working together on a great variety of residential projects—from low-income housing to custom, high-end houses—we discovered how much we enjoyed design, enjoyed the process of working with people to create appropriate buildings. And we found that there was a real satisfaction to be gained from running our own practice: going after work, presenting ourselves and our enthusiasms, winning and losing commissions, seeing our projects get built, our clients reasonably satisfied.

try, try again

Theory, however, still lured us. We all taught at local colleges and universities and constantly worked to refine our ideas, to boil down what had come to seem overstated and unwieldy in *A Pattern Language.* Clients and students asked penetrating questions about how the design process worked, and we struggled to find good answers.

In 1990, all three of us co-authored *The Good House,* published by The Taunton Press. We had come to think that all the patterns could be expressed as variations on a single jewel-like theme, the pattern of patterns, so to speak, an idea we called "linked contrast." In a nutshell, we argued that much of the power and excitement of architecture arises out of the experience of strong contrast. The parts of buildings—rooms, windows, courtyards—could be understood as ways of experiencing the fundamental contrasting dimensions of the world: up/down, in/out, warm/cold, light/dark, order/mystery. For example, a good doorway increases our awareness of the contrast between inside and outside, light and dark, exposed and sheltered. Its depth allows us to experience both dimensions simultaneously, making the difference more apparent and striking by the use of thickness, threshold, solidity, glazing.

This idea was so ambitious and abstract that even we didn't understand it very well. We knew that it captured some of the intuitions that guide a developing design, but we also came to see that it is not a particularly user-friendly concept.

We returned to design, consciously applying the idea of linked contrast, but seeking an easier way to boil down what we gradually came to feel were the most important patterns. We talked intermittently with Chuck Miller, a magazine editor at Taunton, about writing another book. Over lunch a few years ago, he

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asked us, "What would you like to write about?" A simple answer popped up: "We'd like to write about the 10 most important patterns of home design—the ones you must get right. And we'd like to illustrate this handful of patterns with built work, some of our own, but largely with the work of other architects around the country whose work we admire." Soon, we had a contract with Taunton to write a book on this subject.

Our topic grew naturally out of our experience helping hundreds of clients design new homes for themselves, and out of our ongoing experience as teachers of architecture. The house is one building form that every student has experienced, yet designing a *good* house is a real challenge. It requires questioning preconceptions, understanding the ways in which space is experienced, and developing the ability to know exactly how a room will feel by reading the plans. It demands real attention to the whole, and to the details simultaneously.

To facilitate this process, both with clients and with students, we continually find ourselves in the position of wanting to transmit the most essential patterns of house design—the core of patterns that we have struggled to identify through years of practice. Our hope is that using these patterns will create a strong framework that will allow the originality of each design to emerge. ra

Max Jacobson, Murray Silverstein, and Barbara Winslow are partners at Jacobson Silverstein Winslow Architects in Berkeley, Calif. Their book Patterns of Home *will be published in late 2002 by Taunton Press.*

William Helsel

The entry to an Inverness, Calif., home designed by the authors demonstrates several of the patterns they discuss in their book—for example, "creating rooms, outside and in," "places in between," and "composing with materials" (see sidebar, right).

patterns of home

The 10 patterns we discuss are not unique to us. Many—perhaps most—architects use them, whether consciously or not. Differing climates, budgets, programs, and stylistic references shape the specific house examples we have selected. Yet these homes remind us of how fundamentally alike we are in our needs, and convince us that getting the basic patterns right creates a freedom of expression as the design develops. These patterns, presented in an order that starts with the site and ends with the materials of construction, are as follows:

1. Inhabiting the site. The house provides a sustainable home in response to its site. It is a part of a larger order that includes the path of the sun, the presence of neighbors, sound, views, sidewalks and roads, new places, old places, the places that are good to be in just as they are, and the places in between.

2. Creating rooms, outside and in. The entire home site consists of a mosaic of rooms, some inside and some out, defined by landscape, fencing, and walls.

3. A sheltering roof. A strong roof form is important. Each major space, inside or out, is experienced as part of an overall system of sheltering roofs.

4. Capturing light. Each major room is arranged to gather natural light from at least two directions, in accord with the room's function and place in the plan, and in accord with regional cycles of day and year.

5. Parts in proportion. Each part of the house is shaped and sized to fulfill its role as part of something larger, and, simultaneously, as a whole with its own constituent parts.

6. The flow through rooms. Common spaces on the site and in the house provide calm eddies for settling in and pathways for moving along to an adjacent space.

7. Private edges, common core. Each space provides a center for shared activities, and adjacent smaller pockets along the edges for private activities.

8. Refuge and outlook. Both the home and the site provide many stable, safe, protected places (at all scales) from which one can look out toward, and over, a larger beyond.

9. Places in between. Major adjacent spaces are linked to each other by in-between spaces, like porches, window seats, and outdoor rooms.

10. Composing with materials. Like notes in a melody, the separate physical materials of the house and garden are assembled to act in harmony with each other.—*m.j., m.s., and b.w.*