A FULL HOUSE

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Abstract
A fictional child knows which buildings suit him. He talks with an anthropologist, an historian, an architect, and a depth psychologist: he wants to know why some buildings suit him while other buildings don't. The child's own experience corresponds with the experience that led Christopher Alexander to undertake his research. We can recognize this child in ourselves.

Keywords: buildings that suit us.

Birds build nests. Bees make hives. Foxes hollow out the ground. Ants pile it up. They make the homes that suit them. They construct the homes they are capable of building. Each individual home is unique, but the structure of the homes varies little.

People set up tents, hollow out rock cliffs, weave twigs into yurts. People build houses of wood or brick, stone or concrete, discarded cardboard or steel and glass. People build flats and office blocks, stations and airports, stadiums and shops, museums and temples and funeral parlours. Each individual building may be anything but unique, and the structure and the style of the building vary to a vast degree.

'Why,' asks the child, 'do our buildings come in such an array of sizes and shapes, styles and materials? Why don't we build like the animals do, with a form and a pattern that always suits us?'

'Because,' the anthropologist is quick to answer, 'we have so many possibilities.' 'And more or less money,' adds the economist. 'And complex forms of building organisation, of who builds what and who may profit from it,' reminds the sociologist. 'Neither can we forget historical factors,' says the historian, perhaps a bit pedantically.

It is clear that we do not begin with a clean slate. We inherit boundaries and then break them down. We can learn from tradition or else turn our backs on it, ever striving for a new form, a new spatial composition, a new combination of materials. We can set up new boundaries because they serve us, or we can banish boundaries and turn the built world into sprawl. But the child refuses to be silenced. The child gets to the heart of the matter. The child wants to know why some buildings and towns suit us, while others do not.

The child's question is psychological and spiritual, scientific and historical. His question is so significant that we wonder why we forget to ask it ourselves. Is there, in fact, an objectively present need for certain kinds of delineated space for human beings to inhabit? Or can we get used to anything, assuming our very psychological inheritance will evolve along with the spaces and towns we build?

A building is not a language, but like a language a building has its own grammar. It has a front and a back, an above and a below. It has walls with holes in them. It has rooms of different sizes, suited for different activities: some are better suited for dwelling in, while others are meant for moving through. A building's spatial configuration is analogous to syntax in language: some combinations make sense, while others do not; some serve us well, but others serve us poorly.

At this point the apt historian draws our attention to spatial patterns which have recurred in buildings throughout human history, regardless of cultural or technical differences. Eighteenth-century architectural theorists, fond as they were of cataloguing, tried to codify building plans into a limited number of suitable configurations.

The contemporary professional architect rebels passionately. The architect points to buildings which only new technologies and techniques have made possible. The architect, whose craft concerns boundaries and limits, will in no wise be limited or bounded in designing new buildings. What is important is that they be new.

'You're missing the point,' interrupts the child. 'Some of my favourite toys are new. Many of my favourite toys are old. Some of them I got as gifts. A few I made myself, thanks to some help from my dad. I don't care whether they're old or new. What I care about is that they suit me.'

'What I care about is that they suit me.' The child has hit the nail on the head. The value a building has, the suitability a town has: these are the qualities that count. After all, not only the architect but the entire human race must inhabit them. What do buildings and towns do to us? What do they do for us? When do they suit us, and when do they provide us with an improper fit?

Is there an objective answer?

If there is an answer, then the answer must come not from a theory, not from an ideology, not from belief. The answer can only come from human experience. And human experience is like a house: what you see is not all you get. Beneath the inhabitable rooms lie the basement and the subbasement, which in turn rest on the foundation. Sometimes we know consciously what suits us: we know already which rooms are our favourites. But at other times we need to look deeper if we are intent on discovering the truth. We can consult our dreams and myths. We can study the limits to our perception. We can attempt to discover, in fact, how we perceive spaces and boundaries. And perhaps most important of all, we can acknowledge what the spaces and boundaries mean to us, what they mean for us, whether they suit us.

By attending to the record of built buildings through the ages, we can acknowledge how we feel in them and what they connote for us. We can rediscover what we perhaps already knew: this room is too low; this hall is just wide enough; this stair invites us to climb it; this window feels like a letter box; this porch is right in every season; this continuous glass wall needs stickers of birds on it: otherwise both we and the birds will fly into it.

By attending to what goes on inside our heads, we shall probably keep ourselves honest. If our chief goal is to belong to a club of established architects, our wish to be part of the group, part of the age, may make us forget our authentic experience. And the child demands honesty, unadulterated and uncorrupted.

Not only does the child demand honesty: the child is gifted as well. He is bright. He already knows that asking people which buildings they prefer may not provide all the answers. People, the child has observed, respond at different levels of awareness. They may even try to give the answer they assume the questioner wants. Or they may try their best to prove they are trendsetters, choosing the buildings which have just been hailed in the newspapers. How, the child wonders, can we get to the heart of the matter?

Normally, sceptical of theories, the child suspects that certain theories may indeed disclose the truth, provided they grow out of documented human experience. The child wants to know what goes on in our heads and in our bodies when we inhabit a room or a building, a square or a town.

Who could better satisfy the child than a depth psychologist who devoted his life to studying children—how they develop, how their consciousness grows, how they create? D. W. Winnicott (1971) is just such a psychologist. The theories he developed while observing children led to his conclusion that playing is necessary for survival, and that it is impossible to be creative without building on tradition.

At the beginning of our lives, we know virtually no boundaries. In our experience, we simply are our mother and her breast, our brother and the beast on our bedroom curtains; we are light during the day and darkness during the night. In essence, however, we are all budding architects: we begin to build boundaries; we begin to differentiate between mine and thine. The day dawns when we look at our mother and see our own face reflected in hers. And if our mother is good at her profession, she engages us in a game of hide and seek. She leaves us for a

moment, only to return soon afterwards, showing us her face again. It's quite a significant step in our development when we discover we're not our mother. We discover we're still alive, even though she's left the room. You could say we've built a wall around ourselves, a wall that protects us from identifying with everyone and everything else. This wall contains us: it allows us to forge an identity.

We continue to grow as we continue to play. Not only do we discover that mother or father have not disappeared forever, even though they may have stepped out of the room; we find that our favourite toy animal can play the role of mother, father, or friend for us. The house we're building is growing along with our own emerging identity.

As our house grows, as our identity takes shape, we're not only architects: we're historians as well. We have memories. We can enjoy and trust the memory of our absent mother in the face of our stuffed bear. We may even hide the bear in order to delight in finding it again. We have not been abandoned after all. We all tread the path of psychological development, and we tread it as we play. We follow a path that depends on memory.

The inquisitive child is pleased to learn of Winnicott's observations. If playing and building depend on memory, the child reasons, then one would expect that real buildings grow out of memories as well. Do they? The child turns again to the architectural historian.

The historian who comes to his aid has tried to be as honest as the child himself. The historian has searched the record of built buildings for a common denominator: he has not been content to regard buildings as mere examples of various styles. And the historian has hit upon a building theme as universal as the developmental history of every child. The theme is containment.

The child must reflect for a moment: he must consult his memory and his experience in order to savour what containment entails. 'Containment: oh yes—the castles I build with my blocks contain a safe dwelling space, protected from potential attackers. And I remember that my favourite bear contained my absent mother's face. My toy chest contains my treasures.'

The more the child reflects, the more he remembers how vitally important the experience of containment is. He recalls being sent to his room after a temper tantrum. The room's walls contained his unbridled emotions until he was able to distinguish between his feelings and his identity. Perhaps the historian is on the right track, the child thinks.

'Judge for yourself,' retorts the historian. 'Journey with me to distant lands and different climes. Look at the first buildings we built. Look at the buildings we built afterwards. What do they share with each other? Containment. The need to contain. Not just people and animals, but gods, our most precious treasures.'

The historian leads the child through books and pictures, through models of buildings and actual buildings. The child discovers that throughout virtually all of human history, the first buildings and then the most important buildings were built not just to protect people from the elements: they were built in order to contain a god, a divine treasure, a memory essential to human development and wellbeing.

As though he were the first person on earth, the child delights in encountering the same spatial pattern, again and again. He sees temple gods, Athena herself, full of the literal Greek treasures, the Torah, the Shiva, the Buddha, the consecrated Host, the mihrab that reflects the presence of the holy centre in the experience of the beholder. He sees courtyards with fountains. He sees thresholds after thresholds in the Forbidden City, culminating in the room fit only for the emperor. They are all set apart. They are all contained. 'Why?' the child wonders. But hardly are his words out before his memory presents him with an image of his favourite stuffed bear.

'Of course,' exclaims the child. 'My bear contained my memory of my mother. That's why I gave him a special name and built a house for him in my room. I treated my bear with the same respect that grown people give to their gods, to God. I needed my bear to remind me not only of my mother: I needed him to remind me I was not alone in this world.'

'Right you are!' The voice comes from someone else. It's not the historian. It's a wise woman, another depth psychologist. The child wonders how she got into the room. She explains

that the historian invited her. He wanted corroboration. He wanted to be as sure as possible that containment is the theme and the purpose of architecture. That's why he sought an expert with experience in observing that most elusive part of our being: the human soul.

'And that's precisely why people refer to me as a depth psychologist,' the woman clarifies. 'Depth psychologists are not terribly interested in behaviour alone or in manipulating people's behaviour. We're searching for what really makes us tick. We look at dreams, at themes in literature, at patterns in music, and even the spatial compositions of buildings and towns. We find similarities, over and over again. And we make maps in an attempt to order our observations and our insights. This is very difficult territory—at once empirical and hypothetical. We can't see the soul; we can only derive its existence from the experience we observe.'

'Please go on,' pleads the child. 'I like playing with maps. I like extending my boundaries into uncharted territories. Who knows what we may find there?'

'Drawing a map of the soul—of the psyche, depending on which language you prefer—is tricky. It's tricky because we can't view it in the same way we can see the gall bladder in "a patient etherised upon a table" (Eliot, 1971). We're not dealing with visible organs; we're dealing with patterns and attitudes and experience.'

'I don't mind,' interrupts the child. 'I want to know what you've discovered, or at least what you think you've discovered.'

'Well,' the woman continues, 'the evidence is quite unassailable for anyone who wishes to look at it honestly. And the evidence supports the historian's findings: it's all about containment and relating to what we've contained.'

The child recoils. 'Stop using abstractions, please. Show me the maps. Let me see them; let me feel them; let me touch them and play with them. Let me discover for myself whether they've charted the territory I know.'

'I can be brief,' the depth psychologist replies. 'Remember how at first you couldn't distinguish yourself from your mother or your brother? Remember how you were everything else in the world?'

Because the child is still honest, he has to admit he's forgotten this stage in his development. 'But I do remember how important my bear was for me,' he offers. 'And I know how my room helped me contain my anger. I see now—no, I remember—how a building can contain my most precious treasure.'

'Exactly. Take a look then at the map we've made of the psyche. It's in the form of a circle. In the middle is the soul, the source of life and direction, the unconscious, the beginning.'

'Yes,' squeals the child. 'And that's where I was too when I feared I didn't exist any more after my mother left the room.'

'Right again,' confirms the woman, pleased at the child's awareness. 'But gradually you developed a sense of yourself as distinct from your mother, as different from the shadows on the wall, as owner of feelings rather than as the feelings themselves. This sense of yourself, this discovery that you're an "I" in relation to others, this experience we've called the ego. Whatever our school of thought or interpretation, we depth psychologists agree that the ego starts out in the undifferentiated paradise at the centre of the map of the soul and then moves, as it grows stronger, to the circle's edge.'

'I see a parallel with our most cherished buildings,' notes the child. 'The centre is where we start from and what we hold dear. The edge of the circle is a boundary which contains the centre. And the ego, that part of me which is more or less conscious, can look either to my inner centre or to the outside world beyond the circle.'

'You're precocious indeed,' the woman responds. 'You've got it. You understand the map. You're aware of your own experience. You haven't swept it under the carpet.'

At this point the child feels terribly proud of himself. The depth psychologist is aware of his pride. In fact, she uses his pride to illustrate the next phase of the soul's map.

'What happens when you feel so proud of yourself for grasping such a difficult experience? Do you feel you could conquer the world?'

'Well, now that you mention it, yes.' I feel as though I had just sailed the seven seas and had claimed new territories for my king. He'll reward me and give me a noble title!'

'And therein lies the danger,' says the woman, as calmly as possible. 'Without intending to do so, you've just described what depth psychologists call the inflated ego: the "I" that feels unbounded, the "I" that thinks it can conquer everything in sight, the "I" that is blinded by its own apparent power. When your ego is inflated, you forget its source. You forget your own developmental history. You forget your bear. You forget your treasures. You forget to contain them. The all-powerful ego is Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods without foreseeing the consequences.'

'But I know what happened to Prometheus: I just read a book about the Greek myths. His pride led to suffering on a daily basis. An eagle pecked away at his liver, day in and day out.' The child is clearly not unaware of his cultural history.

'I'm very glad you recalled Prometheus,' the depth psychologist says. 'We don't concoct myths to explain what we don't understand scientifically. We receive myths from dreams, from visions, van moments of insight. And the myths tell us as much about the nature of our experience as any scientific experiment can tell us. But why stop at Prometheus? Why not continue on to a mythical encounter which is even closer to our own culture?'

'Yes, I'd like that,' the child admits, now more curious than ever. 'What have you got in mind?'

'Malachi, the minor prophet whom Handel and, in our day, Mark Helprin (1977), acclaimed as a major prophet. You know what he said? "Return to me, and I will return unto you." And you know whose voice said it? The voice of the living God.'

'Wait just a minute,' the child cries. 'I thought we were learning about architecture—the architecture of built and bounded space, and the derived architecture of the soul. Why are you bringing faith into the picture?'

'Because,' the depth psychologist explains, 'faith is larger than a particular tradition of faith. Faith is an experience which we all share, even if we've been coached and educated to dismiss it. The voice that challenges us to return is none other than the treasure which dwells at the centre of our psychic map. The voice was present before our ego developed. And the voice always has the last word.'

'How in the world can you be so sure?' asks the child. He's not entirely puzzled: his intuition gives the woman the benefit of the doubt. His memory begins to blossom. He almost understands the point the cartographer of the soul is trying to make. But not quite.

The woman continues. 'Perhaps I can clarify the map of the soul better if I quote one of the pioneer mapmakers. Jung recorded that not one of his clients during the second half of his life regained his equilibrium before he rediscovered what Jung called a religious attitude. The prophet's words sum up that attitude better than a whole book of words could do. In psychological terms, the ego rediscovers its role in life, gets back on its given path, comes home to its rightful house when it acknowledges and remembers it's not a god. The healthy ego recalls its humble beginnings in the undifferentiated paradise of unconscious life. It recalls its centre and its source. It remembers its origin. And its origin is at the centre of the depth psychological map. Call it God, call it the source, call it the living centre, call it the Other before the ego learned to distinguish itself from an Other. Call it the treasure which architecture throughout history has sought to contain, to set off, to consecrate.'

The child is still. After a rather long silence he associates the map with a story he's heard, a story he only partly understands. Not entirely sure of himself, he dares a question nonetheless. 'Are you talking about an offer?'

The depth psychologist is stunned by the the child's inherent wisdom: she can't reply immediately. But the architectural historian, who has been listening attentively all along, is less reticent. 'I can't think of a better way to describe the attitude that led to our most enduring buildings and towns. The architect—if indeed there were an architect—and the builders were not

primarily interested in power or personal gain. Neither were they building only for themselves. They were building for the whole community. The cathedral, the palace, the covered market, the town walls were for everyone to enjoy.'

'I understand,' adds the child. 'But that's not entirely what I meant by an offer. I was thinking more of what went on in the soul of the builder while he was building. I was thinking of the map of the psyche. If you build as an offer, then you're honouring the centre of the map. Your wages and your own pride are not your chief goals. I know this attitude, this stance: I know it when I'm playing. When I play, I'm not concerned with accomplishing something, with proving myself, with being evaluated. I let my ego go, just as I let my bear go, only to find him again. When I play, I come home: I come home to a full house.'

Now it's the historian who needs a moment of silence. This child is wise indeed. Or perhaps he hasn't succeeded in learning to be dishonest. He's seeking the truth, and the truth has set him free.

'You know only too well,' begins the historian, 'that our world is more than a stage we can play on. It's also a battlefield, a marketplace, and a laboratory. It's a factory too, and not just a factory where we make things and perhaps turn the workers into machines: our world is a factory of ideas and concepts as well.'

'I follow you,' assures the child. 'Do you mean that sometimes this factory of ideas gives us other attitudes than the experience of an offer?'

'That's exactly what I mean,' says the historian behind a broad smile of appreciation. 'And the best way I know to explain it is to hold the map of the soul next to the map of history, next to the record of countries invading other countries and new technologies which conquer and replace old ones. When we invade another country, we acquire land which really isn't ours. It's just like the experience of the ego when it steals territory that previously belonged to the centre. The ego then fancies itself as centre. It knows no bounds. It has no need of other people or other dreams. It has no need of gods or treasures. It races on, beating everyone and everything in sight.'

'I need to take stock,' declares the child. 'I think I grasp the difference between building as an offer and building chiefly for personal gain. I know the distinction too between a building that belongs to the whole community, that nourishes every member of the community, and a private castle hiding behind guarded gates. And I've seen more than enough shops and malls along endless roads where people fear to tread outside their cars. It's as though everyone forgot about the community. And not only that: it's as though everyone forgot how to play, forgot his own history, forgot his own path of psychological development. It's very sad. But it's more than sad: if the map of the soul's development is accurate, then the buildings and towns we've built recently don't suit us at all. They are like clothes of the wrong size. They're too hot in summer and too cold in winter. They have very little to do with who we really are. Besides that, they make me forget how to play.'

'Yes,' say the historian and the psychologist in one breath. 'We're racing along toward a goal that cannot possibly be our true home. "The falcon cannot hear the falconer." (Yeats, 1977)'

'What is to be done?' the child demands.

The historian pauses for a moment before trying to answer the child's question. The more he reflects, the more he sees the two maps, side by side: the map of our built world and the map of the soul. He clears his throat and looks straight into the child's eyes to make sure he's listening.

'It seems to me we can take two routes that lead to reconstructing a full house, a house we all recognise as home. One route is clearly marked on the map of the literal townscape. Taking this route we can work to change building codes, we can try to organise the building trades and the money lenders in a more healthy way. We can build buildings which both we and our clients feel truly at home in. And once we've peopled even a small part of the world with full houses, more and more people will want to live in them. It may be a long battle, but the presence of a real building or a real town may convince us far more effectively than words.'

'And the other route?' interrupts the child, just as curious now as when the conversation began.

'The other route is printed on the map of the soul. That makes it difficult for everyone to see clearly, but since we've already experienced it in our own development, it can't be terribly unfamiliar. Following the other route,' the historian continues, 'requires at first no action in the outer world at all. It simply means giving ourselves the chance to be still, to reflect, to remember. Are we builders? We'll ask ourselves why we're building, what we're building, and whom we're building for. Are we architects? We'll ask ourselves not just what we think we want, but what we need, what our souls need. Are we town planners? We'll ask ourselves if the laws we uphold truly help people to live in a house that suits them, in a house they can play seriously in.'

The child grows slightly impatient. He wants to make sure he understands the paradox of following two routes on two different maps simultaneously. He wonders which route comes first. He has no difficulty seeing buildings and towns which give him a feeling of joy, but he's not so clear about the change in attitude which the psychic map offers. 'Can you draw the inner route for me so that I can see it distinctly?' he asks.

The historian obliges him. 'I can try. Remember your experience with your bear? Remember building towns with your blocks? Remember your dreams? The way you played with them was the way of analogy, the way of synthesis, the way of regarding your toys, your family, your whole world as enchanted. Everyone in the world knows this way, because everyone has been a child. And a child does and builds what suits him.'

The child can't resist interrupting again. 'I'm not sure I know all those adult words—analogy and synthesis.'

'That's all right,' the historian reassures him. 'You know from experience what I mean. From playing you know that a thing is never only a thing, that it's always alive. You can engage it in conversation, and it answers you. You know too that time falls away when you're playing: you don't have to meet deadlines, you don't consult the digital clock every ten minutes, you don't reflect on yesterday or plan for tomorrow.'

'That's true.'

'But something began to happen in the Western World several hundred years ago. People challenged their leaders, who had often treated them as slaves. Perhaps the Enlightenment wasn't the first step; perhaps the change was growing gradually; perhaps its seeds were planted long before. The exact time is not what's important; what matters is that we discovered new ways of building and fighting, new ways of thinking and believing, new ways of making things and selling them. More and more we forgot the past we all share, our own past as players. More and more we learnt not to synthesise but to analyse, not to build but to dissect, not to dream but to control. We're still in this developmental period now. We haven't yet discovered how to combine the new visions and the new techniques with our own human nature, our own development as players.'

The child doesn't need to know all the supposed facts of history in order to grasp the history of a quite radical change—in attitude, in a way of being, in a way of regarding other people and things in the world. An image of the psychic map has stayed clearly in his mind. He sees Ego dressed as a relentless Napoleon, conquering not only the territory outside the circle but confiscating its inner, holy centre as well. The child knows this attitude doesn't suit him, because it keeps him from playing.

The historian senses it's time to bring the conversation to a close—not forever, but for the time being. 'Our conversation began,' he reiterates, 'when you asked why we so often don't build the buildings and the towns which suit us. We've all tried to understand how the history we've inherited is at odds with our natural history, our history of development. To make things simpler than they actually may be, we've drawn two maps to help lead us to a house that suits us, to a full house we can play in adequately. We've discovered we need to follow both routes: one in the outer world of action and one in the inner world of reflection, of remembering who we are and

how we became who we are. Fighting ill-suited laws, changing the organisation of the building trades, actually building joyful towns and buildings: they require an offer because the route is anything but smooth. Honouring the central court on our psychic map demands an offer too: your ego may be frightened of relinquishing its power, but if it remembers the joy of playing, then it can offer itself quite easily.'

'Yes,' the child responds. 'Two routes on two maps. But aren't the two maps really one single map? How can you separate work and play, action and reflection?'

'We can't. And we don't need to,' the historian reminds him. 'All we need is a song, or perhaps a poem that will sing itself within us. We need a song to remind us that our buildings contain not only furniture and machines and people: they contain our souls and their centres as well. And if the arrangement of spaces we build fails to contain our treasure, then we need to build different buildings and towns.'

'Yes, yes! Give me a song. Give me a song that reminds me how to play again. Give me a song that will help me build buildings that suit us when I grow up. Give me a song that will give me courage.'

The historian thinks neither long nor hard. The end of a poem starts to play resoundingly in his mind. 'Why shouldn't we sing it?' he asks himself. 'Why shouldn't it sing us?'

'The song,' he gently tells the child, 'is a poem which grew in the mind of Cesar Vallejo (1974) during the dark night of the Civil War in Spain. It's not only about that war. It's not only about the map in the outer world. Neither is it only about a change in attitude belonging to the map of the inner world. It unites them both. Here, I give you Vallejo's song:

si la madre
España cae—digo, es un decir—,
salid, niños del mundo; id a buscarla!

if mother
Spain falls—I tell you, it's just a thought—,
Out, children of the world; go and search for her!

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