
9 Recording space

There is a central quality which is the root criterion of life and spirit in a man, a town a building or a wilderness. This quality is objective and precise, but it cannot be named.

Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*

There's no such thing as a bad Picasso, but some are less good than others.

Pablo Picasso, *Come to Judgement*

Measuring place

We have repeatedly seen throughout this book that space is not abstract but is governed by a complex meaningful language. This language is implicit rather than explicit. It is understood by all except, it seems to many, the designers of modern architecture. This cannot be better summed up than by Aldo van Eyck in 1962, in a quotation I make no apology for repeating:

Whatever space and time mean, place and occasion mean more. For space in the image of man is place, and time in the image of man is occasion.

His distinction between space and place is a nice one, and in reality this book is probably best understood as how to make places out of spaces. As Aldo Van Eyck tells us, though, this is done not so much by architects as by the people who inhabit space with their activities and thus turn them into places. However, architects can of course develop spaces that seem to celebrate those activities and rituals. This is very similar to the argument of Alexander that we saw in the last chapter.

People often seem rather inarticulate when asked for a brief by a designer about place, and this is probably largely due to the way the language of space is understood by them implicitly rather than explicitly – they are not used to translating the language into words. For this reason, many people not associated professionally with design may be quite definite about their likes and dislikes but comparatively hazy