

In 1975, architect Christopher Alexander received an invitation from a group of faculty members and students from the School of Architecture at the Autonomous University of Baja California (UABC) to give a lecture in the border city of Mexicali. Instead, Alexander proposed conducting a social housing experiment with working-class families willing to build their own homes. The experiment would also provide an opportunity to test his groundbreaking theory known as “pattern language.” With the support of UABC and the Center for Environmental Structure in Berkeley, as well as a group of local government institutions and officials, the Mexicali Experimental Project was inaugurated in late 1976 on the outskirts of the city, in an emerging neighborhood known as Conjunto Urbano Orizaba.

The Mexicali experiment was part of the architectural vitality of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which saw an unprecedented production of public housing and informal settlements amid one of the worst moments of the global crisis in human settlements. Like those of many of his peers, Alexander’s ideas stemmed from a profound reflection on this crisis and were fueled by a fierce critique of the dominant state and market-driven solutions. At the same time, grassroots movements responded to this crisis with radical ideas and solutions grounded in self-help processes, while technological advances stimulated the rise of utopian and futuristic visions of the city.

Alexander’s proposal consisted of replacing large, mass-produced housing complexes with small “communities” designed and built by the people according to their social, economic, and spiritual needs. His theories were based on the conviction that buildings should

be human and beautiful places, or, as he called them, “whole and timeless.” Alexander’s short-term plan in Mexicali was to test a series of participatory design principles and experimental construction techniques. However, his end goal was much more ambitious—and contentious. As he stated a few years later in his book *The Production of Houses*, the project sought to become a roadmap for an entirely “new social system.”

Due to institutional setbacks, only five of the thirty homes initially planned were completed, along with a “builder’s yard,” where design-build solutions were tested on a full-scale prototype. Since its completion, the Mexicali experiment faced numerous challenges, from disagreements among residents to incompatibility with local building systems to fierce questioning by critics and academics alike. However, half a century later, as the housing crisis deepens worldwide, this experiment still offers many lessons. With this idea in mind, this exhibition explores the unique legacy of the Mexicali Experimental Project through a multidimensional analysis of its history, its sociocultural, political, and economic context, the theories that underpinned it, and its radical transformation over time.