

THE MEXICALI EXPERIMENTAL PROJECT

In 1975, architect Christopher Alexander received an invitation to lecture at the public University of Baja California (UABC) in the border city of Mexicali. Coinciding with the development of his acclaimed theory, "pattern language," Alexander proposed instead to conduct a social housing experiment with working-class families willing to build their own homes. With the support of a group of students and faculty from UABC and Berkeley's Center for Environmental Structure, as well as local government officials, the Mexicali Experimental Project was built in 1976 on the city's outskirts at the Conjunto Urbano Orizaba.

In many ways, the Mexicali experiment was part of the architectural vitality of the late sixties and early seventies, which saw an explosion of public housing and informal settlements at the height of the global housing crisis of the time. During this period, grassroots movements introduced self-help building tools and systems, while technological advances led to more theoretical architects imagining utopian and futuristic cities. Alexander's method aimed to change the paradigm of "alienated" housing produced by the state and the market in favor of small "communities" built by people according to their social, economic, and spiritual needs. His theories were based on the idea that buildings should also be human and "beautiful places," or as he called them, "whole and timeless."

Due to economic, political, and institutional setbacks, only five of the originally planned thirty houses in the Mexicali project were completed, together with a builder's yard, where design-build solutions were tested on a full-scale prototype. Since its completion, the experiment has faced numerous challenges, from disagreements among residents, to its incompatibility with local building systems, to fierce commentary from critics and academics alike.

Half a century later, as housing crises deepen worldwide, this experiment still offers many lessons to be considered. In this sense, the exhibition explores the history and sociopolitical context of the Mexicali Experimental Project, the theories behind it, and its radical transformation over time. It draws on a wide range of resources and collaborations—including archival material, photographs, film, essays, and new commissions with architects and artists.