

Pattern Language as a Critical Tool for Small-Scale Housing: An Undergraduate Design Studio Experience

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This paper examines the use of Christopher Alexander’s “Pattern Language” within an undergraduate architectural design studio as an operative framework for spatial inquiry. Rather than treating patterns as repeatable solutions, the studio challenges their fixed interpretation by repositioning them as instruments for analysis, comparison, and transformation. In the initial phase, students identify and deconstruct patterns found in a list of case studies, focusing on how spatial relationships, such as thresholds, shared spaces, and transitions, are constructed and modified across different contexts (pattern mining). The next exercise isolates a single pattern and subjects it to dimensional and spatial testing, exposing the limits and variability of its application at room scale (pattern application). The following phase extends this critical reading into a specific design task titled “HousingPLS: Reclaiming/Repairing Bahçelievler”, situated at a neighborhood originally developed as a green, cooperative residential settlement, now transformed through incremental and often uncoordinated interventions. Here, patterns are not applied directly but reinterpreted in response to specific household structures that combine domestic life with productive programs (pattern usage).

Drawing on the concept of the “un-private house,” student projects question conventional domestic boundaries by introducing spatial overlaps, shared uses, and negotiated degrees of privacy, while responding to varying conditions of orientation and adjacency across different parcels within the same urban block (pattern development). Acknowledging that the claim that the activities and their spatial configurations possess a timeless quality is problematic, the paper argues that the value of pattern language in this context lies not in its capacity to produce coherent form, but in its ability to reveal inconsistencies between inherited spatial models and contemporary modes of living. Through this tension, the studio positions patterns as tools for critique as much as for design, enabling re-reading of Bahçelievler’s fragmented condition through small-scale architectural interventions.