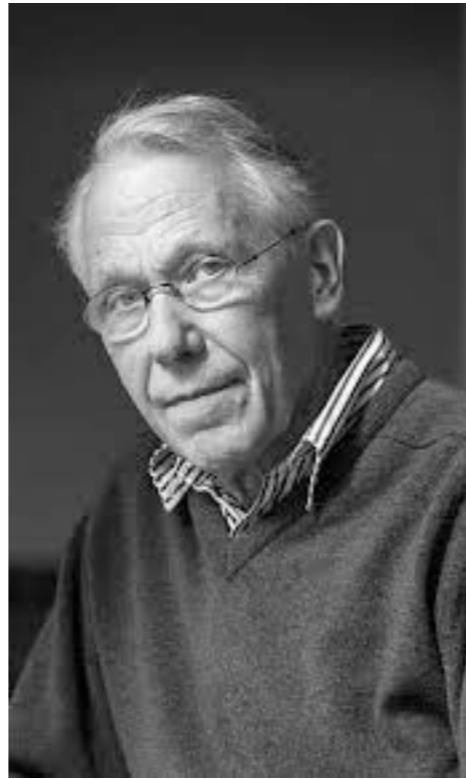
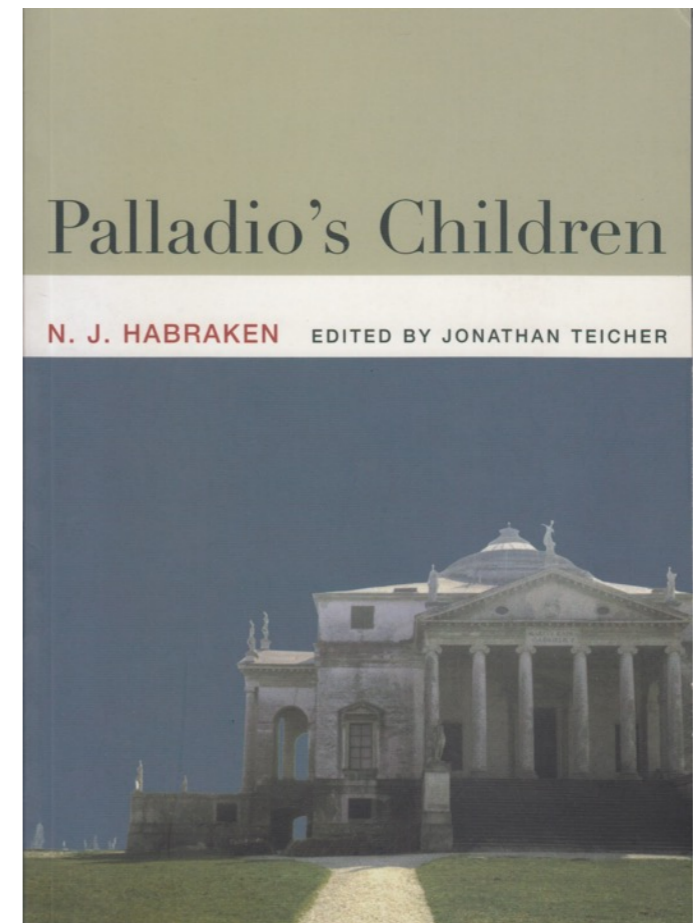
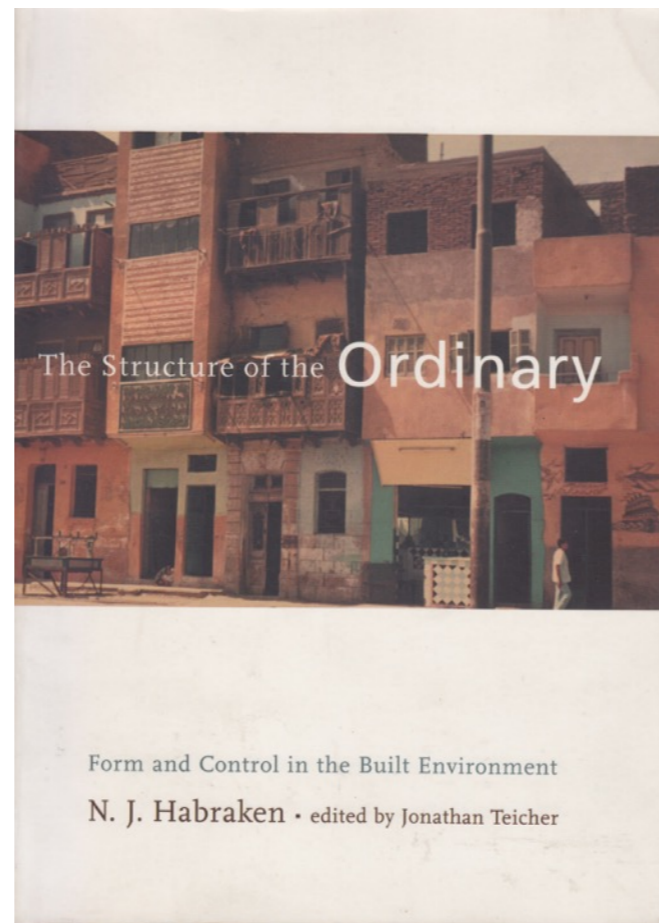
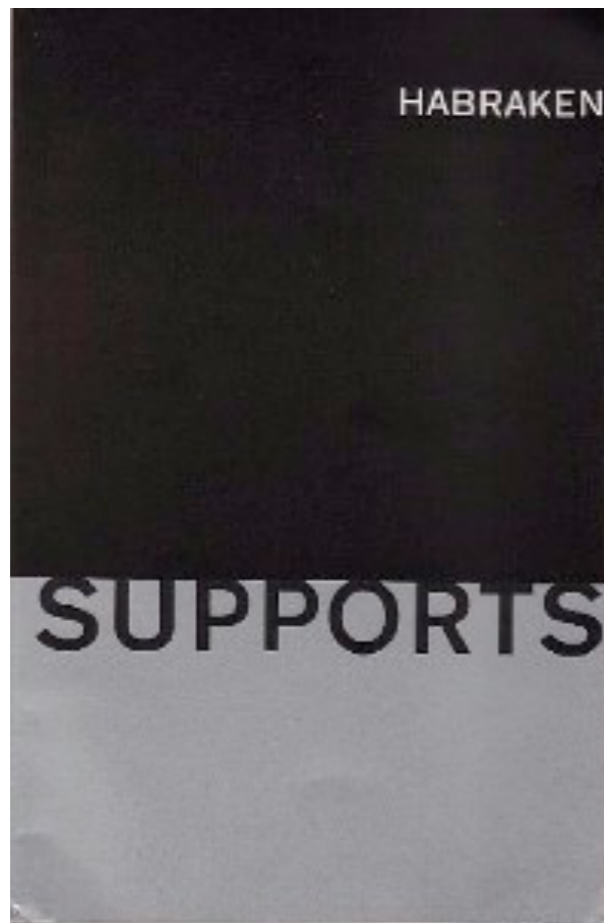


Telling presentation - CAAA  
26.09.2016



**N. John Habraken**



selection of books

# An Imagined Letter to the Students of Architecture

by N. John Habraken  
(Structure and selected ideas by Cidália Silva)



## 1. Learn with the Ordinary

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The wholeness of the ordinary environment is the subject of our work. I invite you to set aside the oppositions we so easily make: between architecture and vernacular, between monument and common building, between the large and the small, between the important and unimportant. Let us consider the continuity of buildings and space - space covered and open, buildings of all kinds.

You see, early in the 20th century, for the first time in history, the ordinary environment became a problem: in only a few generations dwelling typology was no longer viable, new materials came into use, entirely new ways of building were developed, social habits and values changed dramatically, and rapid growth of cities called for massive building programs.

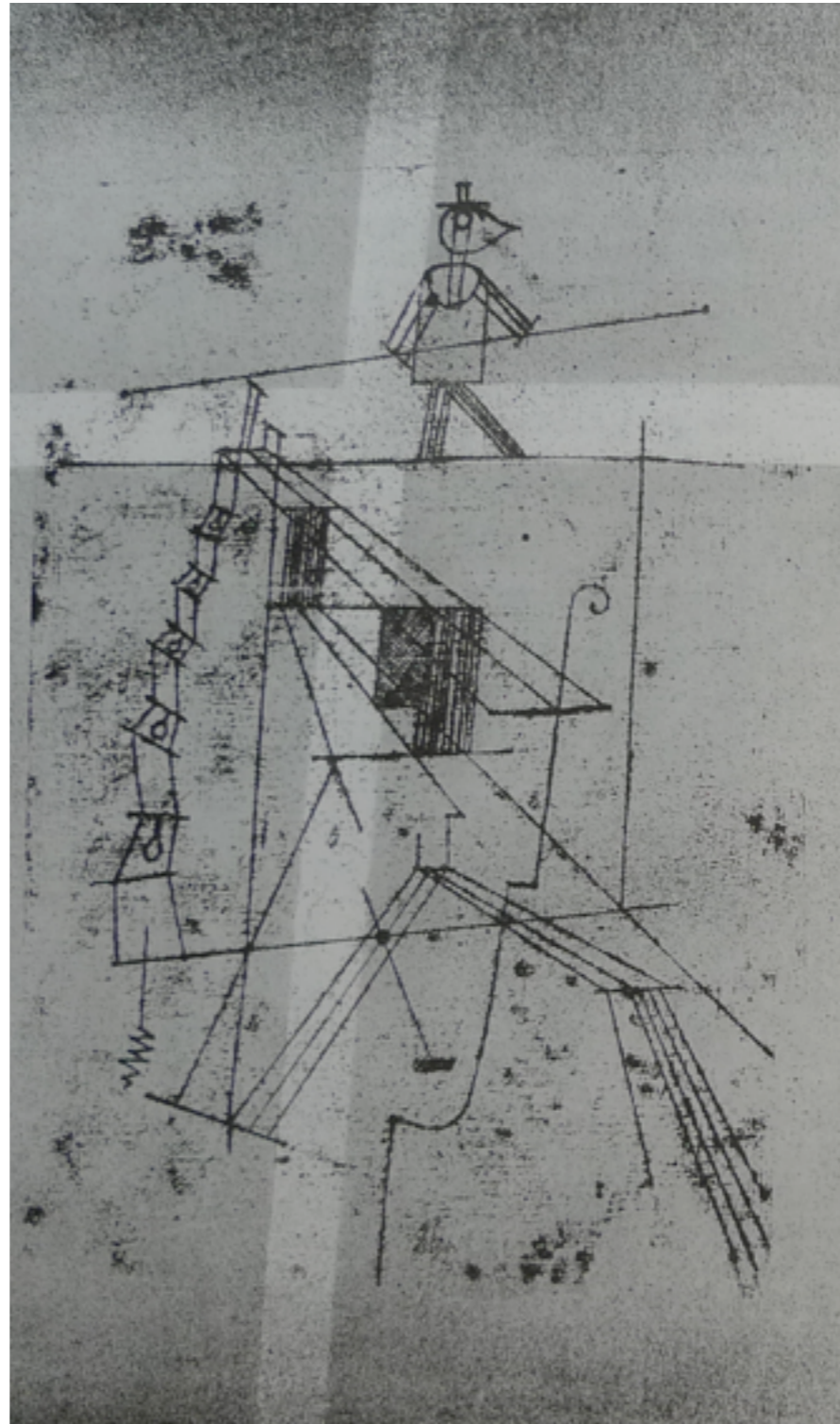
In other words, where the profession traditionally was occupied with the special and exceptional building, now the ordinary environment was approached in the same way. As a result, our contemporary environment is largely the product of a remarkable contradiction. The ordinary was treated as the extraordinary, or to put it differently: everything became special. As I wrote already in the sixties: The legendary king Midas starved for lack of food because everything he touched turned into gold: whatever architects touched became special Architecture while they worked on what in fact is a living organism.

This radical shift in roles has become irreversible. Called upon to maintain, transform, and expand the ordinary built environment at all scales, today's professional can no longer refuse nor abandon this task. Yet in continuing to rely on design traditions, methods, and tools shaped by the Palladian model, we remain poorly equipped to do our mission justice. Practices historically developed to create unique and limited acts of monumentality cannot guide us in engaging the commonplace. We need to shake off jaded ambition, among other constraints on our thoughts and actions.

In this new situation, the unspoken ways of ordinary environments must be articulated. We cannot revive the naive past. We dare not promise an unrealizable future. But to make peace with our task of designing the ordinary we must seek a more intimate knowledge of it. It is innately familiar. Anew, we observe what always has been with us - not to discover, much less to invent, but to recognize.

To do so we need to suspend judgement. Our stance vis-à-vis the built environment should parallel that of the botanist observing plants. Unlike florists, botanists do not promote plants based on shape, color, or fragrance of their flowers. We must similarly resolve not to obscure our understanding of interaction between agent and form in built environments by passing value judgements on what is observed.

Keep in mind: the ordinary is the source of creativity. Creativity is an everyday thing and as such almost unknown. Creativity is the ability to find a solution in a new situation. The ability to do the right thing in a situation without precedent.



2. Dare to Share

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For thousands of years, built environments of great richness and complexity arose informally and endured. Knowledge about how to make ordinary environment was ubiquitous, innately manifest in the everyday interactions of builders, patrons and users. Built environment arose from implicit structures based on common understanding.

Historic environments that we admire and love came about in part because the builders and the inhabitants shared typology, patterns, and styles. Yet many of us now believe that ideally architecture is to be conceived from a blank slate, in rejection of everything familiar. For instance, type need not be local, but it must, at all times, be shared by those who will take action.

Sharing does not come easily to architects. From where this resistance? From where the obsession with originality and individuality? I believe it is because we never learned to enter into a dialogue with the built field. The Modern tradition is highly self-referential and delocalized and thinks it shameful to accept precedent and borrow from others.

We also need a common language: shared knowledge brings common vocabulary, which allows its partitioners to share information and express understanding in a precise and effective way. The language used by architects today seeks to stress what makes us different; it expresses personal meaning and intention. It is a language borrowed from the critic, whose task it is to explain what buildings mean and to describe the impressions they make on observers and users.

Keep in mind Seneca's statement: "the more it is shared out, the greater it will become."





**2.1-2.4 The endurance of fields**

**2.1** Amsterdam, part of the partially completed "Jordaan" neighborhood, from a map by Balthasar Florisz. van Berckenrode, ca. 1625. Created in the Third Extension of Amsterdam, the Jordaan neighborhood stands apart from the houses of the well-to-do, which line the three major canals. The Jordaan neighborhood was intended for tradesmen and artisans. Its streets and canals followed the existing subdivision of the countryside by ditches.



**2.2** Amsterdam, the same portion of the "Jordaan" neighborhood in an aerial photograph about 350 years later. Photograph © KLM Aerocarto NL. Reprinted with permission.

# 3. Embrace Change

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Architecture always has been: the thing complete in itself. The singular thing. The thing that withstood time. Architecture always was the static conception. Architecture was a challenge to time: time is the succession of seasons, the succession of generations, the fragility of life, the birth and death. Architecture's purpose was to stop time. A stone, immovable in the flowing stream of the ordinary.

Architecture was to shut off the transient and fugitive world. to leave the monument, a testimony to later generations. The ordinary: is never a thing complete in itself, is never singular, is never in opposition with time.

The ordinary environment changes all the time, it grows and wanes, and parts are replaced, one after the other, like cells in a living body. But in our architectural ideology change always was the enemy. The monument must remain inviolate.

Conservation may serve to freeze works of art in time, resisting time's effects. But the living environment can persist only through change and adaptation.

In growing and changing through time, the ordinary environment resembles an organism more than an artifact. Yet, while ever-changing, it does possess qualities that transcend time. Identities of buildings and cities persist for millennia. Despite transformation, they represent values shared with ancestors and passed down to descendants, uniting past and future.

In short, the very durability and transcendence of ordinary environment is possible only because there is continuous change. In this respect, ordinary environment is indeed organic: continuous renewal and replacement of individual cells preserves it, giving it the ability to persist.

Change and renewal are the keys to our knowledge of the ordinary environment. This is not a revolutionary idea: scientists frequently observe transformation to understand the nature and structure of things.

The intimate and unceasing interaction between people and the forms they inhabit is a fundamental and fascinating aspect of ordinary environment. We are all players: agents who inhabit the environment, transforming it to our liking and making sure things stay as we choose.

A dwelling is an environment. A dwelling cannot be designed (you can design a house, a flat, a castle, a hut, but not a dwelling). A dwelling is the result of action in ordinary life. A dwelling is an act, not a shape.

To act is to change,  
Therefore, you need to learn how to embrace change.



2.3 Venice, San Polo District, detail from a map by Jacopo Barbari ca. 1539.



2.4 Venice, detail after a contemporary survey by Paolo Maretto. This plan features the four buildings along the Canal Grande indicated in Fig 2.4. The building plans are typical, featuring a large central hall open to front and back with rooms on both sides and a stairway to the ground floor giving access to canal and back streets.

## 4. Cultivate the Field

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Built environment develops and extends in fields.

The term *field* encompasses all. Fields are only conceivable as coherent and enduring physical entities because they are inhabited, subject to and continuously reshaped by the unending actions and interventions of the people who live within the material fabric.

To deal with the ordinary physical environment does not require production but for cultivation. Architects who profess love for the ordinary should become gardeners. The gardener does not make, he cultivates.

For too long architects have been preoccupied with the singular, individual statement. If we knew how to cultivate the ordinary, the field would be well. When the field is well, monuments will appear like flowers appear on a healthy tree.

So here is the dilemma we face: on the one hand the demands of the field, on the other a professional tradition at odds with it. Sooner or later each of us must choose. There is no such thing as artistic freedom. One can only choose which bondage one prefers. Will it be the avant garde tradition, or will it be the constraints of the built field? Which will be more nourishing?

Do not see an intervention as an autonomous act only, but judge it as a voice in the ongoing dialogue in the field. Look for types, pattern and hierarchies. There will not be a single model to follow because that is not the way fields develop. But as we adjust to a new way of seeing, we will recognize more and more those with whom we share the field, we will not only find a new architecture but also friends and kindred spirits.

therefore,

Study the field  
it will be there without you  
but you can contribute to it

Study the field as a living organism  
It has no form, but it has structure  
Find its structure and form will come

The field has continuity  
merge with it  
and others will join you

Because the field has continuity  
no job is large or small  
all you do is adding to the field

Nobody builds alone:  
When you do something large  
leave the small to others  
When you do something small  
enhance the large

Respond to those before you:  
When you find structure  
inhabit it  
when you find type  
play with it  
when you find patterns  
seek to continue them

Be hospitable to those after you:  
give structure  
as well as form

The more you seek to continue  
what was done by others already  
the more you will be recognized for it  
the more others will continue what you did

Cooperate;  
When you can borrow from others  
borrow, and praise them for it  
When you can steal from others  
steal, and admit it freely  
No matter what you do  
your work will be your own

Avoid style: leave it to the critics and  
historians  
Choose method: it is what you share with  
your peers

Forget self expression  
It is a delusion  
Whatever you do  
will be recognized by others as your  
expression  
don't give it a thought  
Do what the field needs

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You can't design the ordinary.