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THE ENVIRONMENT: ACTION AND SYMBOL

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A street in Barnsbury, London, was "improved": trees were planted, the sidewalks widened, benches installed, and traffic reduced. In subsequent interviews the residents maintained that conditions were worse than before. Why? They were working-class people in a neighborhood that was being "gentrified." Middle-class groups were moving in, and the older residents saw the "improvements" as part of the invasion, symbols of the "Chelseaization" of Barnsbury. San Franciscans in like manner have fought the "Manhattanization" of San Francisco. However well they were designed, the new highrise buildings were labeled as symbolic imports from the "outside," a recurrent theme in environmental conflicts (Appleyard, 1976). Social meaning also confounds research in environmental perception. Everyone knows that breakers beating on a beach can have the same decibel count and even the same sound as heavy traffic, yet our perceptions of each are strikingly different because one is natural, the other man-caused.

And so it is that the noise, dirt, odors, buildings, signs, and traffic produced by "us" are viewed far less benevolently when produced by "them."

Britain's Minister for Energy, Wedgewood Benn, once said:

When a Frenchman hears the Concorde's supersonic bang, he feels a swell of pride in his chest. When an Englishman hears it, he thinks it is an outrageous invasion of his privacy.

Environmental professionals have not been aware of the symbolic content of the environment or of the symbolic nature of their own plans and projects. Neither have environmental scientists. The professional and scientific view of the environment usually suppresses its meaning. Professionals see the environment as a physical entity, a functional container, an accumulation of goods or commodities, a setting for social action and programs, a pattern of land uses, a sensuous experience, a natural ecosystem, but seldom as a social or political symbol. Environmental psychologists also concentrate on the environment's perceptual dimensions, its stimulus attributes, structure, and diversity; social ecologists see it as a surface on which social patterns are distributed (Firey, 1947). In many cases the environment is deliberately desymbolized in order to deal with it in technical, nonpolitical terms. This neglect, however, leads to difficulties, for ordinary people view the environment as a social medium. Professionals are surprised when their proposals are treated as symbols of themselves or those they represent. The interpretation of environmental attitudes, and the measurement of environmental qualities break up on the iceberg of social meaning. The concept of symbolism, the link between the physical environment and the socio-

political structure, should therefore be central to our thinking about environmental planning and urban design.

In small towns and rural villages of an earlier time, nearly everyone knew each other and what was going on. The buildings, fields, and other physical features were more-or-less clearly interpreted as expressions of the family background, status, wealth, personality, and social structure. Each feature was named and owned; each part an understood territory; each change attributed to its author, and quickly checked through the social network. The physical environment was thus a distinctly symbol-laden milieu.

In the modern metropolis, face-to-face social contacts are limited, and the news media deal only with major events. More often than not the mobile citizen is in unfamiliar territory, dependent only on appearances to interpret what is going on. He resorts to stereotypical interpretations or gives up on interpretation, viewing the environment primarily as a sensuous experience, abhorring its disorder because he does not understand it (see Blake, 1964, and Nairn, 1965), delighting in its magic (see Raban, 1974) for the same reasons, or simply screening it out altogether. In each instance he is the passive observer, apparently powerless to control the form of what he sees. Outside the neighborhood the metropolitan environment has become symbolically light, strange, and to many, hostile.

But all this is changing. The emergent environmental concerns, and especially the new neighborhood activism, are beginning to alter

the passive aesthetic view of the metropolis. The physical environment has become a new focus for political struggle. Political conflict in Western society has in fact shifted from the point of production to the point of consumption (Castells, 1976). The quality of life, of services, and of environment is now a key political issue. Central to this issue are questions of whose environment it is, whose territory is being invaded, who are the insiders and who the outsiders. Ultimately it is the struggle for self- and group-identity, status, and power.

An environment becomes symbolic in the social sense when it is perceived as representing something or someone else. The symbolism we shall discuss here is the immediate personal, social, and political meaning of environments and environmental actions. Only environments that epitomize the character of their referents are usually labeled as symbols. Mary Douglas (1973) called them "condensed symbols," and they can represent a whole type or class of actions or people. Thus highrise buildings can symbolize corporate power, and People's Park symbolized the youth rebellion and emerging attitudes toward nature. Such a definition is commonly used in the news media.

Among the measures [Carmel] has taken in the last year to control growth and the impact of tourism on the community, one was to halt tour buses from wandering aimlessly about the town. Although they must now park and unload in the designated downtown area [a move accepted with great reluctance by the tour bus companies] the buses themselves remain a symbol of all that is bad about tourists. (San Francisco Examiner, August 21, 1977)

Not that such interpretations are always accurate. In Carmel, an irate councilmember personally ordered one bus out of town, only to find it contained local residents returning from a tour of Alaska!

But while condensed symbols are commonly labeled as such, every part of the environment symbolizes someone or something. This paper is an attempt to outline briefly some of the main components in a model of environmental action and perception; the actors in the production, management, and consumption of the environment; and their motivations, perceptions, and environmental behavior.

The INITIATORS of environmental change can range from any individual who erects a fence or plants a tree to the major developers, property owners, public agencies, and private establishments who are the primary urbanizers. Coupled with the initiators are the EXECUTIVES, those who actually effect environmental change, the environmental professionals and the contractors and others who design, construct, or destroy places.

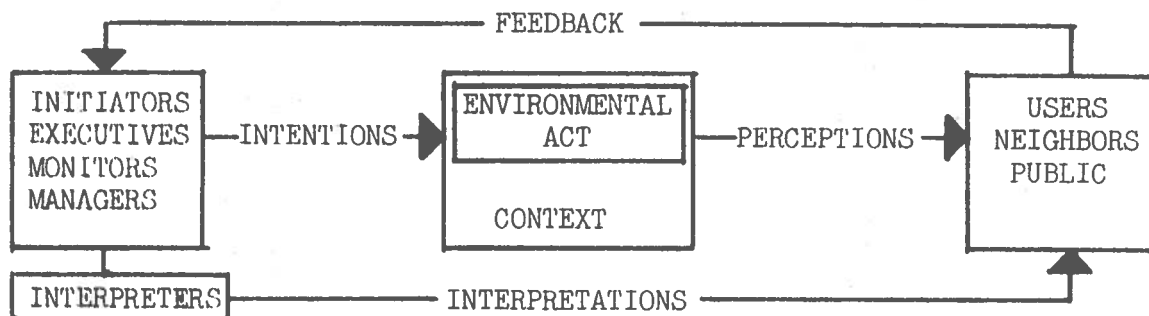
But those who change environments are no longer free in modern society to do what they would like. Their actions are subject to MONITORS, conservation and other interest groups, the planning and other public agencies and commissions, the politicians and the courts, who may oppose change, evolve guidelines for what is appropriate, arbitrate among conflicts, and generally try to interpret the public interest. OWNERS and MANAGERS have a more direct and continuing influence on the environment. Besides property owners, they include

the police and firemen, garbage collectors, and parks and public works officials who maintain the physical stock and control the ambience.

Virtually a new force in the politics and perception of the environment are the INTERPRETERS. This groups consists of reporters and news commentators; those who write and publish guidebooks; and researchers, scholars, and authors who uncover new information about the environment, and who edit and publish in professional journals and magazines. The interpreters can change perceptions of an environment and hence mold public opinion without direct environmental intervention.

A person or group can play several of these roles at different times, in addition to being a member of the lay public--the people. A planner, for instance, can originate proposals, execute them, and at other times monitor projects or interpret environmental information. At home he or she may resist local development, build a new garage, or cut down a tree.

These actions take place in the surrounding context of the city or landscape and the people connected to it. The chief RECIPIENTS of an environmental action are those contacted during the proposal phase through the news media, public hearings, word-of-mouth, and subsequently those affected by the project--the USERS, the NEIGHBORS, and the general PUBLIC.



Three primary activities link the various actors and users of the environment with the recipients: the actors' INTENTIONS, their ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIONS, and the PERCEPTIONS or received messages of the recipients. Indirectly, interpreters convey their INTERPRETATIONS of environmental actions to the public, who try to piece this information together with direct perceptions of the environment itself. Although most environmental communication is one-way, the recipients can engage in various forms of FEEDBACK: positive, negative, or adaptive, environmental or political, often through the news media.

INTENTIONS

The intentions behind environmental actions are oriented toward self, toward the action, or toward others.

SELF

Identity
Power
Status
Expressive
Exclusive

ACTION

Instrumental
Economic
Aesthetic

OTHERS

Attention-catching
Informative
Directive
Persuasive
Neighborly
Discretion

The overt and dominant intentions of most environmental actors are instrumental and economic. For instance, the provision of adequate space and shelter or easy access at reasonable cost. The market views the environment merely as a commodity to be bought and sold for profit. The instrumental view has been the motivating ideology of the "functionalist" movement in modern architecture, which has been succeeded by the "environment and behavior" movement, and which is the energizing ideology of land-use and transportation planning. Such an ideology lacks self-awareness and underplays the communication of intentions toward others. Attention is directed to the action itself, which becomes a "technical" operation. Political scientists and activists have increasingly attacked the professions for this self-deceptive view of their activity.

For some, the aesthetic quality of the action is its main purpose: the creation of beautiful buildings or environments that will stand by themselves, independent of their creators or audience. The abstraction of qualities like "space," "color," "texture," and "proportion" as values in themselves results from this aesthetic view of environmental action. "Structural honesty," "ecological integrity," "analytic rigor" become moral imperatives for the action itself.

But I will argue that the symbolic albeit covert motives of self-identity, power, status, and communication are more powerful influences on action than instrumental or abstract aesthetic

intentions. Often environmental actions are carried out to return messages back to the initiators. They reflect, inflate, or reduce the actor's sense of identity or actual power. "I-am-here" statements can range from the quietly dignified to the cavalierly expressive, depending on the personality, resources, and needs of their proponents.

Such motives are traditionally regarded as "improper," one reason for their suppression. Artists are legitimately allowed to express their feelings in their products (though not usually in public spaces!), but environmental designers, planners, or engineers seldom talk about personal expression. It is regarded as too ego-centric, irrational, and therefore unprofessional. Even though many spend a great part of their time seeking identity in their work, motives must be cloaked in the abstractions of instrumentalism, economics, or aesthetics. This depersonalization of environmental action has been most effectively carried out by the larger organizations, public and private, where committees rather than individuals guide the action.

However, the anonymous nature of so many environmental projects has, contrary to their initiators' modest wish to suppress signs of self, been generally deplored by the public, who dislike impersonal buildings and environments, and find the city an increasingly faceless place.

There is an intriguing and apt theory of display, talked of by the Duncans (1976) and argued forcefully by Jonathan Raban in Soft City, which attempts to explain when and why the environment is used as a display symbol. It states that those who live in impermeable social groups, from the old aristocracy and the established rich to the stable working classes and small-town communities, are most exclusive; they have little need for display because their identities are established. Those entering the permeable groups more common in urban culture--the nouveau riche, new migrants, and the socially mobile or transient--depend on display.

A city life is, in very large part, a life lived through symbols. Possessions--both the hardware of purchasable objects and the software of beliefs and ideas--become precious in exact ratio to their expressiveness, their capacity to define the relationship of the self to the city, and, more especially, of the fellow devotee to the depersonalized outsider or enemy. Perhaps the city forces these strategies upon us, or perhaps we have resorted to them thoughtlessly and unnecessarily. (Raban, 1974, p. 128)

Differences in the need for display may be one of the reasons why, in the environment, we find it difficult to discover where the real power lies. True elites have no need for display; in fact they may consciously hide, while we are bombarded by those striving for status. Environmental displays may well be found to correlate inversely with power. Appearance provides few cues to the social reality. Elites live in secluded estates, the vast corporate ownership of land is disguised under fragmentary techniques like the use

of "street names" for ownership on property deeds; the military bases and the CIA lie hidden in our deserts and forests. Moscow's elite shops are as difficult to find as its two hundred prisons (Solzhenitsyn, 1968). It demands clever investigative reporting to find out who owns what and where the power lies.

Only the powerful, of course, have the freedom to choose what to display. The poorer and weaker groups are invisible, hidden from view through neglect or deliberate suppression (Goodman, 1971; Appleyard, 1976).

To such an extent has the convenience of the rich been considered in the planning of Manchester that those plutocrats can travel from their houses to their places of business in the city by the shortest routes, which run entirely through working class districts, without even realizing how close they are to the misery and filth which lie on both sides of the road... The main streets are occupied almost uninterruptedly on both sides by shops, which are kept by members of the lower middle classes. In their own interests those shopkeepers should keep the outside of their shops in clean and respectable condition, and in fact they do so... It is impossible to get a true picture from the main thoroughfare of the conditions of the working class districts which lie immediately behind the facade of the principal streets. (Engels, 1958)

The same could be said of Hunters Point, Roxbury, or Harlem, all of which lie hidden from or are passed quickly by the freeway systems.

The poor, like the prisons, the dumps, the sewage systems, and industry, are kept at the "back" of the city--Grady Clay (1973) calls them "sinks"--just as the productive agriculture and its laborers were hidden neatly away from the park-like scenery viewed from the windows of English country houses (Williams, 1973).

Environmental Initiators, executives, monitors, and managers view their actions and those of others as multi-purpose mixtures of instrumental, economic, aesthetic, and symbolic intent. Some environmental actions, like political acts (Edelman, 1971), are purely symbolic--hollow gestures carried out to convince some audience of the good intentions of the action. Public housing in poorer countries has been labeled a symbolic act (Dyer, 1975), totally inadequate to meet the actual demand for housing. It is an empty gesture using the forms of housing that have meaning in Western Europe, where it does symbolize an (arguably) effective welfare program. In Peru or in India it is a false symbol. Cities and nations are replete with such prestige symbols: overreaching office buildings, expensive transit systems, malfunctioning steel mills. But can we so easily deride their conspicuous waste? Governments and communities endow them with such significance they become, perhaps, an essential part of cultural life: conspicuous acts necessary to maintain pride and identity whatever the price. And is money so important?

Other intentions are directed toward an audience. On the surface they may be attention-catching, informative, directive, persuasive, or discreet. At a deeper level they may be oriented to selling a person, an agency, an idea, or a product; they may seek social control, education, or simply entertainment.

Catching the attention of others is a prerequisite for the communication of other intentions. Unless people receive a message

they cannot be communicated with. If they are to be aware of another's presence, find a place, identify it from other places, discover the entrance, these places must be signaled in some way. The relative need to catch attention should depend on the potential audience, its unfamiliarity with the place, and its public significance (Appleyard, 1976), but the primary motive is usually the desire of the initiator to "sell" it.

Directive information is more concerned with social control. Much of this information is encoded in verbal signs (Keep Right, Go Back Wrong Way), which enable a city to function more-or-less smoothly. The more subtle social controls operate through territorial definition, defense, and exclusion. Walls, fences, signs--explicit and implicit--emphatically let people know whether they are allowed or not onto certain territories. Sometimes it requires only the slightest change in surface or the smallest sign to establish ownership or jurisdiction and exclude the unwanted (Brower, 1965).

The informational function of the physical environment in the smaller community was subordinate to direct and social communication. People knew each other, the functions of different parts of the community were known, signs were not needed. As the city becomes more complex, obscure, and faceless, people depend more and more on explicit information, on guidebooks, signs, and exhibits to explain what is where, and when things are happening. The signs grow larger as the speeds increase and the mix of strangers grows. The city is

itself a vast and changing exhibit of which individuals will ever see only a part. The education of children and tourists avid to learn of other cultures and subcultures is an emerging environmental function (Goodey, 1978).

Persuasion is usually seen as restricted to the world of advertising, and therefore as a reprehensible activity; but political parties, interest groups, and individuals today make environmental appeals for their causes and justifications for their existence, identity, and chosen lifestyles. As Jonathan Raban (1974) has pointed out, the anonymity, vastness, and transience of the metropolis, its background of "noise," forces people to exaggerate, to deal in an epigrammatic style, to engage in the bizarre if fleeting display of identities.

To persuade others, only the good and beneficial aspects of the message, whether it be product, corporation, or individual, can be displayed. The city is full of "front" regions on display, and "back" regions where props are kept and performances prepared (Goffman, 1969). This creates a complicated and deceptive game for the public that receives the messages. How does appearance relate to reality? Which is the truth? The problem is accentuated as the techniques of persuasion become more discreet. Persuasion has in turn stimulated public skepticism about appearance and the hungry quest for authenticity.

Discretion, "good manners," and neighborly relations were always important in the small community, perhaps the main reason why

display was downplayed. In the large city inhibitions have been thrown off in the commercial centers and strips, the entertainment centers, and now the office districts. The exuberance of outright display is now admired, its vulgarity condoned--by some. But the forces of propriety are making strong headway. The design review boards and the environmental impact assessors, spurred on by the neighbors and an active public, are demanding that new structures become more discreet.

The cultural elite are always discreet and are now imposing their restraint on others. Discretion means a low profile, harmony with surroundings, concern for the identity and well-being of others. Freeways sink into the ground, buildings shrink in size, incongruities are drowned in landscaping, signs are controlled, the statement is hidden from view.

In the discreet city, attention-catching directions and persuasion must be carried out in subtle, almost subliminal ways. The artful techniques described by Packard in The Hidden Persuaders (1957), by which advertisers "draw in" their audiences, appealing to aspirations or insecurity through verbal hints or simply through the "character" of the products, are being adopted by others wishing to establish themselves in the urban communications system.

The concepts of the audience held by environmental actors and producers determine the kinds of messages sent. For those in commerce the segmentation and identification of groups in the market

has become increasingly important. Even environmental professionals are beginning to view society as more pluralistic. For a long time the audience or client of environmental designers was a generality-- "man," "people," "the public." This vague undifferentiated constituency made few demands on the professional. He could romanticize its needs and, unencumbered by direct contact, project his own preferred vision on the world. His audience was, and still is, the peer group--fellow professionals--communicated with through photographs and plans displayed not in the neighborhood but in the international magazines.

But "locals," those who live around an environmental act, are pressing for an audience. As they speak up at meetings and write in the newspapers, the environmental proponent must communicate with them. Projects become more chameleon-like as they are affected by demands from different groups: the client on one side, the neighbors on the other, the users wanting their say and, still hovering in the background, the peer group. Projects perpetually change in content and style during their evolution, as they endeavor to communicate with and satisfy all relevant audiences.

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIONS: *Another Language of Social Communication*

Environmental actions include any changes people make in the environment: additions, modifications, destruction, or conservation. They can range from small gestures, such as planting flowers or cutting down a tree, to large projects, such as building cities

or a national infrastructure. The most personal actions, beyond personal appearances and dress, are the acquisition and display of possessions. But the most fundamental environmental acts are the occupancy of space; the staking out of territory, whether it be on land, water, or in the air; the creation and erection of structures or cultivation of natural plants; and the building of channels and systems for communication and transportation. These are the elements of the environment that become the vehicles for interaction, conflict, and communication.

Some actions are ephemeral: gestures, meetings, celebration involving no permanent physical structures. Others endure, lasting well beyond the lives of their initiators. While economic and social systems can undergo fairly rapid changes, the physical environment takes much more time to adjust. This durability and the resulting obsolescence of meaning is one of its chief characteristics.

Environmental actions are usually the result of compromise between their initiators' intentions and the economic and instrumental constraints imposed by the environment and the other actors involved in the planning process. They are thus not easily interpreted. Nevertheless they can be seen as defining the identities of their originators and their relations to others. However, many of the messages sent are also unintended. Environmental actors cannot totally control the messages they send.

The physical environment is the history of millions of such acts, large and small, short-lived and lasting, voices in the

cacophony of modern life, speaking in different dialects and languages. What are the components of these languages, the codes the actors use to convey their intentions?

Because attracting attention is a primary need for those communicating with others, we might begin by reviewing the language of attention-catching. The prerequisites are visibility and imageability. These are the attributes that display power and express desired identity. Their opposites, invisibility and camouflage protect us from intrusion.

Visibility

Visibility depends on access and location. Good visibility is like prime time on television or the newspaper's front page. It depends on the presence of large numbers of people, their ability to see, and the object's duration in their presence. Historically the most visible locations have been in the centers of cities around the principal piazzas and places where people gathered, at the end of major boulevards, or at the city's entrances. Skylines are visible from major open-spaces, stretches of water, or surrounding hills. The main source of visibility is usually the circulation system; the highest information channels are the most heavily traveled routes, particularly at their change points (Appleyard, 1976). The interaction between circulation and use creates visibility. It is like a vast and complex set of television channels, each channel communicating with the flow of travelers along it.

Image

Once visible, an action must attract attention in some way. It must create an image in the viewer's mind. The most potent means is uniqueness. If an action can be not only distinguished from its immediate surroundings but stand out from a whole city of such actions, its chances of attracting attention are high. The "Wonders of the World," the pyramids, the Parthenon, the Coliseum, the Eiffel Tower, or downtown Manhattan, are known by virtue of their uniqueness.

But uniqueness alone may be insufficient. Size, especially apparent size, has always been used to symbolize power. Cities and nations still boast of possessing the largest buildings in the world. A glance at the Guinness Book of Records' listing of the world's largest buildings provides us with interesting clues about what nations value. The largest commercial building and the largest amusement center are in the United States, as is the largest single-family house and the largest sewage plant. But other countries have their claims to fame. Russia has the largest embassy (in Peking), the largest hotel, and the largest statue; and Brazil the largest football stadium; Indonesia is building the largest mosque; Munich has the largest beer-selling establishment; and Britain the largest inhabited castle.

The heroic scale of statues in ancient Rome or modern Russia, the size of objects of American life, from automobiles and highways to household furniture and drinking glasses, differentiate and

monumentalize these cultures. The size of cities themselves, "great" cities, has also been a source of national status. That London planned to contain its growth may have been related to Britain's international decline, as may America's new interest in growth control. In the midst of a "small is beautiful" reassessment of values, the larger end of the size scale may soon become its negative rather than its positive pole.

Height and length are components of size. Moscow now has the world's highest transmission tower. East Berlin's tower, though evidently built to dominate West Berlin, was discreetly built a few feet shorter. The French President, on a visit to Japan, was not told that the Tokyo Radio Tower topped the Eiffel Tower, though the Japanese are proud of that. Sukarno built a Freedom Tower in Jakarta slightly higher than the Statue of Liberty. Was it to symbolize Indonesia's greater bounty of liberty? The rivalry between New York and Chicago to build the highest buildings is of similar ilk.

Length was a symbol of status in times when building heights were limited by construction technology. The facades of Versailles and the Winter Palace in Leningrad, the vistas of the Champs Élysées and the Nevsky Prospect monumentalize quite low buildings. In modern America distance has become a status symbol. Los Angelenos casually boast (or used to) of commuting 100 miles-a-day and driving farther again for an evening out.

The isolation of actions and places through contours and boundaries ensures that they do not merge into the background. The definition of territory by walls, fences, gates, or hedges, the isolation of the freestanding building or bridge by spatial separation, confirm their identity and independence. The seats of past power were all so isolated; the separation of elite from masses a necessary symbolic action. While keeping the elite free from contamination, separation prevented the masses from learning about their more questionable and intimate behavior (King, 1976).

The pursuit of Isolation, if not loneliness, is taken to its ultimate in the American city. Almost every new building, including the masses of single-family houses, endeavors to isolate itself from the surroundings. The result has been an atomization of the urban environment, the causes and consequences of which are still debated. Isolation by itself may lead therefore to seclusion rather than display. The result depends on other attributes.

Color, texture, style, and shape are other means of differentiation. Italian palazzi were constructed of white stone to set them off against the common stucco buildings. London's Portland stone was used only for the better office buildings; the dark color of San Francisco's Bank of America was an effort, deeply resented, to set this building off from its context.

Texture and style, the proportions, the scale of doors and windows, the opulence and quality of materials, and the degree of ornamentation are the language of prestige. Differentiation and

uniqueness are the key attributes; austere facades in ornate surroundings, decorated edifices in plain contexts. Unique shapes have made buildings famous, from the domes of Santa Sophia and the spiky silhouettes of gothic cathedrals to the Eiffel Tower, the Transamerica Building, and Portman's hotels. Departure from the rectilinear or traditional sloping roof strikes the eye and forces attention.

Signs and lights are the modern way of signaling presence. In California, the most flamboyant shapes are the signs to be found on the commercial strip. Movement catches the eye too. Revolving signs, smoke emissions, racing lights, and balloons are all part of the cheap, flexible, and eye-catching kit. If the symbolic pattern of a city has to be quickly changed or if a particular display is needed, here are the media to do it.

The symbolic status of age is in turbulent change. Until recently, modernity meant progressiveness and prestige. Today the old has become chic. In Bologna, they even say "conservation is revolution." The modern conveys the impression of efficiency and rationality, the old is more personal, "experienced," and wise. On these matters there are deep and antagonistic controversies.

For those who wish to avoid attention, the converse of the above is requisite: invisible actions; conformity of size, shape, and surface; a merging with surroundings; no lights or signs.

Environmental statements depend partly on their context to convey their meaning. A single-family house in the middle of a suburb will make quite a different impression if it is found isolated

on the California coast or in Times Square, New York. Situations of incongruity or disruption cause much perceptual bewilderment.

But other meanings than power and status can be conveyed through environmental action. The specific character or identity of the originating agency can be expressed and probably discerned through the connotative character of its environmental statements, its external form. This is perhaps the most intangible and forgotten quality of environmental action, but its most significant, for it affects the visceral quality, the feel of a place. An environment can be oppressive, garish, refined, sensuous, luxurious, hospitable, impersonal, old, worn, or inspiring. This may depend on such details as its location, occupants, maintenance, architectural style, details, planting, furniture, signs, color, materials, or a hundred other attributes. These are the channels that convey the aesthetic as well as the semantic information (Moles, 1966). The psychoanalyst, Anton Ehrenzweig (1965), once wrote that the texture and brush strokes of paintings and the glissando of music convey more of their aesthetic quality than their formal composition. The same goes for the city. The environment of hard shining glass is utterly different than that of natural woods, even if the forms and massing are the same. Yet how much are these depicted in plans or discussed in public hearings?

Buildings are like people (see Ackerman, 1961), treated so by architects, perceived so by the public. The attributes seen as

positive in people are those preferred in buildings. People in San Francisco, for example, prefer "slender" buildings to "bulky" ones. How much are environmental attitudes colored by knowledge of their originators and how much do we rely on appearance to interpret the character of those behind it? The research in person-perception suggests they are strongly interconnected.

Character can be created by the color and texture of materials, the general shape and size of the action, the number and proportions of windows or other orifices, the erection of walls and boundaries; by relative isolation or the presence of natural or artificial materials; by vegetation, water, rock, plastic, paint, the visible presence of people, which make a place "live" or "dead," and so on.

The relation between various characteristics and character perception has yet to be empirically explored. One of my students has been asking people to describe the character of the occupants and activities that go on in various buildings. Pictures of two San Francisco hotels were shown, one garish, plastic, and brightly colored, the other in restrained concrete. Sure enough, people predicted that much more dignified activities took place in the latter. It may or may not be true.

Finally, instrumental communication, informing people how to use environments, can be carried out, not only with explicit signs, but by exposing activities and products, or by conforming to a stereotype (Appleyard, 1976). It is relatively easy to differentiate among factories, offices, apartment buildings, shops, or other

gross functional categories. Even people from distant cultures have learned those stereotypes. A group of students in Delhi, shown slides of twenty San Francisco buildings, correctly identified the functions of all except historic buildings such as Ghiradelli Square and the Ferry Building, which had been converted to other uses.

We learn to code the environment from childhood. The children's books that label every feature of a different scene are basic texts in environmental coding. Buildings have "windows," "doors," "walls," a "roof"; a school usually has many large rooms, an outdoor paved area, play equipment, and large numbers of children. Our environmental perception becomes dominated by these labels, to the point where it takes a conscious effort or a design education to see the urban environment as an "aesthetic surface," as color, texture, mass, or form. The landscape for urban dwellers is more difficult to codify. While the "trees," "fields," "hills," and "rivers" provide a basic codable structure, its social meanings are more hidden beneath the natural guise, a fact that has important effects on landscape attitudes.

THE RECEIVERS: USERS, NEIGHBORS, AND THE PUBLIC

Just as environments are created for instrumental, aesthetic, and symbolic purposes, they can be perceived in the same ways. Probably the most common perceptual mode is that of operational or instrumental perception. In order to function in the urban environment we must understand how it works, where things are, and how to

get around. To carry out these activities we structure the environment in ways that have been explored in the recent research on environmental cognition (Lynch, 1960; Appleyard, 1976; Moore & Golledge, 1976). We learn to code the environment as a functional system, developing the ability to recognize quickly uses and facilities (sometimes wrongly) from the slenderest evidence. At another level we enjoy its sensuous qualities, its comforts, amenities, and aesthetic character, for what they are.

When do we view the environment as a symbol of ourselves or others? The role of distance in environmental perception is central to the nature of our perceptions and to the perceptual and environmental conflicts between different social groups. The social meaning of environments is most powerful in familiar places, weakest in psychologically distant ones. Environments in change are also seen more as the result of social action than stable environments, especially when they involve conflict, for it is at those times that we are most aware of their authors. As time passes, the change is absorbed into our mental schema of things and the originators are forgotten.

To expand on these hypotheses a little, consider first our perceptions of familiar and distant environments. The most familiar environment is usually our home and neighborhood. Here we are sending messages to others--and to ourselves-- through the choice and appearance of our home, and receiving messages from those around

us about their homes and identities. Frankline Becker (1977) has recently shown how difficult it is in the anonymity of apartment buildings for these messages to be sent, resulting in increased anxiety about the nature of one's neighbors.

Our identity is closely bound to our home environment, although we may not see the two as congruent. Self-identity is an imprecise concept for most people--a complex amalgam of aspirations, conformity, self-awareness, and fear; what we would like to be, what we think we should be, what we think we are, and what we fear to admit. It is usually the first two that we wish to display. We may see our home as a harmonious expression of self-identity or a compensating contrast. We may also have made a poor choice, it may have been changed beyond our control, it may have been inherited, or lack of resources may force us to accept an unwanted compromise. But over time the tendency will be for us to adapt ourselves or modify the home toward a better "fit." Like an old glove it may become an inseparable part of ourselves, a constant and reassuring reminder of who we are, to the point where we no longer notice it, or even realize that we value it. Until it is threatened--then we spring to its defense.

"Home" may be a single room, a house, a whole neighborhood, city, region, or nation. It is an attitude toward a territory, which we are inclined to view, whether we own it or not, as "ours," a part of "us" (Appleyard, 1978).

Turning away from self, the inferences we make about others, our neighbors, are important first in the selection of a place to live, and subsequently as a means of keeping up with local events, detecting any changes that suggest some forms of social control or emergency, any decline or improvements, social or physical threats. Frequently discrepancies from the stereotype, from the typical home and garden, catch our attention. In the respectable neighborhood, the uncut lawn, the dirty car, the unpainted house, or trash on the sidewalk clue the neighbors about deviants. Many may be unintended messages, of which the sender is unaware, unless his rebellion is deliberate. Beyond operational needs, those who spend time in neighborhoods like to keep up on neighborhood news. Curiosity inspires gossip. Environmental inferences relate to who is in the environment or behind its facades (the kinds of people, family structure, who has a new baby); what they are doing (their lifestyles, occupations, how they run their family, where they go on weekends); and what they think, their values and attitudes (their political affiliations, religion, etc.). Our interest in these matters is often intense when we first arrive in a place, though curiosity lessens over time. Environmental inferences are checked and corrected through conversation, and may become increasingly accurate as time goes on, but only with those we regularly meet. Interpretations through external environmental appearance are difficult to make. The success with which terrorist groups have been

able to live both in suburban and inner city neighborhoods is witness to how ignorant people are about their neighbors.

Only rarely is one able to put one's assumptions to the test to discover incongruities between people and the badges which they wear; and one has to believe, however erroneously in fact, that people behave "in character," and to trust one's own powers as interpreters of symbols. For me, this gives the city a curiously vertiginous feeling; I have on the streets always a little apprehension that the whole slender crust of symbolic meaning might give way under my feet. (Raban, 1974, p. 166)

As the familiar environment becomes loaded with social symbolism, its originally perceived physical qualities can be lost. Who has not known of a place, at first beautiful, which palled when some unpleasant person or event began to dominate the scene, or which was simply forgotten as we became enmeshed in everyday social life? Only on occasion then do we draw back and "look up" from our daily routines to appreciate such an environment for its physical qualities. Given the poor quality of most environments, this may be a necessary coping mechanism.

Our view of the immediate environment of home is often ambivalent. While we depend on it for stability, light, air, peace, view, and other qualities, it is usually out of our control. Those who are closest, our neighbors, provide the setting for our home; they can destroy our view, their emissions and excrescences can intrude on our domain, their children can make too much noise. Even the smallest changes--letting a lawn go to seed, the parking of a car, the painting of a house in unwanted colors, even the erection of

a house of the same style (subject of a recent California court case)--can be interpreted as objectionable symbolic acts. Yet in times of stress or loneliness, neighbors can help. They are often like ourselves, and some may be our friends. If they and we are considerate and have similar tastes and styles, the neighboring environment can provide friendly support.

At larger scales, dependence on neighbors seems to lessen and hostility increases. Most environmental conflicts result from the sensed intrusion of an alien entity on home territory. The intruders may be large development projects, but they may also be fast-food stores that are "out of character," "through" traffic, or other evidence of an alien culture: "commercialization," "Manhattanization," or Americanization." The aliens themselves, the tourists or newcomers, may be the real cause of resentment, but the anger is often vented on their symbols. The defenders of the neighborhood or community (Suttles, 1972) rally to combat the outsiders. There is nothing like xenophobia to bring a neighborhood, community, or nation together.

Our sense of home can be extended beyond our dwelling to our neighborhood, city, nation, or culture. The conservation movement has extended or transferred the feelings of home to the natural landscape. Many conservationists, though enjoying the benefits of urban life, identify more with the wilderness than with other human beings or cities, which are seen as destroying the wilderness, in much

the same way as tourists complain that Italy would be all right but for the Italians! (Barzini, 1964). The wilderness in some sense is no longer free; it "belongs" to the Sierra Club. Such identification with remote environments and species is part of the modern alienation of man from man.

As we venture away from home, remoter environments are read with less assurance. Personal involvement declines rapidly with distance, we try to extrapolate from the familiar, using stereotypical cues and categories, often without success. "That building looks like a post office"; "they must be poverty stricken"; "what a beautiful village to live in." We depend more and more on surface appearance to tell what is going on as social meaning is dematerialized into insubstantial myths and impressions picked up from the news media, novels, or academic studies.

Distant environments are not solely those exotic places beyond our shores. Most of our own cities where other subcultures live are distant and foreign to our understanding. The natural landscape is distant from urban dwellers, even if we visit it frequently, because we are no longer instrumentally or economically involved in it. We now see the landscape primarily as a setting for visual pleasure and recreation experience: our attitudes are predominantly aesthetic. The landscape's social meaning and purpose are increasingly ignored, to the distress of a few writers like J. B. Jackson (1967) who retain a close contact with rural American culture. Farmers, miners,

lumbermen, and foresters see nature as a place to be used. A good landscape for them is one that functions well, whatever it looks like. But an urban dweller fails to see this.

Historic environments, paradoxically, are almost free of symbolism, at least of their original symbolism. Indeed it can be argued that historic environments are not loved until their meanings have been forgotten. How else can one explain the restoration of colonial buildings recently begun in countries like Indonesia thirty years after decolonization or the careful restoration of the czarist palaces in Leningrad? These places no longer retain their original and awesome social meaning. They have somehow become part of a common heritage, admired for aesthetic reasons, romantic associations, and a general sense of patriotism.

Tourist literature epitomizes our attitudes toward distant environments: the dependence on impression and appearance, the susceptibility to idealization (in a few cases stigmatization), the use of synecdoche, and the prevalence of myths and stereotypes never tested by deep experience or prolonged contact. The tourist who actually ventures into the unknown may undertake the trip with more trepidation. Beneath the agreeable and strange crust may lie unpleasant social facts and hostility. Yet many are eager to test their romantic images in search of authenticity and closer contact with the unknown, or to enlarge experience and bring a new identity home. MacCannell (1976) indeed argues that tourism is central to modern man's search for identity.

It is an excessive simplification, but there does seem to be a pattern in our views of home and near and distant environments. The home is loved and known despite its scars, warts, and problems, for it is part of us. Near places affect our lives and can be a threat as well as an opportunity. Our attitudes polarize. Distant places are less central or threatening and can therefore be idealized. These attitudes prevail in the temporal realm too. The present is ours, the immediate past of our forbears is something to rebel against, while the distance past was a heroic and golden age. Attitudes are much more complicated and subtle than this. Exceptions are numerous, yet there is a discernible pattern.¹

How frequently do we see the past used to disparage one's forbears? The history of modern architecture is a fine example. Fashions change as each generation searches for an original contribution. A group of students disliked buildings of the immediate past, but were increasingly favorable as we moved back through Art Deco and the nineteenth century to medieval and ancient buildings. All old buildings appear to be liked. This relativist view of architecture may dismay those who hold that there are absolute aesthetic standards, but it appears to be a fact.

Differing social distance leads to many environmental misperceptions and conflicts. It was Herbert Gans who said that planners held a "tourist" attitude toward the suburbs, mistaking monotonous appearance for social monotony. Professionals are distant from the

ghetto too, and from the world of most laymen, because we see the whole city, except our own neighborhoods, as a distant environment.

Although we depend on appearance to interpret social reality, there is no guarantee that appearance and reality are congruent, even though we may penetrate the "front regions" of display and catch unintended messages. We may not read the code of a particular subculture, it may present us with blank walls, or the messages may be obsolete. Even anthropologists, who have time to become familiar, have interpreted the meaning of the same tribal or village cultures in very different ways. Witness the controversy between Robert Redfield and Oscar Lewis over Tepoztlan.

FEEDBACK

Environmental communication is virtually a one-way process. If someone puts up a building that emits unwanted messages, there is no easy environmental reply. Vandalism and graffiti are hardly effective protests, and destruction is dangerous, and often illegal and costly. I have been studying how countries after revolution or decolonization have changed the symbolic forms of their cities. They depend more on changes in uses and names, signs and new buildings, than on destruction of the old. But the existing cities exert a persistent influence over the changed culture, one very difficult to exorcise.

Most of the struggles over environmental action occur before construction, in the period of design. That is when opponents

can most effectively prevent or modify unwanted acts, or propose alternate ones--that is, if they are aware of what is coming. Too often images of future action displayed in the media bear little relation to the ultimate act (Appleyard, 1977).

What Does This Mean for Planning and Design?

This article is intended to articulate a relatively undiscussed view of the environment: Were the physical environment to be seen more as a social or political phenomenon, the professionals would understand better the implications of their work, and the language of planning and design would change. Acknowledging the symbolic as well as actual ownership of territory may lead to clearer understanding of the leverages necessary for environmental improvement. Increasing the ability of people to identify in a satisfying way with the environment through participation in its improvement may be more important to them than the actual improvements.

If the environment was viewed as a set of symbolic relationships, abstract issues of aesthetics, taste, and even the definition of environmental problems would take on necessary social meanings; and this could be a means of linking environmental quality with social justice.

Figure 1
Environmental
Perceptions

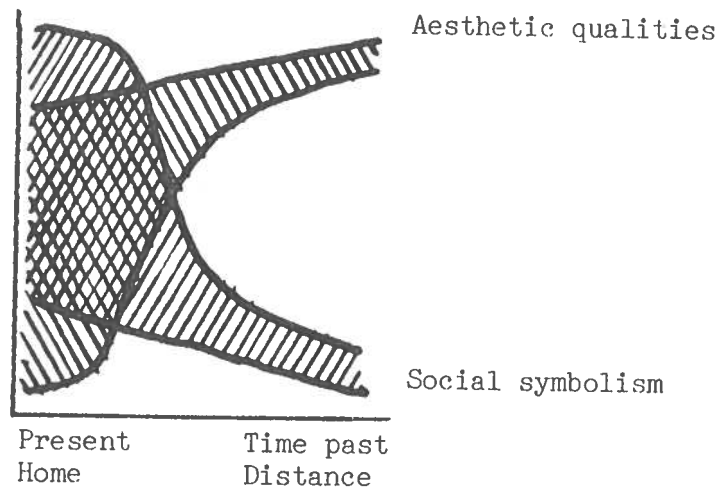
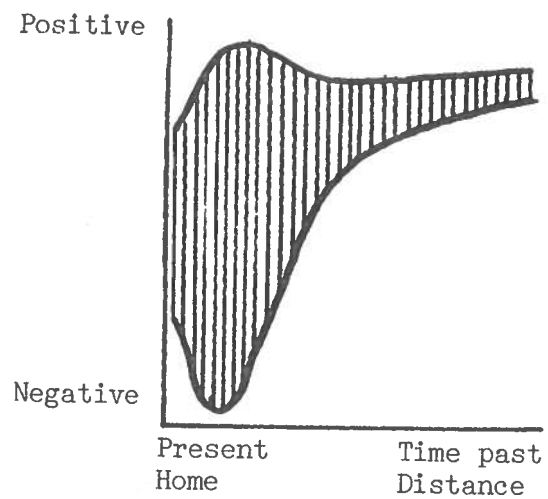


Figure 2
Environmental
Attitudes



FOOTNOTE

These two graphs suggest how time and distance may affect environmental perceptions and attitudes. Figure 1 demonstrates that close and present environments have special and intense social meanings that frequently decline or become generalized with distance or recession into the past, where they are more likely to be appreciated for their perceptual and aesthetic qualities. Familiar environments may be appreciated for their physical qualities, but these are frequently immersed in social meaning. The range of possible perceptions is indicated by the width of the bands.

Figure 2 suggests some consequent environmental attitudes. We may have adapted so well to very familiar environments that we are almost indifferent to them (Wohlwill, 1966). But we may hold strongly positive or negative feelings toward the environments of our neighbors or to those produced by a previous generation. With increasing distance or time our feelings become less intense, veering toward the positive. These environments are less threatening, but we are also less involved in them.

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