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The University and the City

Some Environmental Considerations*

My purpose here is to share with you some ideas and concerns I have about the physical setting of the urban university. In part these ideas and concerns were stimulated by the environmental crisis of the late 1960's, in particular as it was revealed in the erosion of human dignity in major urban settings. However, something else was happening at about the same time right here at the Graduate Center that gave me much food for thought. A relatively old and undistinguished office building was transformed into a unique and indeed prize-winning educational setting. What was happening here made me think a great deal about what had happened and was happening in the development of the physical facilities of other much larger urban colleges or universities.

The research and theoretical interests of most environmental psychologists are focused on the "built environment." Regardless of whether it is the city itself, one of its institutional settings such as a hospital, school, or apartment house, or some smaller unit within this setting, the question they ask is: What are the relationships between the physical properties of the setting and human behavior and experience? Does the setting make the individual feel, think, and behave in ways that were intended; or does it, in fact, interfere with these intentions by creating feelings, thoughts, and behaviors which run counter to the human goals and purposes for which the setting was designed?

*This paper is adapted from the President's address, delivered at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, on his inauguration in the Fall of 1974.

These are the questions that concern me with respect to the urban university as a physical setting. I am interested in what it looks like, where it is located, and more particularly in what its classrooms, lecture halls, faculty offices, study rooms, libraries, and other areas of its physical structure are like in terms of their designed purposes. Of course university settings — like most urban institutional settings — are complex systems in that they serve a variety of hierarchical and interrelated human purposes or goals. It can be asked whether the university is an effective learning environment, whether it is a good recreational setting, whether it fosters good social relationships, or even whether it is physically and psychologically a healthy environment.

My special interest is in the physical setting of the urban university as an effective learning environment. After all, our colleges and universities are expected to educate each generation of the members of our society, by establishing these activities, places, and conditions that enable complex human learning to occur. Such learning extends from the relatively simpler tasks of assimilating and reproducing facts to the more complex and difficult achievements of logical reasoning, analytical thinking, and creative imagination. All of these achievements, of course, are in turn dependent on the instrumental skills of verbal and written expression of a high order.

There is little question that psychologists of all persuasions still have a long way to go to explain human learning. Be this as it may, it is at least agreed that there are not one but many forms of human learning. It is also agreed that at the root of the kind of abstract learning required in an educational setting are motivational factors inextricably tied to a host of biological, psychological, and cultural conditions. Establishing or meeting these conditions, in turn, depends in some part on how we design, organize, equip, use, and maintain the spaces and places in which the learning process involved in this setting takes place.

To answer the question of what the student needs from these spaces and places in order to learn, requires that we specify which of the three kinds of conditions — biological, psychological, or cultural — are being considered in relation to the learning process. Thus, as to biological needs, it is important to ask if the physical setting of a university has been designed and constructed, and is being used, with direct concern being given to optimum illumination, temperature, sound level transmission, desk and chair size, hallway and room dimensions, and of other physical conditions that must be met because they have consequences for the motivation to learn.

However, these “enabling” conditions for human learning are only part of the story. There are other human requirements that must be met in order to sustain if not initiate the student’s desire to learn. At the core of these conditions are the individual’s feelings of self-esteem and whether or not he believes his efforts to learn will indeed lead to success. In no small measure these feelings revolve around those physical properties of the learning environment which determine the extent to which the student can arrange, modify, understand, and thereby use and control his environment. Unquestionably involved are the student’s environmentally-related expectations of — or needs for — personal space, privacy, territoriality, place identity, and aesthetic satisfaction.

the “urban” university

Some of these environmentally-related needs, in my judgment, are crucial to the learning process. They are therefore at the centre of my thinking concerning the effectiveness of the physical setting of the urban university as a learning environment. For my discussion to make sense to you, however, I should indicate what I mean by an “urban university.” The urban university I have in mind was born and nurtured during the period of the 1930’s to 1960’s. Thus, I obviously do not mean just any college or university located in a large city. What I do mean is a university that embodies many of the physical and socio-cultural characteristics of what we now call the “big city” or urban center. Although many of the urban universities that have these features are in large cities, there are others — particularly large state universities located in suburban or even remote areas — that embody many of the characteristics that define “the urban university”.

It is important to consider what was happening in our nation during this thirty year period. As Oscar and Mary Handlin point out, it was a period of great economic, technological, and population growth. We all know the result. Industry, labor, government, and business all grew into larger and increasingly bureaucratic structures. As a consequence individual entrepreneurial success was being replaced by social and strategic advancement within these same structures. This meant that with the decline of economic alternatives for high school graduates, coupled with a growing emphasis on egalitarianism in higher education, larger and larger numbers of young people were seeking a college education and did indeed enter college. As the President’s Commission pointed out in 1947, the growth in attendance was less a function of the ex-

pansion of the eligible age group than of the rise in the proportion of those who chose to go to college. Since the means for entering and finding one's socio-economic place in our society had become obscured, it was left to the university to meet the needs of heterogeneous groups of students who sought both the direction and the credentials for finding their way into this society.

Urban universities simply grew, relative to the past, in numbers of students, faculty, administrators, and other personnel, with the necessary accompanying growth in space and related facilities usually lagging somewhat behind. Like the urban center, the urban university became a big and crowded setting, in which a considerable diversity of people both within and between groups interacted in a far more complex and diverse physical environment than formerly. But as with the "big and crowded city", other things began to happen. While the private home and small two-family or three-family dwelling in the urban center gave way to the high-rise apartment house, in the urban university the small class room increasingly gave way to the large lecture hall; and to a redefinition of what constituted a standard-size class section.

And like the change from a small town to a big city, there emerged in the urban university a far greater and more complex hierarchy of administrators, faculty, clerical supporting staff, security personnel, scientific and technical aides, and health and service individuals, all of whom established their procedures, paper forms, and activities that were tightly woven into an organizational fabric known as the *university bureaucracy*. In this context, the institutional nature of human relationships also changed. Not only did the significance of any single individual become less, but interactions and relationships between individuals grew increasingly stereotyped and impersonal. What was true for the city also became true for the urban university: there are far too many people to know, so that a faceless anonymity becomes the rule rather than the exception.

a setting for learning

Given the physical setting and organization of the urban university as I have just described it, the question I now raise is how well does it perform as a learning environment. I would like to consider briefly the issue of what students expect a college or university should look like, and be like. It can be said with considerable certainty that how well we perform or carry out an activity in any physical setting will depend to some degree on how much that setting conforms to our expectations as to what it should be and look like. I do not believe that particular architectural styles and designs of the

university setting count in any direct sense in influencing the learning process; but I do believe that confirming the general expectations of students as to what a college or university should look like and be like, can have some effect.

What are the predominant expectations of the very heterogeneous student populations of the urban university? I have no hard evidence to give you, but I do have more than some hunches. Talking to graduate and undergraduate students during the last ten years has given me some definite leads. Of one thing I am quite certain. Notwithstanding their diversity of ethnic background, social class status, or community experience, it can be said that their expectations are unlikely to conform to the traditional model of the "old alma mater" with its monumental buildings, tree-lined walks, green campus, paneled libraries, and sorority and fraternity houses. In part this is to be expected, considering that changes in the nature and style of physical settings of urban colleges and universities began to take place by the late forties. The skyscraper university is a concept that has been with us for some time; and certainly the use of lofts, warehouses, quonset huts, and still other kinds of old buildings, either temporarily or permanently, have become increasingly common approaches. Even the newer State Universities at the outskirts of urban and suburban communities conform little to the traditional model.

To account, however, for the changing expectations of students, one must look well beyond the changing nature of the physical setting of the urban university. We should not overlook the diverse ethnic and social class backgrounds of these students, and the important fact that many of them have been born and raised in the vastness, complexity, and diversity of the urban community. They have experienced its frustrations and hazards as well as its pleasures and satisfactions. Those of them who grew up during the last two decades also experienced its decay. What today's and tomorrow's students expect of the physical setting of the urban university is similar to what they expect of the urban setting in which they also live. They hope it will be functional, attractive, and meaningful.

By "functional" I mean that it will serve the simplest and most mundane needs of students. Is the university located in a safe and convenient area? Can the student easily get from one place to another within its grounds? Does it have all facilities at hand or does the student have to go elsewhere to satisfy his or her library, laboratory, or personal needs? Since the urban university does not of itself provide the total "living environment" that characterized the traditional college or university, then by its site selection, the use

of its space, and in many other ways, it must enable the students to establish this kind of environment, by making appropriate and realistic choice of services available.

This, of course, is not enough. Attractiveness also counts, but I use this term in a very special sense. It is not architectural style, monumental buildings, and landscape design that are critical for the urban university student, but rather a physical setting that is worthy of the designation "college" or "university". Such perceived worthiness depends on whether the setting is permanent rather than makeshift, orderly and neat rather than chaotic, tidy and trim rather than rundown and ramshackle. It should be evident that an urban university setting that has all of these characteristics does more than merely satisfy the student's expectations of a college or university. These features also increase the probability that he or she will be able to learn in this setting.

Colleges indeed can be in warehouses, old apartment houses, or abandoned military buildings, if in fact from the student's viewpoint these settings are functional and attractive as I have defined these properties here. However, they must possess a third characteristic. They must be meaningful as well. By *meaningful* I mean they must communicate some kind of educational or academic identity. For the student more than anyone else they must be distinguishable from what they used to be, and from other settings adjacent to them. This Graduate Center is only partially distinguishable from all the other office buildings around it, but its marquee, its mall, the special events that go on in the mall and its library downstairs, identify it uniquely as a cultural center as well as an educational setting.

the sense of crowding

Now let me turn to the more critical consideration of establishing and maintaining an effective learning environment. I begin with the known and patent fact that urban universities are big and crowded; but I also point out to you the far less recognized fact that in their great size they also stimulate in the student (and others in the university) a sense of crowding. By "sense of crowding" I do not mean simply too many students for a given activity in a given place, a condition that usually produces pushing and jostling or endless waiting for elevators, food, counselors, book purchases, registration forms, and so on. Even where there are enough places for the number of students, faculty, and other personnel, the sense of crowding prevails. The very large numbers of individuals create

in all of them the expectancy that in most of their activities on campus they will have to contend with large numbers of people. They will, in effect, have to compete to be seen, to be heard, and to have influence; or even to see, hear, or be influenced by others, whether in a classroom, lecture hall, or cafeteria.

Like the city dweller, the university student must cope with the stress of numbers, noise, and the kaleidoscope of visual, olfactory and auditory stimulation we attribute to the city. Such coping makes it more difficult to learn. Learning under stress is far more costly in human effort, not to mention the quality of the learning itself. It is a sad commentary that, in addition to all the curricular and non-curricular factors that induce stress and over which we have little control — examinations, assignments, poor social interactions, faculty-student conflict, and so on — we allow the built physical environment to add to the intensity of stress experienced by the student because of our inadequate planning.

But even if we should eliminate the problem of physical stress in the urban university setting, this would by no means maximize its possibilities as a learning environment. The student has particular environmentally-related needs that must be satisfied to achieve this end. The first has to do with his need for *privacy*; and if we consider the design of the urban university, then it should be quite apparent to you that it is not only crowded in the sense that I have defined it earlier, but it is conspicuous in its lack of places where the student may achieve privacy. The study hall, the library, the lunch room, the classroom, the laboratory, and most other places on campus were designed for numbers or groups of students, and not for the individual.

Where does the student find privacy? He or she will through ingenious means either create or find places of privacy in the university. It can be done by the way you position yourself in the library, or by finding an empty room, or even by searching out the most remote or deserted part of the campus. These solutions are, however, delicately balanced achievements in which the student's actual control of the physical setting is minimal. They may work, but the possibility of intrusion is always there and indeed does occur, so the lament that one must find *another* quiet and isolated place to study, think, or write is not unfamiliar to most of us. Of course, it could be argued that that is the student's problem and he can always go home or to his dorm to find his privacy; but even assuming he or she gains privacy in these settings, that is a sorry response for those considering the role of the physical setting of the university in the learning process.

I do not mean to suggest that if such settings did provide students with defined ways of achieving privacy, then all of their problems of learning would cease. Many other factors enter in. Nevertheless thought, contemplation, intellectual rehearsal, and the play of ideas are the strands out of which the fabric of individual scholarly activity is woven. I can only conclude therefore that one of the key environmental conditions for such activity is sorely missing.

territoriality

Getting and keeping one's privacy requires control of a given space or area. Environmental psychologists have in recent years placed great emphasis on the concept of *territoriality*. Simply stated it refers to the tendency of individuals to define and establish a given spatial area as their own — a place that they may have acquired on their own or which was assigned to them by virtue of some role they play. Of course, the area may be just a desk, or a locker, but it can also be an office, a study cubicle, a dorm room, or a laboratory work area. For any person, territoriality expresses a human need to be able to control some area of a physical setting so that the individual will not only be free to choose his behavior and experience in it, but also will have the power to include or exclude others from sharing this behavior or experience. It should be evident that when the individual student or faculty member can lay claim to an adequate space of his or her own, then he or she acquires that freedom of choice in which the effects of crowding or the lack of privacy can be nullified.

Some ten years ago my colleagues and I introduced the rather simple view that places as well as people and activities are essential in telling us who and what we are. In other words — and here let me speak in the language of the psychologist — self identity is derived not just from the groups we belong to, the roles we play, and the things we are able to do and not do, but it is also derived from the places we live in, play in, work in, and indeed are being educated in. Each of us then has a place identity as well as an ethnic identity, occupational identity, and sex identity. To see oneself as a student, for example, involves also seeing and identifying oneself in terms of a particular college or university including its physical setting. Whether or not such identification with the college's physical setting occurs depends on the experienced quality or value of this setting for him or her. Included in this evaluation are matters we have already spoken of. Does it meet his or her expectations of what a college should look and be like? Does it

satisfy the student's privacy, territorial, and other environmental needs, and to what extent can he or she alter or control it? Where such evaluations are positive and the student's place identity includes his or her college or university, he or she also experiences a corresponding increase in feelings of self-esteem. If the physical setting that defines the role of student is really worth something, then the student is also worth something. It is as simple as that.

It follows then that if, as is generally recognized, high self-esteem is a crucial requirement of the learning process, then making commitments of spaces and places to students is an essential condition to maximizing for the student the return or "pay-off" from this process. There is, however, an important return for the college or university as well from making such commitments.

It has been pointed out that the development of the urban university involved the fractionalization of the once fully-integrated university community, a community whose students had been both strongly identified with it and committed to it because it met almost all of their needs, personal and social as well as educational. Students in the urban university identify far less and therefore lack a real commitment to it because many of these needs are not met. Of course, many factors may have contributed to this change, but certainly one has to ask if it would be this way if we had committed to each student his "space and place." Now if "spaces and places" help to define the self-identity of the person, then the person will seek to help maintain and enhance these spaces and places as a means of maintaining and enhancing his self-identity. For the university this means the strong possibility that students will give to it as well as take from it. What applies to the student also applies to faculty members. Clearly, faculty office and research space are matters of territoriality, and therefore they are factors that relate to the self-image and self-esteem of the faculty member. Perhaps there would be a better pay-off from faculty members, particularly younger ones, if we provided those space and place conditions that would lead not only to greater productivity but to an identification with and commitment to the university.

This brings me to the end of my discussion. What I have attempted to establish is that in the design, organization, and development of the urban university, there are important human learning factors that to a large extent have been ignored. I am not suggesting, of course, that if indeed we did provide the appropriate physical settings for the student, all variations in learning and performance would then suddenly disappear. Clearly, there are many factors underlying the educational process and the student's desire and

ability to achieve intellectually. But this obviously valid supposition does not diminish the importance of establishing university physical settings whose dimensions foster and support the process of learning; dimensions that recognize human needs for privacy and territoriality and their consequences for high self-esteem through the development of a place identity.

I began with the view that the urban university setting mirrors some of the less desirable characteristics of the urban community of which it is a part. It is big, crowded, impersonal, stress-producing, and less than responsive to meeting the place-identity needs of students. Perhaps it is time for the university to serve as a model of how our cities should be designed. Realizing the full intellectual and emotional potential in students or citizens depends on establishing a built environment that mirrors their need for human dignity, and not their almost infinite capacity for human adaptation.

Change and Growth

The McGill Journal of Education has now begun to appear **three times a year**, with a view to becoming quarterly in due course. The dates of publication for 1978 will be Winter, Spring, and Fall — respectively at the ends of February, May, and November.

Correspondingly, after several years in which its rates have remained unaltered, falling well behind costs, the price of the Journal will rise in January, 1978, to **\$3.50 a copy, \$8.00 for a year's subscription, and \$20.00 for three years** (student rates will be \$5.00 and \$12.00 for one year and three years respectively).

Subscribers who renewed or began their subscriptions with this issue (Fall 1977) have been entered at the existing rates of \$4.50 a year or \$9.00 for three years. All current subscribers, and all new subscribers registered before December 31st 1977, are to receive in addition a copy of the **Anthology 1966-77**, which was brought out in September of this year and presents a selection of the writing that appeared in the McGill Journal of Education during its first decade, 1966-77.