

Session on Environmental Psychology, Homelessness and Dignity

© Einar Strumse, 2008

Environmental psychology is the study of transactions between individuals and their physical settings. In these transactions, individuals change the environment and their behaviour and experiences are changed by the environment” (Robert Gifford, 2007)

The session focused on how the field of environmental psychology in general may contribute to the promotion of human dignity in general and in particular on psychological insights into the conditions under which solutions to homelessness may promote dignity. One possible aim of the session was to propose a list of recommendations to designers and decision makers.

Introduction to environmental psychology (Einar Strumse)

The human-made world has taken the place of “nature” as a setting for our daily lives. The dominant social paradigm or world view has been and still remains the so-called “Human Exemptionalism Paradigm” in which human beings regard themselves as rulers of the physical world, and as exempted from the laws of nature. Although the main environmental problems today are caused by human activity, social and behavioural science is seldom utilised for the understanding and solving of these problems. There is a strong belief in and emphasis on natural science and technology, but we are in short supply of knowledge permitting the understanding of *human activities* leading to positive or negative environmental change.

In this situation, environmental psychology aims at the application of existing theory and methods to research on human-environment problems, at the formulation of new concepts and methods, and at the application of research findings to the amelioration of environmental problems through environmental policy, planning, and design. Important questions concerning the relevance of environmental psychology include the following:

- To what extent have practising environmental psychologists contributed to positive change in society?
- To what extent have environmental psychologists contributed to lasting behavioural change in large segments of the population ?
- To what extent has environmental psychology influenced various practices in ways that have improved daily life for many persons?

Psychology’s relevance in design issues is emphasised by the fact that early research in environmental psychology was mostly labelled architectural psychology. The research on design issues resulted in concepts such as ‘sociofugal’ and ‘sociopetal’ settings, ‘human territoriality’ and ‘personal space’ among others, and in research on the role of the design of the psychiatric hospital for the improvement or healing of patients.

The emergence of environmental psychology was related to a growing dissatisfaction in the late 1960s with ‘egocentric’ design resulting in personal monuments rather than buildings centered on the needs of their users. Also, in the post war era, rebuilding was not any longer guided exclusively by functional criteria, and there was a growing understanding of the need

to include users' appraisals in design, and psychologists were called in to conduct them.

According to two of the pioneers of environmental psychology, David Canter and Terence Lee, the basic information that psychology can provide for designing the environment concerns (a) People's activity (what, where, how, change), (b) Hierarchies of priorities among appraisals, (c) The behavior - environment relationship.

In Norway, the perhaps most important stimulus for environment – behaviour research came in the 1990s with a research programme devoted to studies of environmental quality of life. This was a multidisciplinary environmental research programme focusing on psychology, social science and culture studies. The basic premise was that environmental research is not only a challenge for the natural sciences, and the main purpose was to increase basic understanding of relations between the environment and subjective well-being, health, quality of life, attitudes and actions. The program concentrated on five themes: 1. Humans in nature, 2. The natural environment and quality of life, 3. Coping with environmental threats, 4. Environmental concern, environmental behaviour and conservation and 5. Environmental interventions.

It could be argued that a theme of particular importance for the session was Environmental/participatory design. This type of design effort involves a broad range of residents in defining the project from the start. When designing neighbourhoods, the focus should be on the creation of social public spaces which are accessible in a variety of ways. This implies that neighbourhoods should be involved from the very beginning in planning and design, in change and in generating a vision for the location concerned. In the case of the formerly homeless, this may be important to facilitate a sense of belongingness and ownership to a new residence.

Other examples of applied areas in which environmental psychology has played an important role are applied behavioural analysis applied to recycling, littering and energy waste in residences, spatial cognition in everyday life, green (environment-friendly) design, and social design (systematic incorporation of people's needs and ideas into the building itself and the promotion of user-oriented design principles and concerns)

Environmental psychologists have also studied people's landscape preferences, and argue that such preferences may be seen as evolved psychological mechanisms because they solved adaptive problems in human ancestral environments; they are triggered only by a narrow range of information; they are characterised by a particular set of procedures or decision rules; and, finally, they produce behavioural output that presumably solved adaptive problems in ancestral times. Preference studies have demonstrated that people tend to prefer natural elements over the human-made, and in particular those natural environments perceived as moderately complex, easy to comprehend and inviting exploration.

An extension of preference research have demonstrated that preferred natural environments also are restorative, the mechanism behind this appears to be that humans are genetically prepared to handle patterns of information characteristic of natural environments with little attentional effort. In turn, this research suggests exposure to nature as a remedy to the social problem of mental fatigue. Based on existing research, exposure to nature can be assumed to reduce mental fatigue as a function of 1. Increased distance to fatigue-causing factors (*being away*), 2. *Fascination*, or interest - driven and involuntary attention, 3. A rich and coherent environment, and 4. *Compatibility between* opportunities in the environment and the

inclinations and aims of the person. From a public health perspective, it is thus extremely important and not a small contribution to the promotion of human welfare and dignity that all segments of the population are secured access to high-quality natural surroundings.

Home, homelessness and dignity (Einar Strumse)

"This is the true nature of home – it is the place of peace: the shelter, not only from injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home...it is then only a part of the outer world which you have roofed over..."

John Ruskin (1865): *Sesame and Lilies*. London: Smith and Elder

A house is not necessarily a home. A house is nothing but a physical structure which can be turned into a home. The notion of home concerns the cultural, demographic and psychological meanings we attach to this physical structure. The environmental psychologist Irwin Altman distinguishes among five dimensions of residence: 1. Permanent versus temporary, 2. Differentiated versus homogenous, 3. Communitality versus noncommunitality, 4. Identity versus communitality, 5. Openness versus closedness. These dimensions are assumed to vary across cultures, however, the psychological effects of these variations are largely unknown! One important issue in this respect would be what happens across these dimensions when a person moves from one type of home to another. Moreover, home can be characterised along six dimensions: It should be a **Haven**, providing security, refuge and protection. It should have **Order**, both spatially and temporally, it should express **Identity**, which would be a result of the transformation from house to home, it should provide **Connectedness**: to people, place, the past, and the future, it should radiate **Warmth** both symbolical and interpersonal, and finally it ought to be **Physically suitable** in order to match the psychological needs of its users.

When a person is *homeless but not houseless*, the residence would have little or no meaning, security, order, identity or connectedness. Behind the state of being both *houseless and homeless* lies, at least in affluent societies, a process of increasing marginalisation and exclusion, starting with the loss of family support, continuing with the loss of support from friends, and ending up with the loss of support from home community.

Humane solutions to homelessness should include the provision of both housing and social support. Integrated plans aimed at restoration of housing and support, could for example cover the following aspects: a) Basic services: food, clothing, showers, b) Physical and mental care, c) Shelter, d) Employment, e) Permanent housing.

Swedish interventions during the 1970s demonstrates identified a number of qualities that should be fulfilled for a living environment to provide a formerly homeless person with an *adequate life space, i.e.*, an environment that facilitates the resident's opportunity to use his/her psychological resources and prevents being dominated by one's disabilities:

- It should be attractive enough, so that he person does not drop out at the first crisis
- It should contribute to material and emotional improvements
- It should prevent isolation from society
- It should promote contact with a variety of people
- It should permit the person to use his/her psychological resources instead of being dominated by one's disabilities

These requirements imply that single, short-lived interventions are inadequate and in most cases a waste of time and resources, instead long term follow-up (several years) by a stable personnel is crucial. It is also important to note that the difficulties involved in moving from homelessness to a meaningful life has been underestimated, and that too little attention has been given to healthy aspects of the homeless population, such as their unique life experiences, friendships etc. In line with this, a study of homelessness in Norway concluded that with sufficient planning it is possible to stabilise the housing situation of formerly homeless groups, stop their circulation in the social welfare system, and to provide meaningful occupation.

The meaning of architectural quality in housing for the social identity of formerly homeless
(Åshild Lappegard Hauge)

The presentation described findings from a case study of the housing project *Veiskillet* (Crossroads) in Trondheim, Norway, the main question being: *Is it possible to use a dwelling as a strategy to positively affect a person's sense of dignity?* The project was based on the symbolic interactionist perspective and social identity theory.

To qualify as residents, one had to be older than 25 years and recently released from of prison. The project is a so-called "high threshold offer", thus it demands that residents are motivated and show a willingness to change. The results demonstrated that all residents were positive to their new housing situation, however, some were more enthusiastic than others. All expressed appreciation of the housing environment and some mentioned explicitly that the architecture related to their view of themselves and their life. The buildings also lead to more positive social contact. The main conclusion was that quality housing may strengthen a message about inclusion, safety, tolerance and control. However this contribution is dynamic, and is dependent on other situational factors as well. The physical environment may be a strategic instrument in counteracting social exclusion of formerly homeless criminals and drug addicts.