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Reading about . . .

The Environment

There has been a surprising lack of interest in – and an even greater lack of worthwhile research on – the relationship between the physical environment and human life in its psychological-behavioural aspects. Following up the outcome of interventions is a basic investigatory task for psychiatrists, but has had little attraction for planners or architects, any more than for lawyers. It is ironic, though, that psychiatry should so often be attacked for taking too clinical or mechanistic a view, considering that hardly any other discipline (except social work) devotes so much attention in everyday practice to the objective circumstances of peoples' lives. Perhaps this bad press has something to do with the failure of social psychiatry to construct a coherent environmental offshoot, or to intervene usefully in that kind of public issue – a gap which I have tried to start filling in *Mental Health and the Environment* (Freeman, 1985).

A very unusual architect, Oscar Newman, shifted the subject's paradigms by a series of naturalistic experiments which showed that design features of public housing could actually affect people's behaviour. This work related to one of the overwhelming concerns of New Yorkers (and increasingly, now, of other city dwellers) – crime and violence – although in fact it has much wider implications for urban living in general. Newman demonstrated that making public space more 'defensible' could both reduce crime rates and improve the local quality of life, yet only limited use has since been made of this knowledge, and he has been labelled an 'architectural determinist', as if that were the end of the matter. (Interestingly enough, determinism was a concept that grew out of American research which at first was largely concerned with environments for the mentally ill and, as Mechanic & Aiken (1987) have pointed out, encouraged the community care ideology). Newman, though, provided the starting point of important British work by Alice Coleman.

Like Newman's *Defensible Space* (Newman, 1972) *Utopia on Trial* (Coleman, 1985) is a heady mixture of polemic, research reports, policy analysis, and practical recommendations; each book has a scientific basis, but each also reveals the author's strong feelings. Coleman believes that post-war British housing policy and other large-scale redevelopments have not only been failures, but have created a whole set of new and overwhelming social problems. Whereas Newman recorded mainly crime, Coleman has measured environmental disadvantage or social malaise in public housing through a number of indices, and has done so on a much bigger scale than anyone before. These social indicators were all found to have a direct relationship (of worsening) against five increasing design variables: dwellings per entrance, dwellings per block, number of storeys, number of overhead walkways, and adverse spatial organisation; crime levels also showed a similar relationship. It is made clear, though, that "bad design does not determine anything, but it increases the odds against which people have to struggle." No determinist label for her, then, if she can help it.

There is such a massacre here of the sacred cows of architecture and planning that their bleached bones lie scattered throughout: high-rise blocks "are not only financial disasters; they are also human disasters"; "the combination of high-rise with low density has produced the worst possible result"; "in a flat, a mother (of young children) has a range of options – all unpalatable"; "the demand for more play areas in estates is misconceived"; "inter-war semis were cheap without being nasty, while post-war buildings may be nasty without being cheap"; "estates have been designed on the basis of false prophecies of movement patterns, and encourage abuses"; and "the worst designs bring out the worst behaviour in children". Most trenchant of all: "people have been denied the right to choose their own kind of housing, and have then had disastrous designs chosen for them, creating a needless sense of social failure". All these statements are supported by direct evidence, and all ought to be taken most seriously.

One instance where the methodology does seem most open to criticism, though, is in using the number of children in care as one of the measures of social malaise of a public housing area, together with litter, graffiti, vandal damage, and presence of urine or faeces. Apart from its sensitivity to the effects of local ideologies or administrative policies (particularly in some of the areas that were mapped), this

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variable is inherently too different from the others to be conflated with them, and its place in the chain of causality is uncertain. Like psychiatric morbidity – which failed to enter the model because of lack of data – the rate of children in care is a multi-factorial product that raises complex questions, for instance about incidence versus prevalence, length of time spent living in a particular environment, or the age and sex-structure of the local population. Counting the number of pieces of litter per square yard is simply not comparable, although it may be equally important in its own way.

Coleman maintains that where families are given a genuine choice – and this applies as much to council tenants as to owner-occupiers – they will most often choose the now traditional 'semi'. This form of living environment does very well on the indicators of social malaise, and also tends to discourage crime, through the much greater defensibility of its space, compared with tower blocks for instance. Equally important is the fact that it restores to people the responsibility of caring for their homes, and (within limits) the important power to make their mark on territory which is identifiably their own. Correspondingly, they are freed from the shackles of vast, unresponsive, grossly inefficient, and outrageously expensive bureaucracies – which is 'democratically controlled public housing' in Marxist terminology. From the mental health perspective, it would be reasonable to predict that this liberation from the prison of high-rise or other megastructures would result in residents experiencing much lower levels of stress, whatever other problems they may have to continue facing in different homes. It is generally accepted that such stress is a determinant of psychiatric morbidity, although in ways which still remain almost entirely undefined (see below).

"The lady doth protest too much", some might say. What has been most remarkable, in fact, is the relative silence of those who might have been expected to deny this message most vehemently – whether trendy architects, municipal bosses, or high-technology builders. Here and there, high-rise blocks are actually being demolished now, notwithstanding that their often shoddy construction has incurred debts lasting far into the future, while small-scale housing is appearing even in inner cities. Although Coleman evidently hit the nail on the head, her pioneering work now needs to be developed so that the relationship of building forms with behaviour or psychological well-being is investigated in more sensitive ways. Professor Coleman has mostly discounted housing management as contributing to the quality of residents' lives, in comparison with building structure, but it is more likely that both are important.

It would be wrong to imagine that her lessons have been generally learnt. The Maiden Lane estate in Camden was completed in 1983 and described then by the *Architectural Review* as "representing the very best in British housing lore and as civilised as any recent European solution". Within four years, though, it had attained social breakdown; its "references to ocean liners" had produced dangerously steep staircases, a mugger's paradise of tunnels, and rubbish collections which eluded the dustmen. So much for the legacy of Le Corbusier (Stamp, 1988).

'The environment', though, can be approached from many different directions – all relevant, if difficult to integrate. Costs in one may need to be traded off against benefits in another, through highly complex manoeuvres. Yet all too often this fails to happen, whether through ignorance, political obduracy, or the overwhelming attraction of short-term economic returns. Rodwin & Hollister (1984) (not the psychiatrist of that name) have therefore done a useful service in assembling a collection of images of the city, as seen by a great variety of disciplines, from law to economics. Among these, the anthropologist points out that, following long-term market failures, what at first seem to be technocratically-soluble problems turn out to contain intractable social and political dimensions, relating to the fact that the most disadvantaged groups bear the biggest brunt of difficult readjustments. Hence the 'inner city' morasse, in which the chronic mentally ill are often caught; this view provides a useful contrast to that of defensible space, although it does not undermine the Newman–Coleman thesis.

Sociological and psychological approaches today remain influenced by Georg Simmel's prediction, early in this century, of the possible effects of continuous contacts with innumerable people in cities; "one would be completely atomised internally and come to an unimaginable psychic state" (Simmel, 1908). Hence, city dwellers have "the right to distrust" others and the need to be selective in their responses – both of which attitudes can also be harmful to everyday life. Later, Wirth showed that the impersonality and arbitrariness of the city was reduced through the creation of sub-communities, within which each person could establish some control over his immediate environment at least.

One of the most important contributors to *Cities of the Mind* is Kevin Lynch. His *Image of the City* (Lynch, 1960) has been endlessly quoted over the past 30 years, yet he regrets that it has actually had very little effect in changing the way in which cities are shaped, or in making them more responsive to

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their inhabitants' wishes – which was its main motive. "Decision makers", he says, "often base their choices on a strong personal image of the environment, but this image is implicit and not tested against others". As for the individual in the city, he should feel delight "in ambiguity, mystery, and surprise, so long as they are contained within a basic order and as long as we can be confident of weaving the puzzle into some new, more intricate pattern". One of the tragedies of large-scale redevelopment and of present-day architectural doctrines is that they destroy all possibility of experiencing these environmental pleasures; the city becomes nothing more than a collection of huge, inhuman structures, surrounded by dereliction.

It was not ever thus. Early nineteenth century Manchester may have been, as de Tocqueville put it, a filthy sewer from which pure gold flowed – and Engels said something similar, a decade later – but the city was also "an urban and industrial prodigy, a phenomenon of a new age". That is John Archer's description, in his editorial introduction to *Art and Architecture in Victorian Manchester* (Archer, 1985), a collection of ten superbly illustrated essays. Certainly, the human costs were great to the immigrants who poured in – just as they are today in the burgeoning cities of the Third World – but on the other hand, the potential rewards seemed infinite. The city's atmosphere, described by Girouard as "of relentless activity and money being made in heaps", left an unforgettable impression on visitors. Embodying it all was the Town Hall, an achievement which Archer claims was "of a scale, significance and permanence" that outstripped those of all other provincial cities and even rivalled most of what London had to offer. Around it were the warehouses, built mainly in the Italian *palazzo* style, so that it did not seem ridiculous to compare Manchester with a city of the Italian Renaissance. (It still has as many canals as Bruges, although one wouldn't think so).

No British writer has so far even attempted a synthesis of the meaning of Victorian Manchester and its society, but Gary Messinger has now done so, seeing it as "the first predominantly industrial city of the world" (Messinger, 1986). He has scrupulously collected the comments on Manchester of writers from Disraeli ("as great a human exploit as Athens") to J. B. Priestley ("an Amazonian jungle of blackened bricks"), but perhaps most important is his emphasis that detailed statistical enquires into the health and living conditions of populations began there. This trail leads from James Kay and the Manchester Statistical Society of 1832 to today's high-rise blocks, and awaits new explorations.

If Britain gave the world industrial cities in the last century, in the present one it can show what has been described as a unique social experiment – the new towns. No other country has produced a comparable scale of deliberately planned large communities, with a theoretical basis which certainly changed over 30 years but was always clear and coherent. Their origins were in Ebenezer Howard's 'garden city', which he conceived as a single answer to the human problems of both crowded megalopolises and culturally impoverished rural populations. By 1945, British planners were confident that they could prescribe the conditions in which most people could live satisfactorily – such hubris!

In fact, no-one had thought of collecting data which might have thrown light on the relationship between these new environments and their inhabitants. This vast national investment was unaccompanied by even the smallest efforts at evaluation, and we shall never know whether it was all worthwhile, in comparison with other ways in which the money might have been spent – the opportunity costs. But many years after it was established, the largest new town – Milton Keynes – decided to consult its residents, and the results of this appear under the questioning title, *The Best of Both Worlds?* (Bishop, 1986).

Milton Keynes residents mostly see their community as a series of villages, although they use the whole area extensively and in a city-like way; their top priority, though, is their own house and its immediate surroundings, rather than the wider setting. They do not see the new city as anything very special or even unique, but rather as being a little better than usual environments; at the same time, they would not like it to develop into just another anonymous suburb. They want a house to look like a house and reject the imagery of contemporary architects, who are mostly fixated on some overall design rather than on peoples' needs for living space. Like many grand designs, though, Milton Keynes seems to have passed into a phase of disillusionment: psychiatrists there report marital and family breakdown in almost epidemic proportions. Perhaps this was predictable from the fact that the 80 000 immigrants to it were mostly separated from their networks of family and social support. However, the whole story could only be revealed by large-scale epidemiological study, and there is no indication that the funding for this will ever be available. An experiment it wasn't.

But if study of the environment-person relationship is ever to gain the dignity and utility of a scientifically valid discipline, it will need better theories, more valid methodology, and eventually a respectable body of empirical data. Cohen *et al* (1986) have

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made a helpful contribution to this daunting task in their report of an extensive study of children in Los Angeles schools who either were or were not exposed to high levels of aircraft noise. The results were not outstanding – exposed children had higher blood pressures (although still within the normal range) and some relative cognitive impairment – but much more important is the authors' exhaustive and very honest examination of the methodological and theoretical problems associated with this field of work. For one thing, there have been few attempts to examine the interplay between multiple environmental stressors and the effect this may have on health, although direct effects of stressors on behaviour or physiology may be less detrimental than the costs of coping responses to them.

A significant contribution to the empirical data has recently come from Birtchnell *et al* (1988): screening a large sample of young married women on a London housing estate, they found a disproportionate number of those with high depression scores in dwellings with the highest scores for environmental disadvantage. These high scorers also had homes with interiors that were significantly poorer in appearance than were the homes of the low scorers. When trying to interpret relationships of this kind, the direction of causality may not be clear, and the location of these women in the worst areas of the estate might have been influenced by their own inherent vulnerability. Nevertheless, it does seem reasonable to suggest that "the accommodation itself also played a part in the development and maintenance of their depression."

Perhaps related to this pervading depression is the apathy and hopelessness that seems to characterise environmentally impoverished areas. While there is no panacea for this problem, community action projects can be important ingredients of regeneration, and in *How Green is Your City*, Joan Davidson has provided a valuable account of these in Britain. Although there is a tendency to interpret 'environment' largely in visual terms, she points out that this should be more holistic, including the efficiency with which local resources are used. Rehabilitation of buildings, recycling of waste, energy-saving, and greening schemes can bring back vitality to jobless and disheartened people. Among other things, this revitalisation of communities is very important for the resettlement of people leaving psychiatric and mental handicap hospitals.

Those who might prefer a rather lighter approach to the environmental question will relish *Monstrous Carbuncles* (Knevitt, 1985), a cartoon guide to architecture by *The Times'* correspondent on the subject, with an introduction by William Rushton. Many very true words here are spoken in jest, and any profits from the book go to Shelter.

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