INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL PSYCHOLOGY CONFERENCE

Theme: APPLIED RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF ARCHITECTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

Gösta Edberg, Docent
Department of Environmental Design
School of Architecture
Royal Institute of Technology
SE-100 44 Stockholm, Sweden

INTRODUCTION

I work as a researcher in the Department of Environmental Design at the School of Architecture in Stockholm, which I represent at the conference board, but I am also a practising architect. Because of my double occupation I am specially intrigued by the questions, which I find in the theme for today, "APPLIED RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF ARCHITECTURAL PSYCHOLOGY". How do we use the research results, how can they be utilized in actual planning of buildings and towns? Have results produced up to this date been used by practitioners? Are the findings known? Of what practical value are they? Are they of any value at all or do they only represent work for work's sake, research for the sake of research, mother l'art pour l'art?

I ask these questions because in my practice I have not been able to use research methods or results directly. Some of them have had nothing to tell me, some have been too complicated or too expensive to use, some too abstract, only a few have had something to do with my problems, but the practical value has been small. On the other hand - and this may be important - research and research findings of all kinds have enlarged my field of knowledge and have enabled me to make design decisions with more freedom and surety.

I ask questions. But here I am in the lucky position of not having to answer them myself. Because you, who present papers at the conference, take care of that. Donald Appleyard did e.g. when he said: "Research methods do not provide professionals with usable environmental variables" and "Professionals do not understand empirical research". He also did it when he pointed at the fact that professionals usually are object-oriented when they work. He said: "Starting with the populations that may be involved in a project or plan is still an unusual activity for
environmental professionals, yet it is the only one that ensures that people will not be forgotten. It may be, however, that researchers also, in their way are object-oriented or rather problem-oriented instead of having their primary impetus for work in the needs of men, material needs as well as psychological, social and aesthetic ones. This is probably true both for architects and psychologists. We are all in the same boat.

And now, some sort of a confession: When I work with my research projects, classification of textures, space analysis and creativity a feel that I dwell on a much higher level than those earthbound and moneybound architects do, who design buildings and towns. I feel superior to them. It must be better to produce knowledge than to use knowledge. But at the same time I feel quite uneasy. Haven't those earthbound creatures without any schooling in architectural psychology once created the Parthenon, the Pantheon, the Hagia Sofia, the cathedrals of France, England and Italy - Chartre, St. Paul, Pisa -? The Crystal Palace, the Galleria Victor Emanuel - not to be forgotten farmhouses here in Sweden, in Provence or in Pennsylvania or a lot of good livable domestic buildings in our cities.

And so when I come back to the drafting room, where we work happily in the old-fashioned way with drawings, perspectives and model-building, trying to produce a good building I cannot tell the people there - who work with realities - what I have been doing, for example that I have been looking at a lot of computerized figures on scrolls of paper and that I have interpreted the figures to mean a new texture dimension. If I tell them on top of that the whole thing has been like a mental bath to me they would call me crazy. And I change my mind. Suddenly the research work seems futile and a bit foolish. And I start to look down at the researchers instead - I simply change position, not my own thought which I manage always to keep on the high level. But now in turn I feel somewhat afraid of the researchers with their scientific methods, maybe they with their machines can come up with better plans than I can working intuitively.

And so many of the architects and planners here at the conference have done before me - but not the psychologists - I come to mention the communications gap, that distance between researchers and practitioners. That gap is disastrous to both. Both are necessary but one of them cannot act as a substitute for the other. A psychologist can analyse both a painting, the artist who painted the painting and people's reactions in front of it. But that does not mean that the psychologist can paint, has become an artist. Even if he had the ability to, he would not have the time. Hering, the originator of the natural colour system, is one thing and Claude Monet, the impressionist painter, is another: we need them both as we need the gestaltists on one side and Paul Klee and the Bauhaus on the other. The one cannot work as
a substitute for the other. Through the gestaltists, by the way, psychology really exercised a great amount of influence over the development of the modern movements in the arts – De Stijl and Mondrian for example – and in architecture and design – the Bauhaus, Gropius, International style, School of design in Chicago. We should let researchers and practitioners live a happy life together in give and take. Let us not turn the communications gap into a love-hate situation. On the other hand, we may not make the members of this conference into an association of internal, mutual admiration.

Somebody said yesterday that the art of architecture and planning is at such a low level now that we really need the architectural psychologists – who would come with some kind of salvation, I suppose, to society. – Practising architects would be able to design much better and much more in contact with common people, build much better towns, if they only were allowed to do so by the real decision-makers, that is the politicians, the bankers and the big industrial corporations. Please, do not attack the architects, for the new slums we build, we are all responsible. Help instead the architects by attacking the real villains. In that way you would also help common man.

The kind of assistance architecture needs today with its crude industrialized and inhuman way of building and construction in an assembly line fashion and entirely based on profit-making is primarily not such a fine instrument as architectural psychology is. Anyone who walks around in the suburbs of Stockholm or Paris or London can see with his own eyes that the new cities are inhuman and that they are bad. Architecture does not need psychology there but rather some kind of PR-people with heavy guns. But to be sure, psychologists can provide those PR-people with their ammunition. But it should be for heavy guns and in this I do not see any contradiction to what I have said earlier, that architectural psychology is a fine instrument and very much needed and that ARCHITECTURE and PSYCHOLOGY, both with capital letters, can work together.