A SOCIAL DIMENSION OF ARCHITECTURE

Jan Gold

Abstract

A simple model of man/environment relations is described. Two principle means of need-fulfilment are referred to as actions and experiences, and the two environmental elements of the total environment are the physical environment and the social environment. Four main environmental relations are thus established, physical experience, social experience, physical actions, social actions.

A study carried out by the author in Copenhagen reinforces the fact that social aspects of the environment are highly valued and it is maintained that life and activity has been effectively built out of new housing areas. This loss of social experience is only insufficiently and unevenly compensated for by new but indirect sources of communication, as social demands of architecture increase as a result of smaller families, higher proportions of old people and dull impersonal work situations.

The aim is to ensure that every person has access to a varied social environment, to achieve this the traditional degrees of actual physical planning must be reassessed, functional segregation, means of transport etc. As a result a different architecture would emerge based on a different concept of architecture, centred on the social aspects of planning and a realisation that this is the most difficult but most interesting and important dimension of architecture.

In this way man/environment relations are described:

Physical Experience such as experiencing nature, physical structures etc.

Physical Actions such as drinking, eating, breathing, sleeping etc.

Social Experiences such as experiencing other people or receiving information from society.

Social Actions such as talking to other people, doing something together with other people etc.

Evidently all four relations are of vital importance for the human existence, and any human environment must consequently be able to provide for physical experiences, physical actions as well as social experiences and social actions.

Environmental planning in history

Throughout history the purpose of physical planning, has been the creation of suitable and satisfying environments, step by step the foundation of physical planning has been extended and developed following developments in philosophy and science. In the self-grown medieval towns, which were formed and adjusted by the citizens themselves, the resulting environment was usually remarkably well organised and obviously all four man/environment relations were known and considered in the process of forming the town.

It is not by chance that the major part of outdoor urban activities are still taking place in medieval urban spaces, but due to the fact that these spaces were made especially to ensure a necessary social communication and to accommodate various kinds of human activities.

Twice since the Middle Ages the foundation of physical planning has undergone radical developments and extensions.

The first development materialized during the Renaissance where professionals took over the environmental planning. In this period the most uncomplicated man/environment relations planning for physical experience was made conscious and developed into new criteria of social architecture. Still the aesthetic ideals which were developed during the Renaissance are seen to be dominating architecture. The second remarkable extension of the foundation of planning occurred around 1930 and was given the name of Functionalism. In this period the second physical relation, planning for physical actions, was made conscious and developed into rules for physiologically, healthy architecture. The buildings where separated and orientated towards the sun, functions were aggregated, and the building densities were radically reduced. In contemporary Late-Functionalism, houses are seen to be higher, longer and the housing schemes bigger, but all basic principles thought out in the 1930's are still carefully observed. Only two of the four environmental "relations" which are influenced by physical planning, have by this time been consciously recognized and developed as relevant dimensions of planning.

Contemporary environmental planning

Only the two physical man/environment relations have therefore been thoroughly considered in contemporary physical planning. The corresponding social relations have not been consciously recognized in a similar way. Whether the resulting rather one-sided work on aesthetic and physiological problems has influenced the social relations in a positive or negative way, must be a fairly important question.
As an investigation covering 6 characteristic planning areas will help in answering the social environment - makes sensory contact between people rather difficult. The wide, open and regular squares do not psychologically encourage people to stay outside even under the climate, particularly conducive. Outdoor activities are literally blown out of the housing areas.

Organisation towards use and function, particularly public and streets gives physical experiences rather than social ones. Low densities of people, as well as their relative scarcity, reduces the social environment - makes sensory contact between people and thus reducing the sources to social experi-
ceuses. Functional segregation, dividing housing, industry, shopping etc. reduce some psychological disadvantages, but also any social advantages which might have derived from a closer contact. Transportation systems based on individual cars reduce social experiences for drivers and pedestrians alike, and the vast areas laid out for traffic further isolate buildings and thus persons. The obvious result of these similar planning is that social life in the housing areas - not being limited to visits to the social actions and persons. The obvious result of these similar planning is that social life in the housing areas is being more and less of the residents of the area.

This has not happened as a result of a well considered policy of planning, but as an unskilful by-product of the misguided attention to the physical aspects of planning. Saturdays and housing areas which due to these manipulations, have become lifeless and dull are most often called dormitory towns - because they are not. More than 50% of the inhabitants are rather stationary. They are actually living in the housing areas throughout the day - and almost every day. These towns, but some, towns without life.

Physical environment - social environment

- in most European countries 50 - 60% of the total population are now living in these new housing areas built during the past 30 - 40 years, which differs from all previous housing situations in being more of less lifeless.

- This makes a closer investi-
gation and evaluation of the meaning and importance of social experiences rather easy.

- Any such investigation reveals that experiences from the social environment, in almost every town, is a kind of life as well as a kind of life that people attract more attention than any other single subject. A few suggestions shall be made to this point. A marked preference for walking and gathering in places where many people are known to be - such as near the houses, street corners, busy streets etc. - are commonly found in towns throughout Europe. Several investigations have shown how people, by the housing areas to stay and work where most social experiences are at hand. More experiences are offered along side the traffic lanes, playgrounds tend to be deserted.

- Several investigations carried out in Tirol and on 3 urban squares in Copenhagen has revealed that people in these areas are aware of a number of social movements - as the sitting persons are looking into different directions, as well as to miss anything which is going on, on the urban stage in front of them. Corresponding to the stage the city can be observed how close a sidewalk safety - as a general rule - are oriented towards the most active areas - whereas media wrongly oriented in relation to the surrounding human activity often remain unused or are used in a rather awkward way.

With a group of students from the school of Architecture in Copenhagen I have carried out an attractivity analysis on "Storgade" - the large pedestrian street of Copenhagen. The subject was to find where people were stopping and what they were stopping to look at. The method used was to plot in stationary people on plans made during winter, spring and summer 1969. Summing up the figures we found that people were stopped in front of houses, offices and show-rooms showing day - a box of hair cutters, a single piano etc. Four houses were located in the area and all of them were found to be on the lowest point on the attractivity line. On the other end of the list we found shops and exhibits giving various kinds of information from the social environment. Paper-stalls, photographe exhibits, window-dresses and shops with children's toys (which we will know function as a kind of miniature museum). These kinds of shops and exhibits were found to be most popular in the categories of "shopping-placed" related to the facts. The subject which by far around the greatest interest among the hipster were not related to the facades but were the various human activities and "happening" going on in the space. All kinds of human activities ranging from seemingly trivial little incidents - a newly married couple coming away from the photographer - a drunk man praying, a man singing etc. to painstakingly planned and well executed happenings were found to attract great clusters of spectators. At the time of the investigation one of the big department stores in the area where bulling an extension and through two gates in the same building the building was visible from the pedestrian street. It was then found that more people were looking at the building site than at the same or an exhibition window of the store - put together. The moment the workers went away to have lunch - very few people were found to be looking at the empty building site. Obviously it was the building site but the men working that was the interesting subject. The largest crowds were observed when something really spectacular and unusual was taking place - a fight, the hippies bands in a fountain or a commotion made by the students. On these occasions the leisurely flow of pedestrians was then stopped. Of course these kinds of social experiences are of a rare and rather extraordinary character and nothing can be generalized from them - but they just round off the general picture which was: That human activities were more interesting and more attention was paid to them than any other kind of experiences offered. This conclusion corresponds very closely to the previously mentioned findings from other localities and points to a generally high evaluation placed on social experi-
cences.

This remarkable interest in social experiences is fairly understandable due to the fact that social experiences play a rather prominent role in the fulfilment of several important psychological human needs. Seen in relation to the need for contact, experiencing other people is a kind of low atmosphere. And furthermore social experiences provide valuable information on other people and society. In general, social experiences also serve as a kind of teaching point for other kinds of social contacts - provide that the experiences are personally and not indirectly received through television etc.1. Social experiences can thus be described as a key to the social environment. Seen in relation to the need of experiencing, social experiences offer a much wider range of variation and stimulation than physical experiences, and they are far more pleasurable and entertaining and enthusiastic. No moment is exactly as the moment before as long as people are involved. In relation to the need of identification social experiences too present various aspects. You can see other people and be seen yourself. Quite naturally it has also been found (Jaw Jørn, Jørn, de Jong etc.) that social activities play a rather important role in relation to the need for structuring your environment. Whether a street or a square is empty or active is found to be just as important for structuring as many physical cues.

Summing up, the social experiences are found to be very highly evaluated, and the reason for this interest underlines the importance which must be placed upon the access to social experiences as an environmental factor.

Environment and the changes in society

In medieval towns the squares and streets were the prime sources of information and the prime connection to the social environment. Today new means of communications have provided many alternative possibilities. Through television, radio and newspapers social experiences are continuously headed out - but only of indirect, one-way contacts, which neither issue in literacy, nor in rich and complex situations. Communication for the direct communications, traditionally offered in the public urban space. The automobile today offers a new before known freedom to reach the social environment - but these possibilities are very unevenly divided among the different groups in the population. More than 50% of the population - primarily the children, the young, the handicapped and the poor do not have - and will never get - real access to these new means of transporta-
tion.
Furthermore, two other circumstances tend - in our present situation - to increase the social demands on architecture and urban planning. One is the reduced size of families and the growing number of old people. About 10% of the households in Scandinavia are now only composed of one or two people. The second is the widespread change in working conditions towards more dull and impersonal working situations. The bias of social experiences in the new housing and urban areas have therefore only been insufficiently compensated, and the various means of compensation are very unevenly divided among the different groups in society.

The neglected dimension of architecture

I started by pointing out that a social dimension of architecture does exist, but has not been made conscious and developed into a relevant dimension of planning. I have pointed out how the attractive and important access to social experiences that used to be offered in urban spaces has by now been built out of the contemporary housing areas, because the social dimension of architecture has been disregarded. Consequently, the overlooked and neglected social dimension must now be placed into consciousness and developed as a relevant dimension of planning and also as a dimension of architecture, because working on activity sequences naturally must be looked upon and treated as an art, fully comparable to the well developed arts of working on space, light, colour and other kinds of physical sequences.

The purpose of this work must be to ensure every person, and primarily the weak and deprived groups in society, have access to a varied social environment. The method would be, in the first place, a conscious effort to create a varied range of possibilities for obtaining social experiences. The consequence would be a re-evaluation of practically all traditional dogmas on aesthetics, on urban densities, urban structure, segregation of functions, means of transportation etc. The result would be a rather different architecture based on a different concept of architecture, centered on the social aspects of planning, realizing that these aspects are not only representing the most difficult, but also the most interesting and important dimension of architecture.

JONECE D. de

LYNCH K.